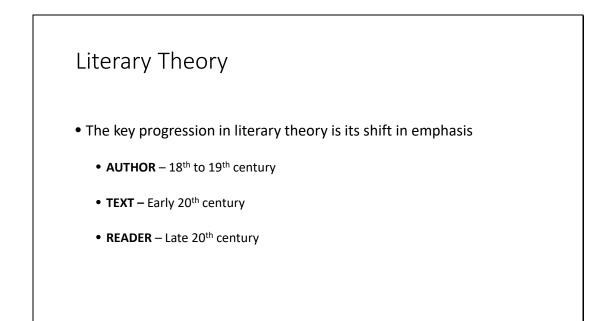# Literary Theory
and
Your Novel

The goal of literary theory is to understand story. Simple. Yet literary theory is often viewed as arcane, overly academic, and very far from the writer's day-to-day work of getting words on the page and finishing a manuscript. But theory has a lot to say about writing and story – it can help writers strengthen their prose and the elements of fiction in their work (character, conflict, plot, point-of-view, etc.), as well as add thematic density to their story. All writers can benefit from understanding the basics of literary theory and incorporating it into their work.

This presentation is meant as an introduction to some of the foundational ideas of literary theory. It introduces three major movements in literary theory, highlights a key concept from each one, and then analyzes how that idea helps the writer tell a story. To better illustrate the concepts, they are applied to two well-known stories: *Star Wars* and *The Great Gatsby*.

As you read through these notes, think about your work and how these literary tools can help your story. If you have any questions or want to talk more about these ideas, feel free to reach out at any time. Enjoy!

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Literary Theory

- The key progression in literary theory is its shift in emphasis

  - **AUTHOR** – 18th to 19th century

  - **TEXT –** Early 20th century

  - **READER** – Late 20th century

- **Literary theory**
- Literary theory exists about as far back as there is literature; it is by no means a recent phenomenon
- What is recent, beginning in the mid-18th century and onward, is the slow splitting off of literary theory into its own discipline that generates full-time practitioners
  - It moves from a dilettante's realm and matures as a field of specialized knowledge
- Much of early-modern literary criticism is indebted to techniques and assumptions applied to biblical scholarship
- Literary criticism from this emerging group of critics traditionally focused primarily on the poem – this was at a time when the novel had yet to achieve its cultural hegemony and was seen as a lesser literary form than the intricately crafted poem
- **Author**
  - Literacy rates begin rising in the 18th and 19th century and concomitantly so does commentary on the texts being read
  - Reading for pleasure is available to a wider segment of the population who are beginning to read secular texts, texts designed for aesthetic purposes and/or with unresolved moral ambiguities in the story – very much unlike the Bible, the dominant text up until the start of professional criticism
    - The criticism that starts to emerge with this trend is still coming from a religious context where a text (the Bible) has a definite meaning that the author (god) intended
    - So just as most biblical exegeses proceeded by examining the definitive meaning the author had in mind, so too did early literary criticism proceed in this vein

- Then with the rise of Romanticism and its celebration of the individual, criticism re-doubles its focus on the author
- Social and economic theories proliferating in the 18th- to 19th-century started devaluing the individual and the aesthetic experience
    - During this period there is increasing skepticism of emotion, temperament, and individual experience in favor rationalisms like Bentham's utilitarianism, Smith's classical economics, the Enlightenment's Scientific Method and an overall emphasis on objectivity
    - Romanticism rises as a counter-cultural movement to re-establish the supremacy of subjective individual experience and sensory and aesthetic impression
        - In Romanticism, the individual is celebrated, particularly that individual who is able to distinguish him or herself in artistic and creative endeavors
            - Artistic endeavors evoke notions of the past with its artisans and simple technologies, as well as the organic society, a station the romantic movement is trying to recreate
        - Whoever could stand against the tide of modernity with its tendency to dehumanize and commoditize the individual represented an ideal figure in Romanticism
        - Thus the author (or painter, or composer, or poet) fit nicely into Romantic thought as a symbol of triumphal emotion and spirit
- Helped by the religious dogmas of the middle-ages and then by Romanticism's tenets, the modern study of literature began with the assumption that meaning lay with the author, and that if we could better know the author we could better understand the text
    - Thus, criticism from this period focuses heavily on the author's biography and historical circumstance
        - Studying the author's life, the author's family, the author's cultural setting and milieu, the author's own statements, etc. could help unlock meaning in the text
        - Critics studied letters written by the author, diaries kept by the author, family histories, public records touching on the author, etc.
    - Many literary critics during this time are themselves famous authors (Coleridge, Wordsworth, Johnson, Arnold) and have a vested interest in valorizing the author and his or her unique genius and method
        - It is at the beginning of the 20th century that we start to see a class of professional critics – people who are not authors of poems/novels but instead study and interpret what these authors produce
            - This begins to relax the emphasis on the sacrosanct author
- **Text**
    - Beginning in the 20th century, in Russia and in the United States, there is a movement to push aside the author as the key to meaning and instead focus on the text itself
    - Early practitioners of this critical philosophy were tired of the subjectivity and emotionality of prior criticisms and wanted to establish critical doctrines on stronger epistemological footing than those of feeling and impression
        - These critics wanted a critical method that was repeatable and universal, very much like the scientific method

- One thing these critics are rebelling against is the ambiguous symbol
  - In Romanticism, objects from the real world are imbued with heavy symbolism but ultimately what any given object symbolizes begins to be an overwhelming and even contradictory list of things
    - The sky as a symbol – does it represent eternal life, or mortality, the divine, the earthly, the limitless, the limited, life (day), death (night)
    - Criticism had begun to run in every possible direction when interpreting a symbol, which rendered many pieces of criticism simply the idiosyncratic understanding of a particular individual and not a principled, methodic discipline
      - And often the effort to reconcile these contradictory symbols was an appeal to what the author meant, or probably meant, and then began the fight over interpreting the author's life
- For these textual critics the idea of authorial meaning was irrelevant
  - These critics distrusted authors' statements about their meaning, believing no one is ever in full possession of their intentions and motivations
    - Thus even where the author may think she knows what she intended or what she meant with her text this is no guarantee that she is actually aware of all the influences working on her
  - Further, most great authors, particularly authors of "the classics," are dead – and so it is no great help to try and construct meaning from sometimes just fragments of an author's life or an author's own statements
  - In other words, the author is too fickle a thing to trust as the interpreter of so much meaning
  - And it is a foolish errand to go tracking down biographical details and often apocryphal stories about authors in the hope that they may help shed light on a single line in the middle of a vast novel
    - A far better avenue for these critics is to look at the one immutable thing that is actually right there for you to interrogate – the text
- These critical movements are conservative in their practice
  - They very much want to take meaning out of the individual hands (and minds) of untethered readers who are beginning to produce more and more far-flung theories of literature that often have only tenuous textual support
  - Here with text-based criticism the emphasis is not on the subjective stance of the interpreter but simply on what is in the text
- So to perform this rigid interpretative scheme, these critics utilize an extensive toolkit to identify the constituent parts of texts
  - This toolkit helps critics examine things like rhetorical devices, linguistic functions, poetic forms, tropes (irony, metaphor/metonymy), narrative techniques
  - To the critics, the text is made of these things
  - So in this critical method the first step is inventorying and studying, for example, all the possible rhetorical devices an author could use, all the possible poetic forms and rules, etc. and then the second step is going through the text to find these elements, isolate them and then also understand their relationship to each other in the text

- And by this process we can understand what a text means
- As an example, a formalist reading of *Hamlet* might identify Shakespeare's use of Parallel Construction as a way into meaning
- The Parallels in *Hamlet*
  - Hamlet's father, the King, is poisoned by an antagonistic brother (Claudius)
  - Hamlet is poisoned by an antagonistic brother-like figure (Laertes)
  - Hamlet's father visits his next-of-kin (Hamlet) as a ghost with a frightening story to tell
    - Act I, Scene 5
      - **Ghost**: But that I am forbid
        To tell the secrets of my prison-house,
        I could a tale unfold whose lightest word
        Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood…
  - Hamlet visits his next-of-kin-like figure (Horatio) as a ghost with a frightening story to tell
    - Act V, Scene 2
      - **Hamlet**: I am dead, Horatio…
        Had I but time--as this fell sergeant, death,
        Is strict in his arrest--O, I could tell you--
        But let it be. Horatio, I am dead;
  - Hamlet's father gives his next-of-kin a mission
    - Act I, Scene 5
      - **Ghost**: If thou didst ever thy dear father love--…
        Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder.
  - Hamlet gives his next-of-kin-like figure a mission
    - Act V, Scene 2
      - **Hamlet**: If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart
        Absent thee from felicity awhile,
        And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain,
        To tell my story.
  - So for a Formalist these parallel constructions are rich with significance and draw our attention to the archetypal theme of the son taking the place of the father
    - Shakespeare is juxtaposing father and son by placing them in parallel roles (ghost, messenger, requester)
    - And the key distinction between them becomes what they exhort their listener to do
      - The Ghost wants revenge, Hamlet wants his story told
      - Moving from revenge to storytelling is very much a movement from chaos to order, from pre-civilization to civilization
      - So the key plot element in the play, the revenge plot, ends with the possibility of moving from barbarity to culture
        - After everything Hamlet has gone through to carry out his revenge mission – taking innocent life, his friends turning on him, losing the woman he loves, his mother's death, his extreme emotional disturbance – when he gets
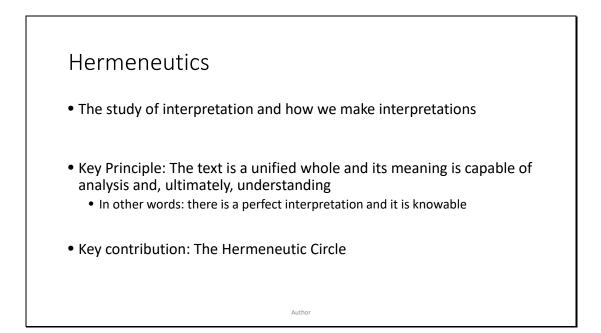
- the opportunity to fully step into his father's position, he declines
  - Hamlet has been through the ugliest aspects of revenge and ultimately does not take his father's place by demanding he be revenged but transcends his father and delivers his father's kingdom out of chaos and into civilization by requesting his story be told
  - Thus Shakespeare gives us the archetype not of the son taking the place of the father, but of the son supplanting the father
  - This meaning is right there in the text and made obvious by a careful study of the textual elements, in this case: parallel constructions
- This is an example of how a Formalist criticism proceeds and the tools it uses to understand meaning
- Always the key assumption of formalism is that the text alone is sufficient to understanding meaning – if one can understand all of the elements a text is made of, he or she can put those elements together as they appear in the text and assemble meaning

- **Reader**
  - The success and widespread saturation of Formalist ideas and methods is hard to overstate – for about fifty years Formalism dominated academic and critical circles (and in many ways still does today) – and as it spread and consolidated its far-ranging influence, alternative theories inevitably arose to address shortcomings or perceived shortcomings in Formalist approaches
    - Reader-based criticisms arise in response to the orthodoxy of Formalist schools
  - Formalists insist that meaning has nothing to do with authorial intent (what Formalists call the Intentional Fallacy) or with how a story personally affected a reader (what Formalists call the Affective Fallacy)
    - Criticism of Formalist schools focused on how the Formalist method cut-out a key part of the reading experience – the reader – and handed the last and only word in meaning to a priestly class of critics who gave no consideration to the constituency that actually brings a text to life: readers
  - In reader-based criticism there is a recognition that much of what a work has come to "mean" was discovered and debated by large groups of readers, sometimes whole societies
    - Reader criticisms insist on the fact that often a text means different things to different readers or groups of readers
      - To these critics this difference in understanding is important, worth studying, and can tell us a lot about what the text communicates
      - For example, if readers ignore or don't emphasize a certain element of the text then functionally it has no meaning for those readers
      - If, say, Romeo and Juliet were viewed as impulsive and reckless teenagers (which certainly has textual support) instead of deeply committed, true lovers then their ultimate deaths might move us to indignation at their foolish behavior instead of empathy for their hopeless love

- We might see the text as a tale about the dangers of romantic whims instead of as a tale of tragic sacrifice for timeless love
- In the first reading, Romeo and Juliet themselves might become the antagonists – they are the ones who cause their own problems and downfalls because they are not able to govern their impulses and mature, while in the second reading the antagonist is the rigidity in society that subsumes individual freedom in favor of social roles that the individual must perform
- These are the kinds of interpretative acts that Reader-based criticisms are open to and which constitute valid understandings of the text for these critics
- This presentation will examine each of these critical traditions – author-, text-, and reader-based – will highlight their key contributions, and explore how their methods can inform story construction

Hermeneutics

- The study of interpretation and how we make interpretations

- Key Principle: The text is a unified whole and its meaning is capable of analysis and, ultimately, understanding
    - In other words: there is a perfect interpretation and it is knowable

- Key contribution: The Hermeneutic Circle

Author

- **Study of Interpretation**
    - Hermeneutics tries to offer an efficient framework for interpretation, a set of rules that provide the basis for good interpretative practice
    - Hermeneutics explores what goes into our interpretation, what factors influence how we understand any object or phenomenon, including a text
        - These factors include our cultural traditions, our language, our historical understanding, our psychological disposition, our knowledge of the author's context and biography
    - The word Hermeneutics comes from the Greek word meaning Translate or Interpret
        - Hermes is the messenger god whose role it is to mediate between gods and mortals, to communicate messages between the gods and mortals
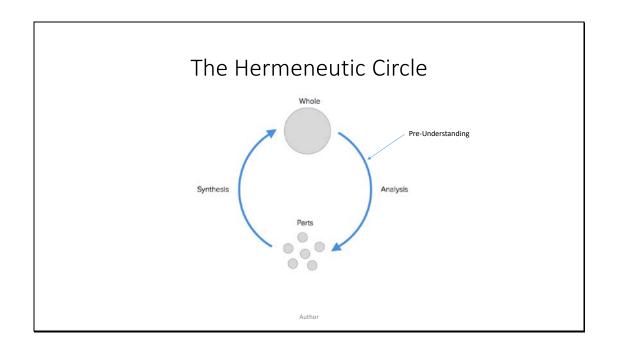- **Key Principle**
    - Although it is a contentious idea in some schools of criticism, the understanding that any given text has a "meaning" is core to almost all forms of criticism, including Hermeneutics
    - Hermeneutics comes out of the classical understanding of Platonic Forms,
        - The idea of Platonic Forms posits that there is a metaphysical place (the world of forms) where all objects have integrated and perfect wholes and exist in their ideal states
            - In this world of forms, everything has an ideal form: a chair, a triangle, a literary text
            - Thus, in the same way that objects can be integrated wholes with ideal states and meaning, so too can literary texts embody this

- The highest aspiration of writing in the classical mode is to achieve a unity of meaning, which, according to classical aesthetics, was arrived at by fully integrating the parts into the whole such that the object imitated its ideal state
  - Part of this core idea of meaning is that the parts of the work are assumed to integrate into a whole and that there is a complementary (not a divergent) relationship between parts and whole
    - In other words, the work is unified and the meaning of its parts "move" in the same direction as the meaning of its whole
      - There is no part that is not capable of integration with the whole
        - Later this idea is attacked by many critical schools
  - Hermeneutics, although it could be described as covering all theories of interpretation, is considered an author-based approach to criticism
    - Because ultimately although the parts and whole of a work are being interpreted and put in relation to each other, what those parts and the whole truly mean is considered to be found in the author's intention
      - Hermeneutics, and the study of interpretation generally that begins in the Renaissance, sees as one of its most important aims the "clarifying and capturing" of the author's intention
      - So a hermeneutic approach to reading, when it is trying to make sense of a part or whole, heavily appeals to and attempts to elucidate authorial intention
      - This understanding, that ultimately the author controls meaning and is the highest authority to appeal to when trying to understand a work, is running underneath all of our interpretative acts if we are classical Hermeneutists
- **The Hermeneutic Circle**
  - This interpretative method aims to describe what is happening in the act of interpretation
    - At the precise moment we are interpreting an object, what kind of process is occurring
  - We are always interpreting but what does that process consist of – this is what the Hermeneutic Circle takes up
  - Hans Gadamer: We don't access objects neutrally from a distance, but they disclose themselves to us as we move around in an already existing milieu of meaningful relations

The Hermeneutic Circle

- **The Circle of Interpretation**
  - The Hermeneutic Circle is a theory of interpretation that describes how we interpret
    - It posits that we enter the interpretative act with an inescapable pre-understanding of the phenomenon (which may be accurate or inaccurate) and that we use this pre-understanding along with every new piece of information derived from a part of the phenomenon itself to interpret that decontextualized part and then from that part to project an interpretation of the whole; and as we continue to engage with the object we get new information that modifies and refines our initial projections and understanding of the object's parts and whole
  - The metaphor of the circle connotes both that interpretation is always ongoing and that truly there is no starting or ending point but a continuous loop for entry and exit
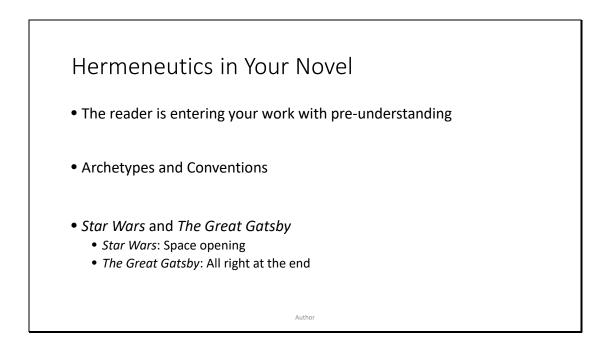- **Pre-Understanding**
  - Although there is no true starting point in our interpretative acts when it comes to reading, we nevertheless enter the text with a set of experiences, and a certain placement in time, culture, etc. and these create an initial "expected meaning"
    - Hermeneutics calls this Pre-Understanding
    - As we will see, the core principle of the Hermeneutic Circle is that interpretation involves relating parts to whole and vice versa
      - And Pre-Understanding is what invariably colors our initial, and even subsequent judgments and interpretations of both parts and whole
      - Pre-Understandings are of course personal to every reader, but also operate society-wide where every society has its own conventions and norms that any interpreter within that society can't help but apply during the interpretative moment

- Pre-Understanding, then, is an innovative theory because it finally accounts for why interpretation varies through time and place and through individuals
- **Interpreting**
  - Wolfgang Iser
    - "A text is comprised of sentences. These serve to create the world within a work of fiction. All sentences offer ambiguity, or fluidity, a meaning beyond the obvious literal one and it is through these that the reader may become an active participant in the reading process. It is through these lenient sentences that the content of the text comes across. The sentences serve as foreshadowers of future events to the reader. The reader thus actively predicts what is to come, modifying his expectations as he encounters new sentences. These sentences also have retrospective importance to the reader (he modifies his views of prior events based on new ones)."
  - Hermeneutics posits that the movement of understanding is constantly from the parts to the whole and back to the parts, and hence, it is a circle
  - The Hermeneutic Circle says that as we move through the text we are continuously understanding the individual parts and using that understanding to project an understanding of the whole, and then using that projected understanding to re-evaluate the meaning of the parts
    - Each movement through the hermeneutic circle sees the reader develop a hypothesis regarding the part or whole or both
      - This hypothesis is continually modified as the text unfolds and new information is integrated into the model
      - Hermeneutics calls this "The reading which interprets"
      - "Bridge inferences" are made when there is any discontinuity between parts or between a part and the whole
        - These Bridge Inferences are key interpretative acts where Pre-Understanding really comes into play as the reader is forced to fit together interpretations that do not seem complimentary on their face
  - Neither the whole text nor any individual part can be understood without reference to one another, again resulting in a circle of meaning and interpretation
  - Hermeneutics says the tendency on the part of the reader is to maximize consistency and wholeness
    - In Hermeneutics the correct understanding is that which harmonizes the parts with the whole
    - Meanwhile authorial meaning looms over the entire interpretative act because interpretation can be more or less correct depending on how closely it aligns with an understanding of the author's meaning

Hermeneutics in Your Novel

• The reader is entering your work with pre-understanding

• Archetypes and Conventions

• *Star Wars* and *The Great Gatsby*
  • *Star Wars*: Space opening
  • *The Great Gatsby*: All right at the end

Author

- **Pre-Understanding**
  - Not only is the reader entering your story with a given personal and social and psychological context, but the reader is also entering with a deep knowledge of certain archetypes and genres
  - Readers have a keen understanding of genre and genre conventions
    - We are all inundated with classic genre motifs
      - Books, movies, TV, music – genre conventions are presented to us everywhere in our media
      - We know in a thriller the good-guy is going to win, we know in a detective novel the criminal will face some form of justice, we know in a literary novel the protagonist will grapple with an internal struggle
  - The reader has conscious and unconscious expectations that they expect will be met – part of what forms these expectations and genre conventions are archetypal representations
- **Archetypes and Conventions**
  - Archetypes
    - The idea that there are universal "essences" underlying our representations in the physical world is an old idea in philosophy
      - Plato spoke about a world of forms as existing in a transcendent plane that our physical world represented in imitations
      - Kant discussed "categories" on which all physical things are predicated
    - While this question of universals is a familiar idea in philosophy, it was given its most famous explication by the psychiatrist Carl Jung who called these

universals Archetypes and hypothesized that they are patterns of the psyche common to all people

- According to this theory, Archetypes are universal patterns in our unconscious minds inherited from "the average psychic life of our ancestors"
  - In the same way we, as primates, have universal instinctual responses (such as social behavior, reproduction, etc.) we have, according to the theory of the collective (or transpersonal) unconscious by Carl Jung, certain patterns embedded in our mind
  - Much like Freud's theory of the unconscious, the theory of archetypal representations in the collective unconscious is not supported by direct evidence but by deduction
    - Freud observed the tumultuous nature of the conscious mind, the existence of dreams, fantasies, and parapraxes (what we know as Freudian slips) and how these all revealed repressed desires – and from this he deduced that there must be a subconscious working underneath our conscious mind
  - Similarly, Jung observed that many patients in psychoanalysis had experienced (either in dreams or in "other exceptional states of mind") certain images and mythological themes despite that patient likely not being exposed to the original source of the myths from which these symbols/themes emerge
    - There also tended to be a clustering of certain representations in art and folk stories and myth, and through Jung's study of myth he noticed what others before him had noticed: that these representations are common across culture and historical periods
  - From this Jung concluded that there must be a shared unconscious that is universal to people and that contains these common modes of representation
    - He called these forms Archetypes and described them as patterns submerged in our psyche – these patterns then lead to expressive forms or representations
      - The image, the representation itself is not the archetype but merely the manifestation of submerged psychic elements
    - These archetypal patterns include birth, death, marriage, the demon or devil, the magician, the jester, the warrior, the mother, creation, apocalypse
- The idea of underlying universal modes of understanding is certainly controversial, not least because it is an all but untestable theory, for how would we go about proving the existence of psychological structures we are alleged to not even have conscious access to
  - Thus we only know them by their manifestation in human experience and creative representations (such as in a culture's mythology and artistic renderings)
  - Jung: "An archetype stirs us because it is in a voice that is stronger than our own"

- The structural anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss disagreed with Jung's conclusions but nevertheless helped show how myths across cultures share similar structural organizations
  - Levi-Strauss viewed social life as a structural system of symbols
  - Levi-Strauss observed that while the surface structure of the symbols might vary greatly cross cultures (e.g.: the form that a Jungian archetype assumes), the way these structures are similarly combined might be pointing to a deep structure that informs the surface symbols
  - His famous work, *The Structural Study of Myth*, analyzed myths across cultures and described the structural similarities of these systems of representation
    - Levi-Strauss pointed out that on their surface myths seem random and chaotic; myths appear as arbitrary stories where anything is liable to happen
    - Yet Levi-Strauss painstakingly showed what a close correspondence myths from different regions have with one another, which strongly suggests that these are not in fact "random" representations
  - For Levi-Strauss, the universality of how myths operate across different cultures – meaning the universality of how the constituent elements of myth are grouped together – suggests something universal is underlying the myth
  - Levi-Strauss strongly disagreed with Jung's work because he did not feel that it was the individual components of myth that held the key to meaning (e.g. the warrior figure, the trickster figure, etc.) but how the individual units were combined that revealed how a myth operated for a culture
    - Yet he still posits, like Jung and others before him, a plane of universal understanding common to all people
- Another well-known proponent of comparative mythology whose work has influenced modern storytelling is Joseph Campbell
  - Campbell is best known for popularizing the idea of the Monomyth – the story of the hero archetype that appears in strikingly similar form across cultures
    - It is a misconception that Campbell himself discovered this phenomenon or was the first to explain its elements
  - Campbell described the common features of the quest myth or Monomyth and how various cultures had represented them
  - For Campbell, myth had psychological implications and the commonality of the Monomyth suggested a psychic commonality between disparate people and cultures
    - He described these as "the hidden processes of the enigma *Homo sapiens*"
- All of these examples are meant to introduce the idea of deep unconscious elements that might be shared across all people

- Whether biologically or psychologically driven, the possibility of these common elements in the unconscious is at least strongly hinted at by comparative mythology and religion and art (see for example the seminal work in comparative religion, *The Golden Bough* by James George Frazier)
- What this means for the novelist is that one element of pre-understanding that might be common to all people is that of basic story-like motifs
  - This means that certain representational symbols (like the warrior, like the demon, like death) or even relationships among symbols, according to Levi-Strauss's analysis (like how the tension between opposing symbols is resolved) – might already be influencing the reader
  - Thus to the extent the writer's work activates these representational modes or organizations, it greatly influences the reader's hermeneutic projection from parts to whole
    - How the writer chooses to manipulate these elements of pre-understanding can influence how the reader moves through the writer's work and ultimately how effective the resolution of the story is in terms of the stunning catharsis the writer owes the reader
  - Genre Conventions – Some Types
    - 1) Conventional Settings – if your novel is set in the old west/the future/the bad part of town, the reader will expect certain representations of these settings
    - 2) Conventional Events – depending on your genre, certain events have to happen
      - In detective novels there is the unsolvable crime (an event that seems to be impossible to sort out or even impossible to have even occurred in the first place, e.g.: the windows and doors were locked "from the inside"), there is the sedentary detective who uses logic to solve the mystery (the crime is solved by abstract reasoning and not by kicking down doors, or by the criminal confessing etc.)
      - In horror novels there is the reactive protagonist (meaning the antagonist tends to drive the plot forward); there is the un-persuadable antagonist (nothing said or argued nor any reasoning with the evil will avail the protagonist; nothing besides the total destruction of the antagonist will stop the sequence of events)
      - In literary novels the protagonist must choose their orientation to society (do they set themselves against society, or are they brought into a greater appreciation and respect for social structures)
    - 3) Conventional Roles – the mentor, the love interest, the trickster, the villain
  - The Haiku
    - This poetic form has rigid requirements that must be observed or the work is not a haiku
      - The poem must have only three lines
      - The syllable breakdown of the lines must be 5 – 7 – 5
    - These are the rules that have more or less established themselves in English versions of haiku

- The rules for haiku in the original Japanese are even more strict, with more conventions that must be obeyed
  - These rules include: the whole poem can be said in one breath, there is a direct or indifferent reference to a season of nature (fall, winter, spring, summer) (indirect meaning the season itself is not mentioned but another detail in the poem makes the season clear, e.g.: rain means fall, insects mean summer),
- And yet, even with this seemingly uncompromising framework, it is possible to achieve an infinite number of new meanings and creations
  - No one would ever say that all of the Haikus have been created
- And thus, conventions do not per se limit the creator but instead help guide her creation in ways that will render it more effective
  - o Sports have conventions
    - Every baseball diamond has the same dimensions: the bases are 90-feet apart, the pitcher's mound is 10 inches high and 60 feet 6 inches from home plate
    - In baseball, the pitcher can only throw a pitch a certain way otherwise it is an illegal pitch and called a balk
    - And within these and other rules, each game is unpredictable, unique, compelling
  - o Thus the reader or interpreter will be aware of a great number of conventions which will both guide her interpretative acts and also give the author the most room for surprise
    - If you come to rely on something and then it is presented to you in a novel way, you are surprised
  - o As it is commonly said: Novelty comes from elevating familiar material
- **Star Wars**
  - o The opening part of both *Star Wars* and *The Great Gatsby* tells us a great deal about their whole
  - o Star Wars
    - Star Wars opens with a prologue announcing: "It is a period of civil war"…and ends by telling the audience that the rebels in this civil war are fighting to restore freedom to the galaxy
    - Then the first scene is the empire overtaking a rebel ship and capturing or killing the rebels on board
      - This opening sets up a plausible assumption in the viewer that she is about to see an action story
        - o The viewer is also processing all this other genre information:
          - There is a conventional setting: Space - there will be foreign planets, strange worlds, strange aliens, advanced technology
          - There is a conventional event: An escape in the nick of time by R-2 and C-3PO – that's probably going to come back and be a problem for the Empire
          - There are conventional characters: Darth Vader, Princess Leia

- Darth Vader as the force of evil, an archetypal villain: he is clad in all black, has a menacing voice, he kills indiscriminately – the viewer knows someone is going to have to face him
- Princess Leia as the chaste virgin (dressed in all white), as the damsel in distress (captured by the villain, a lady in need of rescue), as a heroine (she stands up to Darth Vader, does not fear him) – from this representation the viewer will draw a great deal of assumptions:
  - 1) Chaste virgin - someone will compete for her love
  - 2) Damsel in distress – someone will come to rescue her
  - 3) Heroine – her heroism will be needed later in this story
- This is all accomplished with only some scrolling text and a few minutes of screen-time
  - It can be accomplished this quickly because the audience is aware of genre and genre conventions and is already entering the hermeneutic circle and using pre-understanding plus their initial encounter with the text/film to begin comparing parts and whole and making projections
  - Then in the coming scenes, we see Luke Skywalker at home on the farm and he seems like a typical teenage kid
    - Luke is immature – he tries to get out of his chores to go play with his friends, he sulks when his uncle won't let him leave the farm
      - But he is not a total liability on the farm - he helps his uncle with the harvest, he manages the droids and the maintenance of the droids
        - So some of Luke's effectiveness is certainly established
      - He is in a conventional setting: a dead-end town – he will have to leave this town
      - He experiences a conventional event: control by a stern father (father figure) – he might have to disobey this stern figure
      - He is a conventional character: a country boy, a bumpkin – he doesn't know how the world works; he doesn't know the world is a dangerous place; he is idealistic, which we may like, but he also needs an education about "the real world"
- So with all of this information, a young, immature kid in a small town hidden away from the world, stuck under his parents' (technically his aunt and uncle's) roof, the viewer is thinking maybe this will be a coming-of-age story about this character, maybe we'll see this character come in contact with the wider world and be tested by that
  - But the viewer also remembers the large-scale battle opening and realizes the whole will not just be a coming-of-age plot; it will also incorporate epic action

- Now the reader/viewer has two parts to synthesize in the hermeneutic circle (this is the reader using the parts to project a whole):
  - A large-scale action part, and a small-scale coming-of-age part
    - So maybe now the reader will project a whole that integrates these parts and think "The action part is about defeating evil, winning an armed conflict, and restoring goodness to the world (like it says in the opening crawl), and since there is also this other part about coming-of-age, maybe the whole is about the necessity of maturing if one is going to be an effective part of a noble cause larger than oneself (the cause of defeating evil and restoring freedom)"
      - And what happens at the end – the grown up and matured Luke Skywalker uses all the training and life experience he has gathered throughout the story to deliver the decisive blow that defeats the Empire's evil plans
  - This set up all happens in only about the first ten minutes of the film and already, thanks to the hermeneutic circle, we are incredibly engaged and making predictions and testing our predictions and have a very accurate understanding of the shape of the story
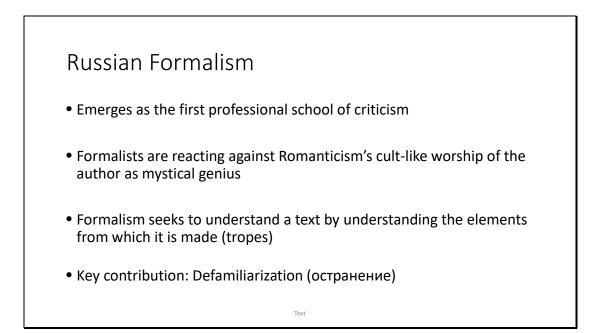
- **The Great Gatsby**
  - The Great Gatsby opens with a passage that is written after all of the events of the novel have taken place
  - Our First-Person Narrator Nick Carraway – in the language of narrative theory a Homodiegetic Narrator because he is both a narrator *and* a character in the story – begins by making it clear that he is narrating a story that has already happened; in other words all the events of the story have concluded, everything is at its final disposition
    - This is quite an *avant garde* technique for the novel in the 1920s
    - From a Hermeneutic perspective this type of beginning has implications for the integration of parts-and-whole and the meaning the reader will project
      - One of the most interesting things we encounter in the opening of the book is Nick's allusion to the events we are about to experience and how dejected they have left him
        - After what happened Nick has had to leave the east coast and return home to settle himself and start over
        - We understand early on that these events have left Nick with a harsh view of the world, an anger towards its people and affairs
    - And towards the end of this intriguing precis, Nick refers to the titular character of the book, Gatsby
      - As will be discussed in a subsequent section, the title of the book does the job of focusing our attention
        - It is called *The Great Gatsby*, so whenever we encounter Gatsby in the text, particularly at the outset, our attention pricks up

- o Rather than see this as Nick's story, the title, and the mention of Gatsby in the opening paragraphs reminds us that this is really Gatsby's story and so we are looking to project an early meaning of the whole that somehow runs through Gatsby's character
- In the opening pages, Nick gives us contradictory impressions about Gatsby, which will be explored in greater depth in a later section
    - Ch. 1 – Nick: "When I came back from the East last autumn I felt that I wanted the world to be in uniform and at a sort of moral attention forever; I wanted no more riotous excursions with privileged glimpses into the human heart. Only Gatsby, the man who gives his name to this book, was exempt from my reaction."
        - o This seems to suggest that Nick desires to know more about Gatsby, that Nick wanted no more glimpses into the human heart, except for perhaps glimpses into Gatsby's heart
        - o Already we begin to understand Gatsby as an enigmatic figure, someone who isn't fully knowable
    - Ch. 1 – Nick: "Gatsby, who represented everything for which I have an unaffected scorn."
        - o This follows immediately after Nick suggests he wanted to know Gatsby more and is thus a startling reversal
    - Ch. 1 – Nick: "If personality is an unbroken series of successful gestures, then there was something gorgeous about him, some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life, as if he were related to one of those intricate machines that register earthquakes ten thousand miles away."
    - Ch. 1 – Nick describing Gatsby's temperament: "It was an extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness such as I have never found in any other person and which it is not likely I shall ever find again."
- These lines create the intriguing image of a "gorgeous" person who is charismatic and endearing but with a serious flaw about him, something worth our harshest scorn – certainly this is the making of a great fictional character
    - And as the reader moves through this section and encounters these contradictory parts about this all-important Gatsby character, she is actively trying to synthesize all this information into a stable projection about Gatsby that can serve as a basis for further interpretation (in other words, the reader has entered the Hermeneutic Circle)
- And as this Hermeneutic process is underway, and the reader attempts to interpret parts and whole, Fitzgerald synthesizes all the disparate impressions we have been given about Gatsby in the following statement by Nick, one of the most curious lines in literature:
    - Ch. 1 –Nick: "No — Gatsby turned out all right at the end."
    - The full line is: "No — Gatsby turned out all right at the end; it is what preyed on Gatsby, what foul dust floated in the wake of his dreams that temporarily closed out my interest in the abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men."
- Amazingly, this all happens within the first 500 words of the book

- We are told these disparate, seemingly incompatible things about the titular Gatsby, and set our minds to work on them and how they will inform the story, and then all this initial tension is resolved by the information that "Gatsby turned out all right at the end"
- Thus as the reader proceeds through the story, she can't help but keep this resolution in mind, that Gatsby turned out all right
- As Gatsby begins to act and more information about his character and motivation comes into the story the reader necessarily interprets events through the lens of Gatsby turning out all right
  - Perhaps even at the turbulent moment where Gatsby confronts Tom Buchanan, where he attempts to persuade Daisy to leave Tom and start a life with him instead, where Daisy says she's leaving Tom and it looks like Gatsby will realize his dream, and where moments later when this dream is crushed – perhaps even through this climactic sequence of near-success and then total defeat the reader is still trying to integrate into this catastrophe the understanding that Gatsby will turn out all right at the end
- And so the reader has come this far through the text, has seen Gatsby achieve a great measure of his dream – reuniting with Daisy – and has then seen the entire dream lost after the confrontation with Tom and Daisy, and now comes the end of the novel where the reader finally gets to see exactly how Gatsby "turned out"
  - Gatsby is shot and killed by the autobody shop owner George Wilson
    - It is a case of mistaken identity following Wilson's wife being run over and killed by Daisy who was driving Gatsby's car with Gatsby in the passenger seat
      - We learn in chapter 9 that Tom told Wilson that it was Gatsby who killed his wife
    - Gatsby is killed and everyone who partook in the hospitality of his parties and open house completely abandons him and he has a funeral where "nobody came"
    - Regarding Daisy, we're told she and Tom return to their comfortable life and that upon Gatsby's death Daisy "hadn't sent a message or a flower."
  - The story ends with Nick contemplating the nature of Gatsby's dream (to live in a glorious past) and how doomed it was from the very beginning
- The novel is over, the whole has been revealed, Gatsby dies and is ignominiously buried having failed in his dream, and yet still forcing its way into the Hermeneutic Circle of interpretation is the declaration, made after all of this has happened, the declaration that "Gatsby turned out all right at the end."
  - This presents such a baffling Hermeneutic puzzle
  - What could Fitzgerald be saying by equating Gatsby's fate with "[turning] out all right"
  - This is such a wonderful question to consider and one of the most intriguing parts of the whole

- To begin to understand it the reader must look back at the parts of the novel, must re-enter the Hermeneutic circle and begin to reanalyze and re-relate and reinterpret parts in order to synthesize a unified whole
- This dilemma shows why the Hermeneutic conception of interpreting is circular and why it is an incredible tool to understand a text

Russian Formalism

• Emerges as the first professional school of criticism

• Formalists are reacting against Romanticism's cult-like worship of the author as mystical genius

• Formalism seeks to understand a text by understanding the elements from which it is made (tropes)

• Key contribution: Defamiliarization (остранение)

Text

- **Russian Formalism**
- Formalists reject previous ideas of viewing the literary text as a "quasi-mystical" object and take a more scientific approach to the text
  - o Formalists view the literary work as a matter of craft – and anything outside that craft (personality, history, culture) is not fit for literary criticism in their method
- In Formalism there is a shift from understanding meaning, to understanding structure
  - o Formalism is the application of linguistics to the study of literature
    - ▪ Where linguistics is concerned with the structures of language rather than what is actually said
      - ▪ The emphasis in linguistics is not what was said, but what were the structures of language and devices of language that made it possible to utter a statement in the first place – this is the method that Formalists apply to literary texts
  - o Formalists are value neutral, they are not concerned with judging the literary merit of a text, but just with how the text deploys literary tropes to achieve its effect
    - ▪ They looked at how devices like meter, rhyme, syntax, diction, and metaphor influence the experience and meaning of a text
- The movement was repressed by the Soviet State, particularly by Stalin, because of its emphasis on form alone (and not matters of class representation, class struggle) and its members either recant or emigrate to European capitals
  - o Trotsky wrote that this preoccupation with form, in and of itself, is a kind of aestheticism

- Communists considered the Formalist method as a turning of one's back on history (because of formalism's refusal to analyze factors like the social context of a work, the status of its author, etc.)
- So the Formalists are accused of abandoning class struggle and thus are persecuted and driven out of Russia

Defamiliarization

- "To transfer the usual perception of an object into a sphere of new perception"

- The Broken Hammer

- Sentence level and Story level
  - "How like a winter hath my absence been from thee…"
  - *Kholstomer, A Modest Proposal, American Psycho*

Text

- **New Perception**
  - The term Defamiliarization is coined by Viktor Shklovsky
    - Tellingly, he comes up with the term in an essay entitled "Art as Technique"
      - Shklovsky does not call it Art as Emotion or Art as Inspiration or Art as Expression
      - He and the other Russian Formalists view art as something that relies on precise methods and not on fanciful ideas of revelation or spiritual meditation
      - Art is a technique the same way pottery or carpentry or differential equations are techniques
  - The Russian Formalists view art as the medium through which our understanding of the world may be renewed
    - From *Art as Technique*: "Art exists that one may recover the sensation of life;" "It exists to make the stone *stony*."
    - To Formalists, the artistic is that which removes the automatism of perception
      - The goal of much of literary criticism, and one of its most contentious aspects, is defining what precisely is literature – and for the Russian Formalists, literature was anything that deformed the ordinary way we perceive
    - Shklovsky and the Russian Formalists' goal is to put ordinary language and themes under pressure in order to arrive at a truer understanding of the thing itself
      - Roman Jakobson calls this: "An organized violence committed on ordinary speech."

- - Formalists understand that the everyday world often does not resonate with us because our perceptions of it are so habitual and automatic
  - According to Shklovsky: "As perception becomes habitual, it becomes automatic."
    - This automatism leaves us detached from the real world and only art has the capacity to refresh our engagement with it
    - Art that can reawaken our perceptions and cause us to engage with familiar objects in new ways is effective art
    - Art that does not allow for this is ineffective – it is merely derivative and continues the situation where "life is reckoned as nothing"
      - This art can be neither aesthetically pleasing or emotionally compelling because it does not engage our senses and faculties
  - Defamiliarization is the ultimate goal for a Formalist because it forces the reader to grapple with language and concepts and story in a more rigorous way – and through this process the object presented to them is renewed
    - The purpose of defamiliarization is to restore our capacity to see the world
  - Formalism rejects traditional notions of aesthetic theory
    - Principally, Formalists reject The Law of Economy of Creative Effort and the idea that it is crucial to economize the reader's attention
      - Here, with the Law of Economy of Creative Effort, the idea is that language is the stuff of thought, and if you add any friction in the language you will reduce the efficiency of the thought
    - Formalists reject this idea and argue that it is precisely the smooth and efficient language/story that slips right by the reader unnoticed
    - But poems that are difficult, or "roughened" force the reader to attend to them and engage with them at level deeper than habitual thought and categorization
      - A Formalist would say that efficiency of language is perhaps desirable in "practical" language (giving directions to someone, explaining step-by-step instructions) but this does not make it desirable in "poetic" language

- **The Broken Hammer**
  - Critic Terry Eagleton and many others use this famous example of defamiliarization – the idea that when we pick up a hammer and hammer a nail we don't really appreciate the function and significance of the hammer
    - If everything is working as it should, we never have reason to stop and examine our assumptions and understanding of the object, or its properties and its potential
    - But, if we have a nail that needs hammering and we pick up the hammer and the handle of the hammer breaks – and we are unable to hammer the nail – now we will have a fresh understanding of the role of a hammer and its properties and possibilities
      - A shoe won't work as a hammer, a book won't work, a fist, etc. – in this moment we fully grasp all the properties and meaning of the hammer because its typical working has been altered
  - Same thing for air, we breathe mostly unconsciously – but if the air is somehow tainted – a truck drives by spewing exhaust – and then we try breathing, then we will

immediately appreciate the meaning of taking a breath and how it affects us; we will have a deeper understanding of the thing, of breathing

- o So literary devices like irony, metaphor, parallelisms can impede our way through the text and challenge our attempts at making meaning
    - ▪ This will ultimately force us to reexamine the art object and its representations and bring us closer to the material
- **Sentence Level and Story Level**
- **Sentence Level**
- At a basic level, defamiliarization is applied to the language in a text
    - o The Formalists analyzed sentences to see how word choice, syntax, grammar, meter, all manipulated reality in an aesthetic way
        - ▪ One example of defamiliarization, an example cited by Eagleton, is the opening line from Shakespeare's Sonnet 97
        - ▪ The line (which actually comprises the first line and part of the second) is: How like a winter hath my absence been / From thee
        - ▪ Here several tropes are influencing the defamiliarization in this sentence
        - ▪ The first and most obvious is metaphor
            - • I. A. Richards, someone whose theories closely paralleled Russian Formalism, devised intricate theories of metaphor
                - o Richard describes Metaphor as being a grace or added power of language and he is explicit that metaphor is not a mere ornament
            - • Richards describes the Metaphor as being composed of two parts – the Tenor and the Vehicle
                - o The Tenor is the subject of the metaphor, the thing whose aspects are being described
                - o The Vehicle is the object whose aspects are being linked to the Tenor
        - ▪ In the above line from Shakespeare, the Tenor is speaker's feeling of absence (that's what's being described) and the Vehicle is winter (with its connotations of barrenness, death, loneliness) (that's what's being used to describe the speaker's loneliness/absence)
            - • In other words, the speaker is defamiliarizing the idea of loneliness and separation
            - • In its ordinary course we understand loneliness as sadness and as a state that makes life dull and difficult
            - • Now Shakespeare is taking a thing like loneliness and not describing it with these common associations but describing it as winter
                - o Winter evokes similar themes of sadness and dullness and difficulty
                    - ▪ But because our reading of the Sonnet and understanding of the line doesn't move directly from loneliness to sadness, but first passes through the image of winter, our ordinary association is disrupted, paused, redirected
                    - ▪ We pause to consider what winter represents and subconsciously try linking it with loneliness

- And after this expended imaginative effort, we at last arrive at our destination: loneliness is harsh (just like winter)
  - But the trip we took to get there was unlike our ordinary trip from loneliness to sadness/harshness, it was a new route that let us re-appreciate each concept in its own right and overall brought us a new way to consider and understand something as common as loneliness
- The second trope that influences the defamiliarization of the sentence is Meter
  - This sonnet, like many Shakespearean sonnets, is written in the commonly used Iambic Pentamer, or five instances per line of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable
  - So this requirement that the syllables move from unstressed to stressed, unstressed to stressed, unstressed to stressed, etc., this influences both word choice and word order
    - Here is a reordering of the line that does not follow Iambic Pentameter: How my absence from thee hath been like a / Winter
      - This reordering of the line carries more or less the same meaning as the original line, and preserves the metaphor of absence from a loved one feeling like winter, but it is not metrically correct
      - Instead of being a smooth progression of unstressed/stressed syllables, now the stresses are thus:
        - Unstressed/Unstressed, Stressed/Unstressed, Unstressed/Stressed, Stressed/Stressed, Stressed/Unstressed, and Stressed/Unstressed
  - So maybe the statement: "How like a winter hath my absence been / From thee" is not typically the way we would convey the meaning of this opening line if we were merely saying it in ordinary speech to someone, but it is the constraints of meter that force this organization into the poem
    - E.g.: If we were telling our partner that our being away from them has caused us loneliness and the pain of absence, and if we still wanted to preserve the metaphor of absence as winter, we might say the line in a more straightforward way
    - We might say something very close to: How my absence from thee hath been like a / Winter
      - Maybe in the 21st Century we say "How my absence from you has been like a / Winter" or "My absence from you has been like winter"
      - But the trope of Meter, its principles and requirements, don't allow us to configure the statement in such a way because it would violate our Iambic scheme
  - So this line is heavily influenced by the constraints of Meter

- By forcing a certain syntactic arrangement in order to conform to Metrical rules, what might be a commonplace statement like "How my absence from thee hath been like a / Winter" is refreshed by the act of making the line obey Iambic Pentameter
  - As an end-note, also embedded in the trope of Meter here are both the trope of Syntax, which forces a certain word order to keep the Metrical plan, and the trope of Diction, which forces the use of certain words to keep the Metrical Plan
    - For example, and in terms of Diction, Shakespeare used the word "absence" to keep the line in Meter; he could not have used the word "separation"

- **Story Level**
- At higher levels of analysis, Formalists were concerned with texts as a whole and how they treated the systems of meaning in a society and how they refreshed a given audience's understanding of conventions and culture so that these ideas could be re-examined
- At the story level, the formalist is looking to see how the story itself or parts of the story defamiliarize our understanding of the world and the norms under which we live
- The example of this that Shklovsky uses in his essay is Tolstoy's short story *Kholstomer*, or in English *Strider*
  - The story is about the life of a horse
    - It is told from the point of view of an aging horse who is shunned by the other, more vigorous horses in the paddock, and it details the horse's life from youth to old age, describing events in the horse's life, the various people who rode him and how their lives turned out, and how even this elderly horse had a magnificent heyday in which he surpassed all other horses for speed and power
  - According to Shklovsky: "Tolstoy makes the familiar seem strange by not naming the familiar object. He describes an object as if he were seeing it for the first time, an event as if it were happening for the first time. In describing something he avoids the accepted names of its parts and instead names corresponding parts of other objects."
  - As mentioned, the story is told from the perspective of a horse who comments on human and equine affairs
  - This point-of-view is a defamiliarization of perspective and understanding
    - Things that go by unnoticed and unquestioned by people are quite bizarre to our narrator-horse
      - The horse's groom, Nester, pets the horse in a familiar spot under the chin
        - The groom thinks he is soothing the horse, pleasing him, but the horse admits to the reader that this type of petting is actually a little irritating and the horse just pretends it's satisfying out of courtesy to the groom
      - The groom gives the horse a command, which the horse hears and prepares to carry out, and then suddenly the groom kicks him in the belly to spur the horse on, which is both painful and confusing to the horse

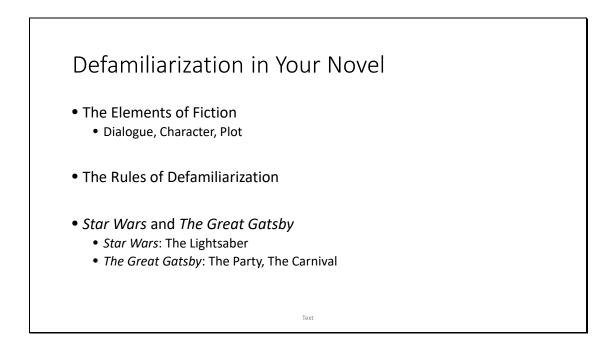who tells us he perfectly understood the command and didn't need any kicking to perform it

- To the owners of the horse who want regal-looking, stately horses, the fact that our horse-narrator is piebald makes him worthless as a Stud Horse and consequently his owners devalue him
  - Meanwhile our horse-narrator cannot comprehend why a spotted pattern is less desirable than any other pattern on a horse
- And, from Shklovsky's essay *Art as Technique*, the canonical example of defamiliarization in *Kholstomer* is the horse's describing his confusion over being another living-thing's property
  - From Kholstomer: "I was quite in the dark as to what they meant by the words '*his* colt,' from which I perceived that people considered that there was some connection between me and the head groom. What the connection was I could not at all understand then. Only much later when they separated me from the other horses did I learn what it meant. At that time I could not at all understand what they meant by speaking of *me* as being a man's property. The words '*my* horse' applied to me, a live horse, seemed to me as strange as to say 'my land,' 'my air,' or 'my water.'"
  - The horse goes on to say that as best as he can understand, whichever human can say 'mine' about the most things is the happiest
- Another example Shklovsky takes comes at the end of the story
  - Our narrator-horse has already died, but Tolstoy continues the device of using the horse's point-of-view to describe the death of one of the horse's prior owners
  - From Kholstomer: "The dead body of Serpukhovskoy, which had walked about the earth eating and drinking, was put under ground much later. Neither his skin, nor his flesh, nor his bones, were of any use. Just as for the last twenty years his body that had walked the earth had been a great burden to everybody, so the putting away of that body was again an additional trouble to people. He had not been wanted by anybody for a long time and had only been a burden, yet the dead who bury their dead found it necessary to clothe that swollen body, which at once began to decompose, in a good uniform and good boots and put it into a new and expensive coffin with new tassels at its four corners, and then to place that coffin in another coffin of led, to take it to Moscow and there dig up some long buried human bones, and to hide in that particular spot this decomposing maggotty body in its new uniform and polished boots, and cover it all up with earth."
    - The death of this former owner is contrasted with the death of Kholstomer (Strider), whose corpse is used by a feral wolf to feed her five young cubs, whose skin is sold to make a blanket, and whose skeleton is collected by a peasant and put to use
    - So in death Strider is no burden and no ridiculous spectacle (like a decomposing corpse in an expensive casket and fine uniform),

but a thing that is completely returned to nature, something useful that ultimately helps nourish new life
- So again the reader is invited to consider just how strange our everyday world is, just how peculiar some of our ways and understandings are
    - The reader need not agree with Tolstoy, of course, or agree that human affairs in this instance are misguided – perhaps caring for the remains of the dead and respecting a dead body are noble impulses that connote our appreciation for the value of each life – but the reader is at least invited to consider otherwise
- It is a simple but powerful device that Tolstoy uses in his story: showing the reader a litany of human assumptions and institutions from the point of view of an animal
    - More than any direct-pass at the matter ever could, the defamiliarized point-of-view presents the reader with provocative framings of otherwise glossed-over human affairs
- *A Modest Proposal* by Jonathan Swift
    - In this essay, the author uses satire as a rhetorical device to examine certain social and economic problems in early-18th century Ireland and the United Kingdom
    - Swift introduces the problem of poor families with several children whom they often cannot afford to support financially
    - He introduces the problem in a sympathetic albeit embellished voice
        - He calls the situation a "melancholy object"
        - He says the experience of people who go through these social and economic problems "would move tears and pity in the most savage and inhuman breast"
    - He identifies himself as someone who is gravely concerned with the plight of the Irish underclass
        - "I think it is agreed by all parties, that this prodigious number of children in the arms, or on the backs, or at the heels of their mothers, and frequently of their fathers, is in the present deplorable state of the kingdom, a very great additional grievance; and therefore whoever could find out a fair, cheap and easy method of making these children sound and useful members of the common-wealth, would deserve so well of the publick, as to have his statue set up for a preserver of the nation."
    - Swift then offers his solution to the problem
        - "I have been assured by a very knowing American of my acquaintance in London, that a young healthy child well nursed, is, at a year old, a most delicious nourishing and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled; and I make no doubt that it will equally serve in a fricassee, or a ragout."
        - Swift's solution to the problem is that the poor should sell their babies as food to wealthy individuals and thus the poor would receive income and the wealthy individuals would enjoy the pastime of a new gourmet dish
            - Swift further instructs his audience that every part of the baby could be put to use as a commodity to help earn income for its parents
                - Including selling the skin to makes gloves for ladies and boots for gentlemen

- o The essay satirizes all of the detached, unsympathetic, ultra-rational solutions to social problems routinely presented in the pamphlets and periodicals and social circles of Swift's day
  - o With such a humorous, considered, and dead-panned delivery, Swift re-humanizes the poor Irish families
    - ▪ He shows the reader how callous and ridiculous other schemes to alleviate poverty have been and redirects our attention to the human element at the center of this problem
    - ▪ It is by de-humanizing the poor Irish, by likening their children to livestock, which is decidedly a defamiliarized take on human babies, that Swift refreshes our understanding of who is hurting in Irish society and how woeful the efforts to help have been
- *American Psycho* by Bret Easton Ellis
  - o In Ellis's novel, Patrick Bateman, the protagonist, is a young, up-and-coming Wall Street banker in New York in the 1980s
    - ▪ He is struggling to adapt to and embrace the consumerist, yuppie society around him while also participating in it as a member of the fashionable elite
      - At the same time that he is sickened by the shallowness of the people and the world around him, he is trying desperately to be a part of it so he won't feel an even deeper sadness from being excluded/isolated
  - o This is an old theme – that shallow values and hedonistic culture have a terrible effect on us; that we participate in them to our detriment and often without even realizing
    - ▪ So to defamiliarize this commonly understood and commonly presented modern dilemma, the story defamiliarizies the characterization of its protagonist
      - Instead of the protagonist being one more man or woman who is disillusioned by an empty culture, the text gives us a protagonist who is the apotheosis of that culture, the apotheosis of all the shallow, self-centered values that surround him
        - o Patrick Bateman does not try to struggle against the culture, does not turn his back on this system: he instead sets out to totally embrace it and climb to the top of it
        - o And what does all of this effort to ascend modern society do to our protagonist – it turns him into a serial killer
        - o Patrick Bateman becomes a model psychopath – he murders, rapes, tortures, cannibalizes people
      - The story never quite moralizes, it never tells us that Patrick Bateman is bad and we who condemn him are good
        - o It says look at this cultural and moral milieu that Patrick Bateman inhabits in the novel, one that is so close to ours in real life – look what it does to someone who sincerely tries to conform to all the pernicious signals that the dark side of culture transmits
        - o The characterization makes us look anew at a lot of the assumptions we make and the ideals we act out

- The story is saying: If someone ever really lived up to *all* of the values and morals of a shallow society then it would make them a sociopathic, psychotic person (like a serial killer), and thus how healthy is this society to begin with

- **The Elements of Fiction**
    - In the analysis of both textual defamiliarization and story-level defamiliarization, we see how the elements of fiction are deployed to create a "Defamiliarizing" effect
        - Again, Formalists see literature as comprised of definable elements – these are the raw materials the author has with which to make a story, and thus these are the tools the author has to achieve defamiliarization
            - In *Khlostomer* the author uses the story element of point-of-view to achieve his Defamiliarizing effect (the point-of-view of a horse)
            - In *A Modest Proposal* the author uses tone (satire)
            - In *American Psycho* the author uses characterization
    - So it is the elements of fiction (plot, character, dialogue, setting, theme, point of view, style, tone) and what the Formalists called "tropes" (linguistic elements such as metaphor, metonymy, irony, synecdoche – the four "Master " tropes – ambiguity, symbolism) that help achieve the aesthetic goals of a text, including that of defamiliarizing
    - Plot, character, dialogue, setting, theme, point of view, style, tone – these and other "tropes" are what a text is made from
    - Dialogue and defamiliarization
        - Speech in fiction is completely unlike speech in real life
            - Speech in real life can afford to be lazy – because you can always ask plenty of clarifying questions, and often time is not a significant constraint
            - Speech in the novel has to be extremely effective – because of all the work it must accomplish in the short space it must accomplish it in

- For example, dialogue in the novel helps bring characters to life
  - Consider this imperative and whether you feel the need to "bring yourself to life" when you communicate in everyday speech – most likely you do not
    - This alone should illustrate the different objectives between speech in real life and speech in fiction
    - When we speak in real life, even to a stranger who may not have any context with which to really know us:
      - We do not really feel the need to load up our speech with meaning
      - We do not try to make our speech enhance or freshen the conflict between us and the stranger or our mutual understanding of the world
      - We are not trying to make our external communication reflect our inner richness
      - All these things may happen incidentally but they are usually not our true objective
      - However in fiction, dialogue must accomplish all these things that everyday speech does not concern itself with
  - Speech in a novel is intricately tied to character and a dramatic plot and thus has a lot of work it needs to accomplish
    - Francine Prose: The mark of bad dialogue is that it only does one thing
      - According to Prose, dialogue in fiction must involve sophisticated multitasking
      - Dialogue is never there to make space or to break up story action – it is there when the character intensely needs to communicate things
    - Dialogue also doesn't work when it makes a point that has already been made or that could be made in a better way
      - The Screenwriter Blake Snyder calls this "Talking the plot"
      - Moreover, dialogue that merely tells what the character is thinking or feeling – when this can easily be otherwise intuited by a reader based on other story elements – is flat and repetitive
  - So dialogue in fiction is not there to imitate real life
    - Like all other aspects of "real life," everyday speech is not interesting enough to be taken whole cloth from real life and placed into the novel
      - In real life there is "talking" but in fiction there must be "dialogue," curated, calculated dialogue
    - The writer has to exercise what James Frey calls Selectivity
      - This is the avoidance of taking too direct a pass at things – this will fail to engage the reader's creative construction of your text if the dialogue over-explains the story or the context of a particular moment in the story
- Defamiliarization and other story elements (briefly):
  - Character
  - E. M. Forster described there being a difference between Homo sapiens and Homo fictus (with the latter meaning characters in books)

- Homo sapiens vs. Homo fictus
- Homo fictus (a character in novels) is: born, capable of dying, wants little food or sleep, is obsessed with human relationships, and we know more about her than we could any person in real life
    - Born – little liberty is taken with the true biological facts of birth, Forster observes
    - Capable of dying – often the novelist strays very far from traditional biological death (e.g.: metaphoric death, or death on earth – damnation)
    - Wants little food or sleep – Food in the novel is mainly presented as a social fact; it is seldom presented as something the character requires physically and in constant measure (the daily need for breakfast, lunch, dinner, and some snacks is rarely presented)
        - Similarly sleep is not presented in a novel as something real homo sapiens do for a third of their lives
        - Is tirelessly occupied with human relationships – characters in novels have plenty of leisure and head space to plunge themselves into another person's affairs
    - And (most important) we know more about her than we could any other creature in real life
        - In fiction, unlike real life, people can be understood completely
            - In real life, says Forster, we tend to know people externally – we never get complete "clairvoyance" into someone's subjectivity nor do we get complete confessionals from people
            - But in fiction, the novelist delimits all potential motivational and emotional drives
            - The character in fiction can, if the novelist wishes, contain no secrets
            - And ultimately it is easier to know someone whose motivations and emotional valences have been pared down
- Plot – The Russian Formalists distinguished between story and plot (another major contribution of theirs)
    - The Formalists said Story is the sequential sequence of narrative events (things in their chronological order), and plot is the way in which these events are formally and causally manipulated
        - As the English novelist E. M. Forster put it:
            - The King died and then the Queen died – this is story
            - The King died and then the Queen died of grief – this is plot
    - Defamiliarizing your plot means examining the principle of cause and effect
        - Fortunately for the writer, people are seemingly hard-wired to seek out cause and effect and are always looking for it, which makes them a captive audience
    - Playwright David Mamet argues that the highest goal of plot is bringing your reader into a richer or (as a Formalist would say) refreshed understanding of cause and effect

- The reader enters the story fairly confident in their understanding of cause and effect in the world, and the well-structured plot reveals to them that they were wrong
    - In a first-rate story, the reader realizes that their first understanding of cause and effect was misguided and thanks to your novel they now have a better picture of the world and how it functions
        - This is a priceless gift to give someone
- So the defamiliarized plot means it is structured in such a way that it allows your readers to reexamine their assumptions about cause and effect
    - Accord to Mamet: "We take a reasonable proposition we're trying to find an answer to and then show how we have always been looking in the wrong place"
- **Rules of Defamiliarization**
- Some of the methods of Defamiliarization that Shklovsky outlines are:
    - Describing the object as if seeing it for the first time
    - Not naming the familiar object – avoiding the accepted names for the object or its parts
- Defamiliarization does not mean making overwrought attempts to trick your reader or leave out essential story elements or ornamentalize your prose – it does not come from hysterical metaphors or illogic and confusion
    - Defamiliarization must come about organically based on the internal workings and requirements of the story
    - The biggest misunderstanding about employing this device is that it is meant to complicate things for the reader
        - Defamiliarization does not complicate, it clarifies
- **Star Wars**
- Symbol Defamiliarization
- The lightsaber – one of the most iconic images related to Star Wars – is an example of a defamiliarized object that carries great weight as a symbolic story element
    - It is a great example of defamiliarization that is organically dictated by the plot
        - The Jedi are guardians, protector-types, so intuitively we understand they ought to be armed/capable in combat
        - What weapon should they carry then?
            - Not a gun – Obi Wan tells Luke that the blaster gun is clumsy, random; and we understand it is a sort of least-common-denominator weapon without elegance or craft
                - Anyone can point and shoot and if they shoot enough they'll probably hit something, but there is no craft, no skill associated with this and the Jedi are supposed to be a special class of guardians who are more refined in their martial skills
            - The light saber is essentially a sword, that's all – however, if George Lucas presented us with a just a plain-old sword we would might gloss right over it thinking it is a close-enough approximation of what a classical warrior would carry

- But Lucas set up a fictional world where the very primitive exists alongside the extremely sophisticated (this in itself is a brilliant tool of defamiliarization)
  - So the story calls for a weapon, and Lucas uses the rules of his fictive world to organically include a weapon based in low and high technology
    - The lightsaber is a sword (primitive technology) but a sword made out of an electrified plasma-field (high technology)
    - And by its unique properties (the high technology) we look at something that both is and is not a sword and unconsciously try to fuse that likeness and un-likeness together and it refreshes our understanding of the object itself, the sword and all its properties and meaning
- And now that we have done all this immediate, unconscious work of reimagining and appreciating a sword, then we place the object back in its matrix and use it to define other elements of the story
  - The lightsaber, this sword-like weapon is carried by the Jedi
  - Medieval knights carried swords, Samurai warriors carried swords
    - Both of these groups are themselves quasi-mythic
    - They are seen as apart from and often superior to most groups in society
    - They abide by a strict code that emphasizes honor and sacrifice
    - They are revered
    - They are seen as courageous, heroic
- So not only do we have an object that is defamiliarized, but it also defamiliarizes the subject (the character) and enhances it with all this warrior mythology
  - Because we appreciate the sword motif of the lightsaber and because the Jedi carry lightsabers, we begin attaching all of those sword motifs to the Jedi
    - We think, "Perhaps the Jedi are a quasi-mythical group, perhaps they represent sacrifice and honor, perhaps they are intrinsically courageous and heroic."
      - So with just one carefully chosen, defamiliarized element, an iconic object is created (the lightsaber), a whole mythos is imagined (the cult of the ancient warrior), and a character is tied to both object and mythos and thereby *tremendously* enhanced (the Jedi, who we've never heard of up until that point in the movie, are suddenly this great group of heroes we admire and want to follow)
- **The Great Gatsby**
- The party is a key plot element of *The Great Gatsby* – it is a driving force of the story, and represents something foundational to Gatsby's character and thus our understanding of the novel
  - Ch. 4 – Jordan Baker: "'Gatsby bought that house so that Daisy would be just across the bay….He wants her to see his house,' she explained. 'And your house is right next door…I think he half expected her to wander into one of his parties, some night,' went on Jordan, 'but she never did.'"
  - Because Gatsby's core passion is reuniting with Daisy, and because the lavish parties he throws are his device to accomplish this reunion, we can easily say that understanding the role of his parties in the story is paramount

- In the events of the novel, Gatsby is initially rejected by Daisy for being too poor and of too low status
  - This creates a manic obsession in Gatsby to amass the type of wealth, power, and status that would make him worthy of Daisy
    - He undertakes to build himself up through illicit businesses and gangster dealings, all with an eye toward one day presenting himself to Daisy as a Gentleman
    - The parties at his mansion are to be the way he shows off to Daisy that he now has all of the status and wealth she desires and is thus a suitable choice for her
      - This, in Gatsby's mind, is the purpose of the parties
- In the story these parties are defamiliarized – both by juxtaposition to a parallel party sequence in the novel, and in the description of the parties themselves
  - And ultimately this defamiliarization renews our understanding of the whole story and offers a form through which to view its events
- First we can analyze *how* Gatsby's parties are defamiliarized and then look at what effect that has on our understanding of the story
- How Gatsby's Parties are Defamiliarized
- Play of Opposites – Juxtaposition with Myrtle Wilson's Party
  - There is a second party sequence in *The Great Gatsby*, one that, like Gatsby's main party, occupies the bulk of an entire chapter, and which has important implications for the ultimate understanding of Gatsby's parties
  - This second party, which actually occurs first in the narrative, in chapter two, is the party "hosted" at Myrtle Wilson's apartment in Manhattan
    - There is certainly a debate about who the true "host" of the party is – whether it is Myrtle (who certainly plays host and who is most interested in the party) or whether it is Tom Buchanan (who actually finances everything from the apartment itself, to the alcohol, and food, and Myrtle's clothes, but who has no interest or at best a sneering interest in the party and its working-class guests)
  - This party, Myrtle Wilson's party, which Fitzgerald paints as a sadder, tackier version of one of Gatsby's parties, is in Formalist terms a defamiliarization of Gatsby's party, and one that helps us understand both Gatsby's party specifically and the institution of the Party in the novel generally
- First we can look at how Fitzgerald contrasts the parties to one another
  - Setting
    - Myrtle's apartment
      - "A small living room, a small dining room, a small bedroom and a bath"
    - Gatsby's house
      - "The one on my right was a colossal affair by any standard—it was a factual imitation of some Hôtel de Ville in Normandy, with a tower on one side, spanking new under a thin beard of raw ivy, and a marble swimming pool and more than forty acres of lawn and garden. It was Gatsby's mansion."
    - Inside Myrtle's apartment
      - "The living room was crowded to the doors with a set of tapestried furniture entirely too large for it so that to move about was to stumble continually over scenes of ladies swinging in the gardens of Versailles."
    - Inside Gatsby's mansion

- "We went upstairs, through period bedrooms swathed in rose and lavender silk and vivid with new flowers, through dressing rooms and poolrooms, and bathrooms with sunken baths."
- "…inside as we wandered through Marie Antoinette music rooms and Restoration salons…"
- Myrtle's library:
  - "Several old copies of 'Town Tattle' lay on the table together with a copy of 'Simon Called Peter' and some of the small scandal magazines of Broadway."
- Gatsby's library:
  - "On a chance we tried an important-looking door, and walked into a high Gothic library, paneled with carved English oak, and probably transported complete from some ruin overseas."
- The service at Myrtle's party:
  - 1) "Meanwhile Tom brought out a bottle of whiskey from a locked bureau door."
  - 2) "Tom rang for the janitor and sent him for some celebrated sandwiches."
  - 3) "Tom Buchanan yawned audibly and got to his feet.

    'You McKees have something to drink he,' he said. 'Get some more ice and mineral water, Myrtle, before everybody goes to sleep."

    'I told that boy about the ice.' Myrtle raised her eyebrows in despair at the shiftlessness of the lower orders. 'These people! You have to keep after them all the time.'

    She looked at me and laughed pointlessly. Then she flounced over to the dog, kissed it with ecstasy, and swept into the kitchen, implying that a dozen chefs awaited her orders there."
  - 4) "The bottle of whiskey — a second one — was now in constant demand by all present"
- The service at Gatsby's party:
  - "On buffet tables, garnished with glistening hors-d'oeuvre, spiced baked hams crowded against salads of harlequin designs and pastry pigs and turkeys bewitched to a dark gold."
  - There are "buffet tables" and "Floating rounds of cocktails permeate the garden outside"
  - There is "the first supper" and "another one after midnight"
  - Champagne is "served in glasses bigger than finger bowls"
- The guests at Myrtle's party:
  - Myrtle's sister
    - "The sister, Catherine, was a slender, worldly girl of about thirty, with a solid, sticky bob of red hair, and a complexion powdered milky white. Her eye-brows had been plucked and then drawn on again at a more rakish angle, but the efforts of nature toward the restoration of the old alignment gave a blurred air to her face. When she moved about there was an incessant clicking as innumerable pottery bracelets jingled up and down upon her arms. She came in with such a proprietary haste, and looked

around so possessively at the furniture that I wondered if she lived here. But when I asked her she laughed immoderately, repeated my question aloud, and told me she lived with a girl friend at a hotel."

- "Oh, do you like Europe?" she exclaimed surprisingly. "I just got back from Monte Carlo…just last year. I went over there with another girl…we just went to Monte Carlo and back. We went by way of Marseilles. We had over twelve hundred dollars when we started, but we got gypped out of it all in two days in the private rooms. We had an awful time getting back, I can tell you. God, how I hated that town!"
- Mr. McKee
  - "Mr. McKee was a pale, feminine man from the flat below. He had just shaved, for there was a white spot of lather on his cheekbone, and he was most respectful in his greeting to every one in the room. He informed me that he was in the "artistic game," and I gathered later that he was a photographer and had made the dim enlargement of Mrs. Wilson's mother which hovered like an ectoplasm on the wall."
  - "'I'd like to do more work on Long Island, if I could get the entry. All I ask is that they should give me a start.'"
    - In other words he is a failed artist, or at best a hack, whereas Gatsby's guests are artists at the height of their profession and internationally recognized
- Mrs. McKee
  - She "was shrill, languid, handsome, and horrible."
  - "'I almost made a mistake, too,' she declared vigorously. 'I almost married a little kyke who'd been after me for years. I knew he was below me. Everybody kept saying to me: 'Lucille, that man's 'way below you!' But if I hadn't met Chester, he'd of got me sure.'"
- The guests at Gatsby's party
  - "By midnight the hilarity had increased. A celebrated tenor had sung in Italian, and a notorious contralto had sung in jazz"
  - "The large room was full of people. One of the girls in yellow was playing the piano, and beside her stood a tall, red-haired young lady from a famous chorus, engaged in song."
  - "Gulick the state senator and Newton Orchid who controlled Films Par Excellence and Eckhaust and Clyde Cohen and Don S. Schwartze (the son) and Arthur McCarty, all connected with the movies in one way or another."
  - "Of theatrical people there were Gus Waize and Horace O'Donavan and Lester Meyer and George Duckweed and Francis Bull."
  - "Da Fontano the promoter came there, and Ed Legros and James B. ("Rot-Gut') Ferret and the De Jongs and Ernest Lilly—they came to gamble and when Ferret wandered into the garden it meant he was

cleaned out and Associated Traction would have to fluctuate profitably next day."

- I have forgotten their names—Jaqueline, I think, or else Consuela or Gloria or Judy or June, and their last names were either the melodious names of flowers and months or the sterner ones of the great American capitalists whose cousins, if pressed, they would confess themselves to be."
- "A prince of something whom we called Duke and whose name, if I ever knew it, I have forgotten."

- And so we first encounter Myrtle's party and think what a sad party it is and a terrible room to be in, then we encounter the grandeur of Gatsby's party and are so desperate for a good time after reading Myrtle's chapter that we fall right into Gatsby's exotic celebration like one of his overzealous guests
  - In other words, because we have just left a failed party (Myrtle's) the reader's appreciation of Gatsby's party is heightened
    - The reader takes a closer look at Gatsby's party because of what she has just been shown in Myrtle's party
    - And ultimately this closer look is what Fitzgerald is asking of the reader in the crucial scenes of chapter 3 because it will make for a better payoff later in the novel's climax if the reader has a full, fresh appreciation of Gatsby's party and the defamiliarization it plays with
  - This is thanks to the defamiliarizing device of opposites
    - If the goal is to lead the reader into deeper consideration of the text, and to refresh the reader's understanding of the plot and of life generally, Myrtle Wilson's party in Chapter 2 leading into Gatsby's party in Chapter 3 accomplishes this in great measure
- After this juxtaposition with Myrtle's party, Gatsby's party is itself defamiliarized through hyperbole in the ecstatic descriptions of the guests and their revelry
  - The party we are meant to focus on (Gatby's) is not merely a party, but the most extreme, extraordinary example of one
  - Ch. 3: "And on Mondays eight servants, including an extra gardener, toiled all day with mops and scrubbing-brushes and hammers and garden-shears, repairing the ravages of the night before."
  - Ch. 3: "There was a machine in the kitchen which could extract the juice of two hundred oranges in half an hour if a little button was pressed two hundred times by a butler's thumb."
  - Ch. 3: "By seven o'clock the orchestra has arrived, no thin five-piece affair, but a whole pitful of oboes and trombones and saxophones and viols and cornets and piccolos, and low and high drums."
  - Ch. 3: "The cars from New York are parked five deep in the drive, and already the halls and salons and verandas are gaudy with primary colors, and hair shorn in strange new ways, and shawls beyond the dreams of Castile."
  - Ch. 3: "By midnight the hilarity had increased. A celebrated tenor had sung in Italian, and a notorious contralto had sung in jazz, and between the numbers people were doing "stunts" all over the garden, while happy, vacuous bursts of laughter rose toward the summer sky."

- Ch. 3: "When the Jazz History of the World was over, girls were putting their heads on men's shoulders in a puppyish, convivial way, girls were swooning backward playfully into men's arms, even into groups, knowing that some one would arrest their falls."
- Ch. 4: "On Sunday morning while church bells rang in the villages alongshore, the world and its mistress returned to Gatsby's house and twinkled hilariously on his lawn."
- Ch. 6: "'I've never met so many celebrities!' Daisy exclaimed."
- The party is on such a scale, with so much hedonic description that the reader transforms the event at Gatsby's from a party to the archetypal ideal of a party, so to speak
  - In its own right this defamiliarization of the party delivers great pleasure to the reader but it also develops a deeper thematic structure that is crucial to understanding the story
- The result of this defamiliarization in the party scenes, its most important accomplishment, is pushing our conception of the party into what Russian Formalist critic Mikhail Bakhtin called The Carnivalesque or the Carnival Sense of the World
  - The Carnivalesque is a mode characterized by a complete inversion of ordinary life and a leveling of various hierarchies
    - It comes from traditional European carnival folk festivals where patrons mixed with each other amid lavish feasts and celebrations, usually in anticipation of the austerity of upcoming religious holidays
  - According to Bakhtin:
    - "Carnivalistic life is life drawn out of its usual rut, it is to some extent 'life turned inside out,' 'the reverse side of the world'"
    - "The laws, prohibitions, and restrictions that determine the structure and order of ordinary, that is noncarnival, life are suspended during carnival"
      - "What is suspended first of all is hierarchical structure and all the forms of terror, reverence, piety, and etiquette connected with it – that is, everything resulting from socio-hierarchical inequality or any other form of inequality among people (including age)."
      - "All distance between people is suspended, and a special carnival category goes into effect: free and familiar contact among people."
      - "People who in life are separated by impenetrable hierarchical barriers enter into free familiar contact on the carnival square."
      - "Carnival is the place for working out, in a concretely sensuous, half-real and half-play-acted form, a new mode of interrelationship between individuals, counterposed to the all-powerful socio-hierarchical relationships of noncarnival life."
      - "The behavior, gesture, and discourse of a person are freed from the authority of all hierarchical positions (social estate, rank, age, property) defining them totally in noncarnival life"
  - Carnival is, in other words, an experimental and transgressive state that exists in a separate, liminal sphere – it is temporally limited and confined to a certain physical space where the rules of carnival apply (usually a public space accessible to all)
  - Carnival is itself a defamiliarization – it takes all typical relationships and traditions and ideas from the ordinary world and refreshes them by suspending or reversing them completely

- As much as Carnival is there to free its participants from the ordinary restrictions of life, the lifting of those restrictions (for a limited time only) actually helps puts the original restrictions in greater relief and allows participants to relate to them in new, fresh ways
  - There is ultimately going to be an end of the carnival mode and a re-imposition and renewal of order, and perhaps because of carnival the old order may have shifted ever so slightly thanks to the critique of the transgressive space
- Certainly Gatby's party fits this understanding of carnival for all of its excesses and liberations
  - His parties are time- and space-limited, broadly accessible to the public, represent abundance, allow mixing of social classes, and ordinary rules and roles do not apply – these are the conditions for Bakhtin's Carnivalesque
    - Time-limited – these parties occur only on weekends during the summer, when the weekend is over the party and its liberations end
      - "Every Friday five extra crates of oranges and lemons arrived from a fruiterer in New York – every Monday these same oranges and lemons left his back door in a pyramid of pulp-less halves."
    - Space-limited
      - "There was music *from my neighbor's house* through the summer nights."
    - Broadly accessible to the public
      - "People were not invited – they went there. They got into automobiles which somehow bore them out to Long Island and somehow they ended up at Gatsby's door."
      - Gatsby's Rolls Royce becomes "an omnibus" to bring partiers to the mansion; Gatsby's station wagon "scampered like a brisk yellow bug to meet all trains"
    - Abundance
      - Recall the serving of two suppers and the generous buffet tables, the champagne glasses larger than finger-bowls
      - "The bar is in full swing, and floating rounds of cocktails permeate the garden outside"
    - Social mixing
      - At the party we see "East Egg condescending to West Egg"
      - "There was dancing now on the canvas in the gardens; old men pushing young girls backward in eternal graceless circles."
      - "The groups change more swiftly, swell with new arrivals, dissolve and form in the same breath; already there are wanderers, confident girls who weave here and there among the stouter and more stable, become for a sharp, joyous moment the centre of a group, and then, excited with triumph, glide on through the sea-change of faces and voices and color under the constantly changing light."
    - Suspension of ordinary rules and restrictions
      - "Once there they were introduced by somebody who knew Gatsby, and after that they conducted themselves according to the rules of behavior associated with amusement parks."

- So we see Gatsby's party as this special morphing space full of energy and potential, or, as Bakhtin put it: "This carnival sense of the world possesses a mighty life-creating and transforming power, an indestructible vitality."
  - Even if Fitzgerald was not familiar with Bakhtin's work describing the Carnivalesque (and almost certainly he wasn't since this work of Bakhtin wasn't popularized outside of Russia until the 1970s), and even if the reader is not familiar with all the elements that define the Carnivalesque in Bakhtin's theory – there is still undoubtedly in all of us, including Fitzgerald and his readers, a sense of special times and spaces where traditional rules and roles can be subverted, played around with, escaped
    - This is what Fitzgerald presents in the form of Gatsby's parties
- And so the text goes to great lengths to defamiliarize Gatsby's parties by relying on Carnivalesque imagery, which begs the question: why this mode of representation?
  - If Gatsby's device for attracting Daisy is the party – as the text tells us – and the party is presented in such an obvious Carnivalesque mode, what implications does that have for our understanding of the story
    - In other words, there are myriad ways that Gatsby might have attracted Daisy: through Nick's or Jordan's intercession alone, through love letters, through gifts, through direct contact, through a coincidental meeting, through a party thrown by Daisy or any other person, through notoriety from his illicit businesses, through any number of plot crises
      - But the device Fitzgerald uses is the party at Gatsby's with all of its Carnivalesque elements and this construction has implications
- Here it is important to consider one of the key aspects of Carnival that Bakhtin identifies – that of the Carnival King
  - According to Bakhtin:
    - "The primary carnivalistic act is the mock crowning and subsequent decrowning of the carnival king. This ritual is encountered in one form or another in all festivities of the carnival type: in the most elaborately worked out forms – the saturnalia, the European carnival and festival of fools (in the latter, mock priests, bishops or popes, de-pending on the rank of the church, were chosen in place of a king); in a less elaborated form, all other festivities of this type, right down to festival banquets with their election of short-lived kings and queens of the festival. Under this ritual act of decrowning a king lies the very core of the carnival sense of the world-the pathos of shifts and changes, of death and renewal. Carnival is the festival of all-annihilating and all-renewing time. Thus might one express the basic concept of carnival"
    - "Crowning/decrowning is a dualistic ambivalent ritual, expressing the inevitability and at the same time the creative power of the shift-and-renewal, the joyful relativity of all structure and order, of all authority and all (hierarchical) position. Crowning already contains the idea of immanent decrowning: it is ambivalent from the very start. And he who is crowned is the antipode of a real king, a slave or a jester"
    - "From the very beginning, a decrowning glimmers through the crowning."
    - What is meant by the crowning of a Carnival king is that a certain person is given elite status for the duration of carnival; this person is elevated to a position that all other revelers must accept and pay homage to, and while carnival lasts,

this king is celebrated – however at the end of carnival the king is "decrowned," or, forced back into their ordinary status and stripped of all the power they achieved by dint of the Carnival sense of the world and this moment represents the resumption of traditional norms

- Under this theory, Gatsby is, at his parties, the Carnival King – this is the domain where he has power and influence, has status in the social order, where he is able to embody his wildest ambition – being part of elite society
  - In the ordinary world Gatsby is none of these things – despite having great wealth he is still on the outskirts of society
    - He is, if not a gangster himself, closely connected to criminal businessmen and working in illegitimate enterprises
    - He does not have much personal autonomy as he seems to be under the control of Meyer Wolfshiem, a powerful and capricious underworld figure
    - His success is not celebrated in the ordinary world but rather would be grounds for arrest and prosecution if it were uncovered
    - He does not have the pedigree, upbringing, or connections of social elites like Tom and Daisy
    - He lives on the less-fashionable side of the bay where newly-rich outsiders live, the side of the bay scorned by the old-money elites
  - Yet – at his parties Gatsby is venerated, is the center of attention and speculation; he controls the festivities and his relationship to everyone around him; he is considered powerful and worth associating with, his professional activity inspires awe and perhaps even respect among his guests
    - Yet this status for Gatsby only exists within the time and place of his parties - outside of his parties he is all those contemptible things: a powerless, new-money rogue
    - This circumstance of status within the party, lack-of-status outside of the party strongly identifies Gatsby as the Carnival King archetype
- And here we reach the ultimate point of the defamiliarizing party sequences – they help us better understand Gatsby's situation and ultimate downfall
  - According to the Carnival King archetype, the carnival king has status only within the carnival and is necessarily deposed at the end of the Carnival upon the resumption of traditional order
  - This is the case for Gatsby as well
    - While situated within his party he is incontestably at the top of the status hierarchy yet when he leaves this carnival world he is deposed
- As mentioned, Gatsby uses the party as a device to attract Daisy – ultimately he does attract Daisy albeit not through his parties
  - He uses the offices of Jordan Baker and Nick Caraway to setup a meeting between himself and Daisy at Nick's house, next-door to his mansion
    - Ch. 4 – Nick: "'Why didn't he ask you to arrange a meeting?'"
      Jordan: "'He wants her to see his house,' she explained. 'And your house is right next door.'"
    - And what is striking about the first meeting between Gatsby and Daisy – which takes place *outside* of Gatsby's house and party – is how ineffective and out-of-place Gatsby appears to be, far from the debonair, charismatic man he is at his parties

- When Gatsby arrives to meet Daisy, Ch. 5: "…there was a light dignified knocking at the front door. I went out and opened it. Gatsby, pale as death, with his hands plunged like weights in his coat pockets, was standing in a puddle of water glaring tragically into my eyes."
- Gatsby clumsily knocks over the mantle clock, Ch. 5: "Gatsby, his hands still in his pockets, was reclining against the mantelpiece in a strained counterfeit of perfect ease, even of boredom. His head leaned back so far that it rested against the face of a defunct mantelpiece clock, and from this position his distraught eyes stared down at Daisy…His eyes glanced momentarily at me, and his lips parted with an abortive attempt at a laugh. Luckily the clock took this moment to tilt dangerously at the pressure of his head, whereupon he turned and caught it with trembling fingers, and set it back in place. Then he sat down, rigidly, his elbow on the arm of the sofa and his chin in his hand."
- Gatsby's nervousness, Ch. 5: "He followed me wildly into the kitchen, closed the door, and whispered:

    'Oh, God!' in a miserable way.

    'What's the matter?'

    'This is a terrible mistake,' he said, shaking his head from side to side, 'a terrible, terrible mistake.'

    'You're just embarrassed, that's all' and luckily I added: 'Daisy's embarrassed too.'

    'She's embarrassed?' he repeated incredulously.

    'Just as much as you are.'

    'Don't talk so loud.'

    'You're acting like a little boy,' I broke out impatiently. 'Not only that, but you're rude. Daisy's sitting in there all alone.'

    He raised his hand to stop my words, looked at me with unforgettable reproach, and, opening the door cautiously, went back into the other room."
- In these moments Gatsby is hapless and completely impotent
    - And elsewhere in the book we are reminded that whenever Gatsby is outside the confines of his mansion and parties he lacks power, and ability, and assurance
        - Ch. 4: "This quality was continually breaking through his punctilious manner in the shape of restlessness. He was never quite still; there was always a tapping foot somewhere or the impatient opening and closing of a hand."
        - On the absurdity of Gatsby's speech, Ch. 4: "With an effort I managed to restrain my incredulous laughter. The very phrases were worn so threadbare that they evoked no image except that of a turbaned 'character' leaking sawdust at every pore as he pursued a tiger through the Bois de Boulogne."
        - On the cliché way in which Gatsby speaks, Ch. 4: "My incredulity was submerged in fascination now; it was like skimming hastily through a dozen magazines."

- Nothing Gatsby says to Nick here is effective, nothing is convincing or genuine or even natural – Gatsby is speaking in an affected, anxious manner that sounds like he is borrowing his style from silly society magazines
- Gatsby is so unconvincing and unnatural in his manner that when he produces a medal for service during World War I, Nick says: "To my astonishment, the thing had an authentic look."
- Gatsby, in chapter 4 when he and Nick go to lunch in the city, eventually grows comfortable only in a saloon-type atmosphere where he is surrounded by his fellow underworld figure, Meyer Wolfshiem – a setting with strong Carnivalesque overtones
  - Yet in this same scene, as soon as Tom Buchannan appears, Tom as the representation of the strict socioeconomic hierarchy of the traditional world, as soon as Tom appears Gatsby reverts to helplessness:
  - Ch. 4 – "'This is Mr. Gatsby, Mr. Buchanan.'
    They shook hands briefly, and a strained, unfamiliar look of embarrassment came over Gatsby's face.
    'How've you been, anyhow?' demanded Tom of me. 'How'd you happen to come up this far to eat?'
    'I've been having lunch with Mr. Gatsby.'
    I turned toward Mr. Gatsby, but he was no longer there."
- Gatsby only recovers his faculties when he is back in his house and showing Daisy around the mansion and flaunting his possessions
  - He calmly pours himself a drink and relaxes while Daisy marvels at the gold accessories in his bedroom, he famously throws his custom-made shirts into piles before Daisy, he orders one of the boarders in his house to come entertain Daisy, Nick, and himself with a piano piece
    - Gatsby is still somewhat off-balance and hesitant while showing Daisy around (he does, after all, "nearly [topple] down a flight of stairs" while showing his house) but certainly he is far more self-possessed here than when he is outside of his Carnival setting
- Moreover, Gatsby's dream of reuniting with Daisy comes the closest to being realized only within the confines of his house and party
  - In Chapter 6 the reader is told that Daisy has been "running around alone" at Gatsby's house lately
  - In Chapter 7 Gatsby tells Nick about why he replaced all the servants in his mansion: "'I wanted somebody who wouldn't gossip. Daisy comes over quite often—in the afternoons.'"
  - From a description of one of Gatsby's parties, Ch. 7: "Daisy and Gatsby danced. I remember being surprised by his graceful, conservative fox-trot — I had never seen him dance before. Then they sauntered over to my house and sat on the steps for half an hour, while at her request I remained watchfully in the garden."

- In the context of his house and parties, Gatsby comes right up to the brink of achieving his dream of resuming a life with Daisy – she is by his side and smitten with him and they resume a carefree courtship in this carnival setting
- Yet Daisy ultimately does not care for Gatsby's parties, and certainly this is because of their Carnivalesque undoing of the social order
  - Tom and Daisy represent the traditional and rigid structure of the ordinary world
    - They are extremely wealthy and from prominent families and socially connected with other wealthy and influential people
    - In this traditional world Tom and Daisy have power, influence, and status and Gatsby has none of these things
    - However, in the reversal of the Carnival world, Gatsby has the power and status and it is Tom and Daisy who lack all influence
      - This is perhaps best captured in an exchange where Gatsby, as Carnival King and all-powerful host, is able to both control Tom and Daisy and classify them however he chooses;
        - Ch. 6: "He took them ceremoniously from group to group:
          'Mrs. Buchanan . . . and Mr. Buchanan ——' After an instant's hesitation he added: 'the polo player.'
          'Oh no,' objected Tom quickly, 'not me.'
          But evidently the sound of it pleased Gatsby, for Tom remained 'the polo player' for the rest of the evening."
      - A few sentences later Tom says "'I'd a little rather not be the polo player'" – but we already know that Tom remains "the polo player" for the rest of the night because in the carnival world, the Carnival King has the power and his acts and declarations are sacrosanct for the duration of Carnival
  - The elite pedigree and background Tom and Daisy have are more or less negated by the "Carnival sense of the world" at Gatsby's parties where so many people of diverse backgrounds and statuses participate equally as revelers
    - Chapter 6: "But the rest offended her — and inarguably, because it wasn't a gesture but an emotion. She was appalled by West Egg, this unprecedented 'place' that Broadway had begotten upon a Long Island fishing village — appalled by its raw vigor that chafed under the old euphemisms and by the too obtrusive fate that herded its inhabitants along a short-cut from nothing to nothing. She saw something awful in the very simplicity she failed to understand.
    - On Daisy's contempt for the partygoers, Ch. 6: "Lots of people come who haven't been invited," she said suddenly. "That girl hadn't been invited. They simply force their way in and he's too polite to object."
      - This type of presumptuousness would be appalling to the incredibly mannered Daisy
      - Elsewhere Daisy describes the girl in question as "common but pretty" indicating how class-conscious she is in a place where the class distinctions she was raised under are completely obliterated
    - Chapter 6 – "After all, in the very casualness of Gatsby's party there were romantic possibilities totally absent from her world."

- It is thus obvious why Tom and Daisy disdain Gatsby's party – it upends their status in the social hierarchy and renders them powerless
- Gatsby finally ends all the parties once he understands how distasteful they are to Daisy
  - At the end of chapter 6 Gatsby is already acknowledging this to Nick, saying: "'She didn't like it,' he insisted. 'She didn't have a good time.' He was silent, and I guessed at his unutterable depression."
  - And then chapter 7 opens with: "It was when curiosity about Gatsby was at its highest that the lights in his house failed to go on one Saturday night — and, as obscurely as it had begun, his career as Trimalchio was over."
  - A few sentences later we finally learn why Gatsby's prolific parties came to an end – Daisy disapproved of them
    - Ch. 7 – "So the whole caravansary had fallen in like a card house at the disapproval in her eyes."
- At this point, Gatsby's Carnivalesque parties are over and this necessarily requires that the rules of Carnival give way to the re-imposition of traditional order and traditional social roles
- Disaster comes when Gatsby tries to transfer the status he has, including the recent status he has with Daisy, from the Carnival world to the real world – this precipitates Gatsby's ruin
  - Interestingly, in the same chapter that we're told Gatsby has shut down his parties (chapter 7), we see Gatsby deposed from all his status
  - At the beginning of the chapter we learn that Gatsby has ended his parties because of Daisy's dislike for them, and immediately after that we learn that Gatsby is going to lunch at Tom and Daisy's house and Gatsby asks Nick to join him there
    - Symbolically this represents a return to traditional order – Gatsby leaves his Carnivalesque mansion and re-enters the conventional world as represented by entering Tom and Daisy's house
      - Here all of the customs and hierarchies that make Tom and Daisy powerful and make Gatsby a powerless outsider are in effect
      - Here Tom is in control, as represented by a moment that mirrors a scene from the previous chapter
        - Ch. 7 – Tom: "'Come outside,' he suggested to Gatsby, 'I'd like you to have a look at the place.'"
          - Here the setting is Tom's house and Tom controls Gatsby and shows him around, an inversion from the previous chapter (where it was Gatsby's house and Gatsby controlling Tom's movement)
  - Then we move to a scene that brings all the main characters together (Gatsby, Daisy, Nick, Tom, Jordan): it begins at Tom and Daisy's house and then transfers to the Plaza Hotel in midtown Manhattan – another location of wealth and status and tradition where Gatsby is an outsider
    - Further asserting control and dominance over Gatsby, per traditional roles, Tom even orders Gatsby out of taking his own car to the city
    - Tom tells Gatsby to drive his, Tom's car, and takes control of Gatsby's car
      - Ch. 7 – "'Well, you take my coupe and let me drive your car to town.' The suggestion was distasteful to Gatsby."
    - This is yet another subtle clue that Gatsby's power and control are waning and Tom's are reemerging

- The reader senses that the longer this trend plays out the worse it will be for Gatsby, bringing him closer to his being deposed as Carnival King
- Tom even displays an awareness of the trick of social inversion that has been at play at Gatsby's carnival mansion
  - Ch. 7 – Tom: "'I know I'm not very popular. I don't give big parties. I suppose you've got to make your house into a pigsty in order to have any friends — in the modern world.'"
  - Clearly Tom has grasped what is driving this sudden elevation of Gatsby in general and what is driving Daisy's attachment to Gatsby specifically – the Carnival sense of the world that reigns at Gatsby's and confers elite status on him – and the implication then becomes that to reverse all of this, Tom need only dispel this myth of Gatsby's status and put Gatsby's true position on display
    - Ultimately this is Tom's precise tactic for bringing down Gatsby
- We know that Gatsby loses his dream of reuniting with Daisy – this was inevitable the moment he stepped out of his mansion and the carnival milieu – and if it can be said that Tom "defeats" Gatsby, or deposes him, or wrecks Gatsby's dream, then the method Tom uses is exposing Gatsby's lowly status in the traditional, non-carnival world
  - Ch. 7 – Tom: "'I suppose the latest thing is to sit back and let Mr. Nobody from Nowhere make love to your wife.'"
  - Ch. 7 – Tom: "'I can't speak about what happened five years ago, because I didn't know Daisy then — and I'll be damned if I see how you got within a mile of her unless you brought the groceries to the back door.'"
  - Ch. 7 – Tom: "'She's not leaving me!' Tom's words suddenly leaned down over Gatsby. 'Certainly not for a common swindler who'd have to steal the ring he put on her finger.'"
  - Ch. 7 – Tom: "'Who are you, anyhow?' broke out Tom. 'You're one of that bunch that hangs around with Meyer Wolfsheim — that much I happen to know. I've made a little investigation into your affairs — and I'll carry it further to-morrow.'"
  - Just these four excerpts, explicitly pegging Gatsby as being from a lower class and lacking all the status markers that Tom and Daisy possess and value, just that is enough to keep Daisy from choosing Gatsby
    - Even after Daisy has publicly confessed her love for Gatsby in front of Tom, and told Tom that he, Tom, is "revolting" and told Tom she "never loved him," and told Tom she is leaving him – even after all of these condemnations, Daisy still sides with Tom over Gatsby once Gatsby's status is plainly out in the open
  - Finally, we see the moment of Gatsby's defeat:
    - Ch. 7 – "[Gatsby] looked — and this is said in all contempt for the babbled slander of his garden — as if he had 'killed a man.' For a moment the set of his face could be described in just that fantastic way.
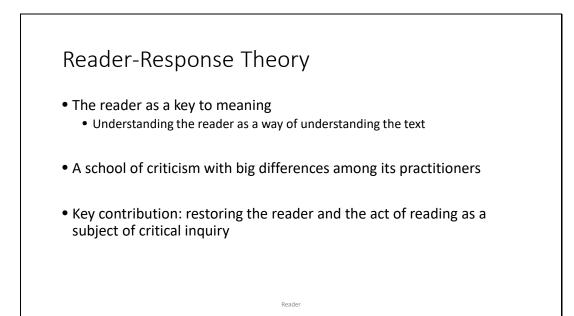   "It passed, and he began to talk excitedly to Daisy, denying everything, defending his name against accusations that had not

been made. But with every word she was drawing further and further into herself, so he gave that up, and only the dead dream fought on as the afternoon slipped away, trying to touch what was no longer tangible, struggling unhappily, undespairingly, toward that lost voice across the room."

- All of Tom's descriptions of Gatsby have been so effective that they permanently strip the veneer of status from Gatsby's image and reduce him to someone so base and inferior, someone who returns to his lowlife status, who, like a proper Gangster, looks "as if he had 'killed a man'"
  - Now Gatsby's true background and social position is plain to everyone and it ultimately causes Daisy to reject him
  - Just by doing this, Tom has achieved a victory, a reversal of Gatsby that is so total that Tom even flaunts his victory and re-established power/dominance: he orders Daisy and Gatsby around and even suggests that they leave the hotel together
    - Ch. 7 – Tom: "'You two start on home, Daisy' Tom said. 'In Mr. Gatsby's car.'"
      She looked at Tom, alarmed now, but he insisted with magnanimous scorn.
      'Go on. He won't annoy you. I think he realizes that his presumptuous little flirtation is over."
  - As Nick describes the turn of events:
    - "Because 'Jay Gatsby' had broken up like glass against Tom's hard malice and the long secret extravaganza was played out."
    - It cannot be any clearer that all of that status Gatsby had as 'Jay Gatsby' is undone and now he is returned to the lowly and inferior "James Gatz"
- Several critics have pointed out that this is relatively an easy victory for Tom
  - Although his wife is so in love with Gatsby, and Gatsby's prominence and renown are so widespread, it takes only a few lines of dialogue about Gatsby's true dealings to completely strip all of the aura from Gatsby and permanently cancel his dreams and position
  - This goes to show just how precarious Gatsby's power ever was and the strict limits of Carnival status; it shows the clear delineation between the Carnival sense of the world and the customary social world
  - Gatsby was supremely powerful and inviolable as Carnival King
    - Then as soon as he tries to convert this status from the carnival world to the real world, to carry over his reunion with Daisy from the extraordinary to the ordinary, he is deposed and loses everything, including, eventually, his life
- All of this insight into Gatsby's motivations and the nature of his rise and fall can be gleaned from the defamiliarization of the party sequences and the archetypal themes this defamiliarization brings to our attention
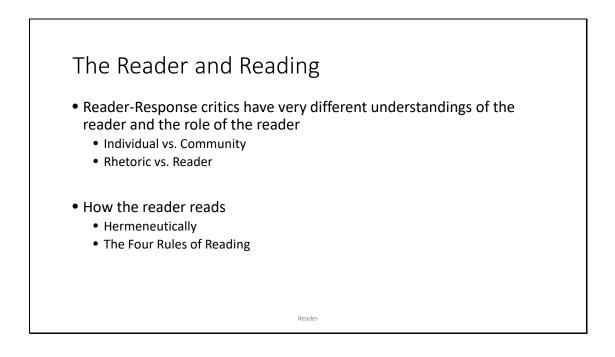
- **Reader as key to meaning**
- The reader/audience has always been of some concern to criticism
  - Aristotle said the effectiveness of drama related to its impact on the audience
  - Plato is weary of poets/dramatists and would not have them in his ideal Republic because of how strongly their work impacts/influences people
- However, modern criticism, until the middle of the 20th century, worked hard to banish the reader to a minor or non-existent role in criticism
  - Again, the goal of most modern criticism was to get away from the "squishy-ness" of an individual reader's understanding of a text and replace it with a stable analytical approach that relied on empirical methods
- What first killed the reader, in terms of literary criticism, was the Romantic period's emphasis on the genius of the single author
  - Then comes Formalism and its rigid emphasis on the text alone, to the exclusion of the author and the reader
- However, with a renewed emphasis on the reader, the text is now understood as something involved in a dynamic relationship
  - There is text and reader and each party depends on the other for its existence
  - So to understand "meaning" it is no longer sufficient to understand only the text – the reader becomes a vital component
- **Big Differences**
- Reader-Response critics all believe that the reader plays a vitally important role in shaping the literary text
  - However the theories of these scholars vary enormously

- So it is difficult to talk about a unified idea of Reader-Response Theory that all of the theorists in the field would agree on
- The discipline is often a vessel for critics of different critical methods to analyze how readers construct texts based on their status
    - A Marxist critic will look at how the reader's class influences their understanding and interpretation
    - A psychoanalytic critic will look at the reader's psychology and say that it is the principal driver of the reader's experience

The Reader and Reading

- Reader-Response critics have very different understandings of the reader and the role of the reader
  - Individual vs. Community
  - Rhetoric vs. Reader

- How the reader reads
  - Hermeneutically
  - The Four Rules of Reading

Reader

- **The Reader**
- What is meant by "the reader"
- Individual vs. Community
  - One split in the field of Reader-Response Theory is whether to analyze individual readers or large groups of readers (whole societies, for instance)
  - The focus on the individual reader tends to be largely psychological
    - It looks at one particular reader's disposition and biases and how those contribute to that reader's understanding of a text
      - Here psychoanalytic theories, as well as historical/cultural analyses, drive the inquiry
        - Scholars are trying to isolate a reader's individual consciousness and her location in historical and cultural milieus to understand that reader's response to a text and to understand how a text influences a reader
          - One Freudian critic writes: "Any individual shapes the materials the literary work offers him…to give him what he characteristically both wishes and fears and…he also constructs his characteristic way of achieving what he wishes and defeating what he fears."
        - One goal is to prove how meaning is attributable more to the reader's disposition than to the text itself, and understand how texts can change our consciousness and values
          - Some critics say that if the reader cannot assimilate a text into her identity it will cause her to expand and re-shape

that identity, others disagree and say whatever the reader cannot assimilate will be pared away until only assimilable material is left, and then the reader will base her meaning on that assimilable material

- o The focus on groups of readers, which are sometimes called "Interpretative Communities," seeks to understand texts based on their significance to large groups
  - These Interpretative Communities are defined as any group of people who share a common interpretative strategy
    - Interpretative Communities arise based on gaps between existing Interpretative Communities – they see a meaning that is not presently significant or apparent to an existing Interpretative Community and put it forward as a challenge to current understandings of a text
  - Here scholars see the text as more or less totally malleable
    - The reader, or group of readers, is free to "interrogate" the text as he or she wishes
  - Interpretative Communities form meaning by a kind of averaging of all individual readings
    - When two interpretations don't easily assimilate, the Interpretative Community will tend to pare down interpretations and rely on those that cohere
  - These scholars are interested in what texts meant to their original, intended audience, and what those texts have meant to subsequent audiences, and the differences between the two
- Rhetoric vs. Reader
- Another major split in the field of Reader-Response Theory revolves around the idea of what controls the reader's response, the reader or the author/text
- Is the reader a sovereign, individuated maker of meaning or is her reading shaped by literary devices and rhetorical methods employed in the text
  - o The latter idea is sometimes called "The text determining the reader"
  - o The theory here is that the text brings certain things into the reader's consciousness that cause the reader to construe meaning in a certain way that is mostly determined by the author
    - An example of this, cited by Reader-Response critic Wayne Booth, is how the author can use point-of-view and emotional distance to shape how a reader feels about a particular character
    - Here, an otherwise vicious character can appear sympathetic if the reader is privy to that character's psyche, and denied access to the psyche of that character's victims
    - So just by using point-of-view, the text can shape our emotional response
    - We are asked to sympathize with villains all the time in literature, and often do
      - Raskolnikov in Crime and Punishment
        - o Despite his axe murdering two people we are rooting for Raskolnikov's spiritual awakening and redemption and want him to have a life with Sonia; we don't want his punishment to be too harsh

- Hamlet
  - He has a revenge plot that we may sympathize with, and we may feel it is a just act to kill Claudius, but Hamlet also kills other people, people only incidental to his revenge plot, throughout the play
    - He recklessly stabs into a curtain and kills Polonius, and mocks Polonius and shows an unfeeling response to the murder
    - He kills old school friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern – who have betrayed him but who are mere tools of Claudius and not agents of evil themselves
    - His knowingly callous reaction to Ophelia, a response Hamlet calculates to be extremely vicious, drives her to suicide
- Gatsby
  - In any other story he would be a villain – he is a gangster, or at the very least a tool of gangsters, and the lifestyle and racquet he participates in has probably caused a great deal of suffering to innocent people
    - Think of the horrible impact organized crime has on the ordinary citizens it preys upon – Gatsby is part of that preying machine
  - If we met people like this in real life we would be, at the least, extremely wary of associating with them and might fear or revile them outright
  - But by never really experiencing any of Gatsby's victims, and by seeing only the sincere, love-driven dream of wanting to marry Daisy, and by pitting Gatsby against a reprehensible competitor (Tom) many readers feel a great amount of sympathy for Gatsby
- The emphasis on the ability of rhetoric in the text to shape the reader's experience and understanding represents a way to fuse other areas of criticism with reader-response
  - So we can marry critical fields like formalism and reader-response theory by showing how formalist devices are used in the text to influence the reader's experience
- **How we read**
- Some of the operations the reader performs while reading
  - Anticipation and retrospection
  - Picturing
  - Interpreting, or Making Sense
  - Deciding intention
  - Forming unity
  - Wolfgang Iser:
    - "As a reader begins the reading process, the sentences that make up a work not only inform the reader of the literary movement, but produce certain expectations within the mind of the reader. However, these expectations are

rarely fulfilled, as a text is "full of unexpected twists and turns, and frustrations of expectations…Thus whenever the flow is interrupted and we are led off in unexpected directions, the opportunity is given to us to bring into play our own faculty for establishing connections—for filling in the gaps left by the text itself." These gaps are the unwritten portion of the text that calls for the reader's participation. Different readers will decide to fill in the various gaps in different ways, allowing for inexhaustible realizations of the text within its provided interpretive limits. As the reader reflects on what they have read previously in the text, or if they reread the text, new light is shed on the happenings within the narrative as "certain aspects of the text will assume a significance we did not attach to them on a first reading, while others will recede into the background."
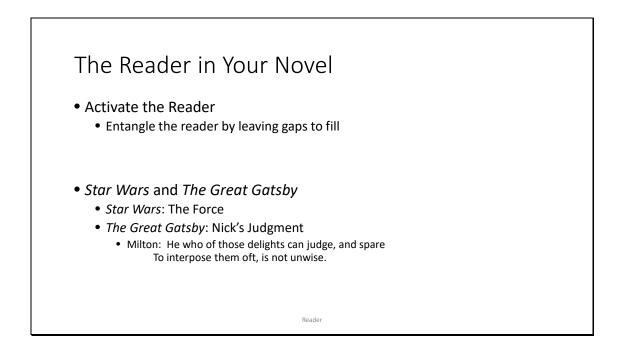
- Many reader-response critics, like Iser, assume a more or less hermeneutic model of reading

- Reading Hermeneutically
  - Reading proceeds from the reader's pre-understanding (a pre-understanding based on countless social and psychological factors)
    - This is helpful to authors because it allows them to play with these pre-understandings to create an effect (whether for pleasure, humor, tragedy, etc.)
  - Then the reader, with her pre-understandings, encounters a text and begins to move through it
    - There is always a time sequence while reading
      - The text is impossible to absorb in a single moment and so there is always a movement through the parts to arrive at the whole
        - So the reader and her perception are always on the move
    - The reader is now reading or "performing" the text, in reader-response terminology, or "interrogating" the text, or "concretizing" the text
  - Reader-response critics talk about the act of reading as the convergence of text and the reader or as the meeting of horizons
    - Here, horizon means everything currently encompassed by that entity (text or reader) and this necessarily has a boundary (meaning it is limited and has the capacity to expand or shrink)
      - The text has a horizon and so does the reader
    - The textual horizon changes when we either elevate or lower its status along certain lines
      - An interpretative community or society can suddenly decide that a certain novel is in fact no longer an exemplary portrayal of certain values, and this will shrink the horizon of the text as now it fails to contain the embodiment of certain values desired by a community of readers
    - The reader's horizon changes when she experiences a change in her understanding of the world that alters how she responds to texts
      - Maybe when she was younger the reader identified with Emma Bovary's longing for freedom and sensual experience, and now that she is older she sees Emma as irresponsible, immature

- Maybe the reader has experienced violent crime or knows the victim of a murder and can no longer sympathize with Raskolnikov
- Maybe an interpretative community does not valorize a trickster figure like Odysseus or the deceit he practices and certain meanings of the Odyssey are no longer available to that community
  - This is evident in later-Greek society and Roman society where Odysseus's trickery and dishonest speech are seen as poor examples to follow
- The reader's pre-understanding and initial meeting of horizons "collects and constructs" what is to come – that is, the reader forms expectations
  - These expectations arouse interest in what is to come
  - As the reader moves through the text, her initial expectations are modified, new expectations are made, new information from the text has a retrospective effect on what has already been read – this is the Hermeneutic Circle that the reader is entering
  - Our new information as we read sheds light on things we had committed to memory and shows us new aspects of those initial understandings
  - We read and bounce between meanings and interpretations in a process of trial and error where we organize and reorganize elements of the text
    - These constituent elements are what we use as the building blocks of meaning, and the process of reading is the process of organizing these elements
    - This process then refines our new information as well and arouses even more complex anticipations
    - <u>All of this is the product of the reader's mind working on the text and is not the text itself</u>
      - <u>The text itself is words, sentences, statements, information – but the connections are made by the reader reading</u>
      - <u>The making of meaning for a reader results from a series of decisions that the reader makes</u>
- During the reader's process of moving through the Hermeneutic Circle she will encounter what one critic calls "blockages" – parts that are not easily assimilable into the reader's present understanding of the text
  - These blockages impede the reader's ability to understand everything she knows so far about the text, impede her ability to make a unity out of the existing parts
  - This process of "blockages" is inevitable since no story can present every connection, show all material in its entirety, or synthesize every textual element (indeed the author may be deliberately trying not to synthesize textual elements)
    - Thu, there will always be these inevitable omissions, or blockages, or gaps
    - Some critics disdain these so-called blockages and cite them as flaws in the text – this is based on the classical idea of art and the unity of form (the idea that the parts of a work ought to fit together into a unified and discernible whole)

- A reader-response critic might look at these blockages and see them as the reader's opportunity to perform, to bring her own faculties into play and begin filling in the gaps that the text leaves
  - And how the reader fills those gaps, according to the individualist reader-response critics, will be highly determined by that individual's make-up
    - And it is in this very personalized gap-filing that the dynamics of reading are revealed
    - The author can have a significant influence on the meaning-making of the reader, but no author can (or should) set the whole picture before the reader's eyes
      - If the author attempts to give the reader the whole picture she will lose the reader
        - Because it is only through activating the reader's imagination, involving the reader in the text, that the reader is able to "identify" with the story
          - If the reader's imagination is put out of action, she feels that she has been cheated
- So as the reader moves through the text she is constantly oscillating between consistencies and "alien associations" or blockages
  - The reader is bound to conduct her own balancing of these phenomena and it is this process of balancing that forms the aesthetic experience offered by the text
  - No balance is ever reached for this would signal the end of the reading process
  - As the reader works out a consistent pattern in the text, she will find that her "interpretation" is constantly threatened by the presence of alternative interpretations
    - And so new "indeterminacies" are constantly arising – generating further expectations
  - Walter Pater: "For the serious reader, nothing is ever ornamental and the reader is rarely content to let anything become rigid – everything in the text will always linger and "[stir] a long brainwave behind" resulting in wild combinations of meaning."
  - Thus, reading is an inexhaustible process – elements of meaning can always be reconfigured by even the same reader to result in ever-changing understandings and experiences of a text
  - The act of reading is not a smooth one but relies on interruptions to keep our interpretive faculty working and organizing
- Now the reader with this balancing of blockages and alien associations amid the constant arising of new indeterminacies is truly performing the text and using her deepest levels of consciousness and sub-consciousness to access meaning in the text
  - Wolfgang Iser: "We look forward, we look back, we decide, we change our decisions, we form expectations, we are shocked by their nonfulfillment, we question, we muse, we accept, we reject."

- This is a fully entangled reader who is now making meaning and higher order impressions from the text
- Ultimately the great text is the one that is able to expand the horizon of the reader and give her something that modifies her pre-understanding and thus shapes how she approaches future texts and her next trip through the Hermeneutic circle
- Peter Rabinowitz – Four rules that govern the reader's performance of the text
  - 1) Rules of Notice
    - We give priority to certain aspects of the text and make our own hierarchy of importance
      - E.g.: Titles are privileged – they often help us frame the events that will follow and focus our attention
        - *The Great Gatsby* is an example of this – think how different the reading experience would be if the reader didn't start that text knowing it would be about Gatsby
          - From the first chapter we would begin to expect a memoir of Nick's time in the bond business and life in New York
    - First sentences and last sentences are privileged
      - Rabinowitz says there is more pressure for an interpretation to account for these sentences than say a random sentence from the middle of the text
    - Context-specific rules of priority
      - The dead, when they appear as characters, have great priority because they normally deliver important information or direct the protagonist to a key theme of the story
      - Certain writers gain their own rules of notice
        - In Hemingway, any character that is or has been a soldier gets extra attention
        - In Faulkner we prioritize a character's family relations more so than in the works of other writers
  - 2) Rules of Signification
    - Rules of signification tell us how to draw significance from the elements that the first rules of notice have brought to our attention
      - These rules tells us how to understand the symbolic meaning of what we are noticing
      - Now we are taking the elements we noticed and understanding them at more than face value
        - Our allusive and symbolic mind comes into play
        - E.g.: Santiago carrying the sailboat mast at the end of *The Old Man and the Sea* – we notice it then understand it is a Christ-like image of Christ carrying the cross
        - E.g.: The green light in *The Great Gatsby*
          - The green light gets mentioned in passing at first and we might not notice it, we may even be meant not to notice it

- Then as the detail is repeated and triggers our noticing we understand it is a symbol and go looking for its deeper significance
  - o 3) Rules of Configuration
    - How we group together elements and symbols to form meaning and patterns
    - From this we also undergo the hermeneutic process of making and modifying expectations as we try to make a pattern emerge
    - Here we rely on genre conventions and rhetorical conventions and literary tropes to aid our compiling of textual elements into a whole
      - We understand these common occurrences in literature and know where to look for them as well as what other elements tend to cluster around them
  - o 4) Rules of Coherence
    - Rules that help us make sense of discrepancies in a text
    - We will tend to repair textual disjunctures in ways that that transform them into metaphors or subtleties or ironies
      - This is a type of cognitive dissonance that helps us keep the text in unity
      - Whatever conflicts with that unity will tend to be de-emphasized in the reader's mind
      - Many texts, particularly modern and post-modern texts specifically exploit this tendency of the reader to prefer consistency in order to force greater contemplation and meaning-making out of numerous disparate elements that cannot be easily unified at most levels of analysis
    - The text can change horizons through the negation of the familiar
    - Hans Robert Jauss: "The distance between the horizon of expectations and the new work, between the familiarity of previous aesthetic experience and the change in horizon demanded by the reception of the new work, determines the artistic character of a literary work."
      - The work that reconstructs our horizon of expectations, expands it, adds something to our pre-understanding is the great literary work

The Reader in Your Novel

- Activate the Reader
  - Entangle the reader by leaving gaps to fill

- *Star Wars* and *The Great Gatsby*
  - *Star Wars*: The Force
  - *The Great Gatsby*: Nick's Judgment
    - Milton: He who of those delights can judge, and spare
      To interpose them oft, is not unwise.

Reader

- **Activate the Reader**
  - John Gardner describes reading as entering a fictive dream – the goal then is obviously to set the conditions for the reader to be able to enter the fictive dream and then make sure as the writer you don't do anything that will pull her out of it
  - Without enough opportunity for the reader to let her imagination and meaning-making work on the text she will not be able to enter that fictive dream
    - Among other things, laying too many connections and explicit patterns or meanings for the reader robs her of the chance to make meaning
    - This is where the reader feels cheated by the text – and that feeling is very similar to boredom
  - When patterns are obvious and meaning is simplistic there is not enough raw material for the reader's conscious and sub-conscious faculties to go to work on
  - Here is where genre conventions and rhetorical elements help the author – they liberate the author from having to establish the obvious and instead let her focus on the innovative
    - Conventional elements are so well known that they save the author the trouble of having to re-tread them
      - In other words, a lot of the author's work is already done for her
      - With only the lightest touch the author can create instant meaning and generate a long chain of associations by relying on the reader to supply the meaning
        - Which the reader will do within the context of her experience with conventions and rhetoric

- This helps keep the author from dramatizing/narrating what need not be explained and frees her to focus on the story and unique character elements
- For example, if the author wants to give a character an archetypal or stereotypical characteristic or dimension, what reader-response theory lets the author do is build the archetypal/stereotypical dimension quickly without having to use numerous scenes and plot points to develop something the reader is already familiar with
  - Here the one, carefully selected detail will open up rooms of meaning
  - Normally the author is admonished not to level jump too quickly in a character's development – which is sound advice – however in this instance of relying on conventions, the author can jump one or more levels in a character's development and the reader will be able to back-fill the necessary story elements to incorporate the movement
  - And to do otherwise, to build for the reader what is already familiar, is how the author loses the reader
- Even without relying on conventions and the familiar, the author can create significant gaps in meaning and representation that provoke the reader into a flurry of interpretation
  - So even in cases where the author is dealing with parts of the text and elements of the story that the reader is not as familiar with in her horizon of understanding – leaving a gap for the reader to fill herself can act as a type of force-multiplier when it comes to delivering dramatic impact to the reader
  - This is a move that takes incredible skill to make sure the text doesn't lapse into incoherence or omit crucial character or plot development
  - The author needs a practiced aesthetic eye and experience with books that leave such gaps for their readers
    - Here is one place where the right editing will really help as it assists the author in calibrating the story in just such a manner that the effect succeeds and entangles the reader
- This process of surprising the reader, of leading her into interpretative acts, Hans Gadamer called "Pulling the reader up short"
  - So in this hermeneutic process of reading, the reader is constantly trying to establish both the meaning and the horizon of the text
  - And it is the best texts that keep showing the reader the limitations of her initial horizon and constantly direct her to expand her horizon by incorporating and interpreting new material
- This idea of pulling the reader up short, of leaving space in the text for her interpretative acts to take place does not mean the author must leave plot holes or keep information from the reader
- These gaps and ways of pulling the reader up short exist across the elements of fiction
  - Symbols (like the green light in *The Great Gatsby*, like the lighthouse in *To the Lighthouse*) demand interpretative acts, so do metaphors (like Gregor Samsa in Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*), whole characters (Mr. Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*), dialogue (Seymour and Sybil in Salinger's "A Perfect Day for Bananafish"), whole plots or parts of plots (Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*)
- **Star Wars and The Great Gatsby**
  - Star Wars: The Force

- In the original Star Wars trilogy, the Force is a plot element with minimal explanation
  - Obi Wan Kenobi: "The Force is what gives a Jedi his power. It's an energy field created by all living things. It surrounds us and penetrates us; it binds the galaxy together."
  - Darth Vader: "Don't underestimate the Force."
  - Darth Vader: "The ability to destroy a planet is insignificant next to the power of the Force."
  - Darth Vader: "Obi Wan is here. The Force is with him."
  - Obi Wan says he feels "a great disturbance" in the Force
  - Han Solo: "Kid, I've flown from one side of this galaxy to the other. I've seen a lot of strange stuff, but I've never seen anything to make me believe there's one all-powerful Force controlling *everything*. There's no mystical energy field that controls *my* destiny. Anyway, it's all a lot of simple tricks and nonsense."
- The audience gets the message that the Force holds great power and that its features are obscure and mysterious
- The Force seems to be somewhat spiritual, something external to that body that someone with the right mixture of faith and practice and talent can access
  - It is often couched in religious terms as a set of beliefs about the world or an orientation toward the world
- The audience is aware that the Force is used for both good and evil purposes and that the Jedi, this special group of heroic knights/protectors, believe fully in the Force and use it for good
  - As there is strong audience identification with these noble, heroic Jedi; there is this imitative desire the audience has – they want to be Jedis and want to participate in the trappings of being a Jedi
    - And most prominent among these trappings is the ability to use the Force and master its mysteries
    - The Force creates a strong image in the mind of the audience while at the same time being so loosely explained in the films
      - This is a great formula for entangling the audience
        - A compelling element + ambiguous determinacy
      - This frees the audience to supply certain gaps in the "theology" and attributes of the Force and therefore lets the individual audience member or groups of audience members construct their own meaning about this unique story element
      - This is evident in so much of the audience's response to Star Wars and the audience's intensive interpretative acts of various story elements
        - E.g.: The functionality of the Death Star and other spacecraft, the features of various planets, Han Solo and Gredo's gunfight – these and many more objects of meaning are fully realized in the mind of the audience even if they are only given small screen time
- To underscore how strong these interpretative acts of the audience are, see the controversy over the Force as it was portrayed in the prequel film *The Phantom Menace*, part of the prequel trilogy

- In *The Phantom Menace*, the plot element of Midichlorians is introduced as something that has strong implications for the Force
- Midichlorians, the audience is told, are microorganisms in a person's cells that influence that person's ability to use the Force
    - They can be detected by a blood-test and the higher one's Midichlorian count, the greater their potential to use the Force
    - Midichlorians are biologically determined and thus create the assumption that the Force itself is similarly biologically determined
- This change in the attributes of the Force caused outrage among many fans
    - For over two decades since the original *Star Wars* was released fans had established a meaning and understanding for the Force based on the details contained in the first film and the original trilogy as a whole
    - This new addition of the concept of Midichlorians upended all of the understanding and all of the interpretative acts performed in arriving at that understanding
    - Many considered the concept of Midichlorians to be over-explaining and believed it cheapened the beauty of the Force
        - Fans were happy with their original interpretation of the Force as spiritual and metaphysical, as something possibly available to anyone provided he or she followed the appropriate path, as did the Jedi
            - There was a sense that the Force depended on a person's character and actions and beliefs, not on biology and something out of a person's control
            - Many fans even believed in the Force as something they could aspire to
            - But with Midichlorians, fans were robbed of this imaginative act and denied the chance to participate in the Force because they clearly don't possess Midichlorians (because they don't live in the Star Wars universe)
            - This new textual material forced new meaning into the conception of the Force and to many this robbed the Force of its quasi-mystical nature that made it both so rich for interpretation and so compelling to fans in the way religion itself with its supernatural element is compelling
            - To see the Force reduced to something like a genetic component of a person, to see it more or less tested for the way we test for certain diseases, was a completely demystifying revelation for the fans and for many it lessened one of the most important connections they had with the film
                - The connection was so strong because the fandom performed so many interpretative acts to conceptualize and understand something as ambiguous as the Force, and suddenly the author

tried to cancel all of that meaning the fans had made

- This controversy illustrates both an excellent example of entangling the reader to help make meaning (in terms of all of the interpretation and fleshing-out fans supplied for this story element) and the notion in reader response-theory that the interpretative community is the locus of meaning and that a text is whatever its interpretative audience says it is (in fact many fans reject the concept of midichlorians and don't consider it as part of the Force; the reaction from fans was so strong that in subsequent incarnations of the Star Wars universe the concept has been diluted and is no longer portrayed as overly determinative of a person's ability with the Force)

- **The Great Gatsby**
  - This example is based on an argument by Milton scholar and Reader-Response theorist Stanley Fish
  - Fish analyzed the problems that certain of Milton's sonnets have presented for critics, particularly those problems of meaning
  - To build his argument, Fish looked at, among others, Milton's Sonnet "To Lawrence, of virtuous father virtuous son"
  - The Sonnet:
    - **Lawrence, of virtuous father virtuous son**

Lawrence, of virtuous father virtuous son,
   Now that the fields are dank, and ways are mire,
   Where shall we sometimes meet, and by the fire
   Help waste a sullen day; what may be won
From the hard season gaining? Time will run
   On smoother, till Favonius re-inspire
   The frozen earth, and clothe in fresh attire
   The lily and rose, that neither sow'd nor spun.
What neat repast shall feast us, light and choice,
   Of Attic taste, with wine, whence we may rise
   To hear the lute well touch'd, or artful voice
Warble immortal notes and Tuscan air?
   He who of those delights can judge, and spare
   To interpose them oft, is not unwise.

  - The narrator of the poem is addressing a friend and asking him what will the two of them do with their time now that the harvest they worked so hard to reap is finished and they have free time on their hands
    - Their days are more or less free until the spring sowing and so the narrator is looking forward to some well-deserved leisure time after all the hard work of the season
    - The narrator begins wondering what this coming leisure time will be filled with and ponders certain fine pastimes he and his friend might engage in
      - They will dine on choice food, drink good wine, and listen to beautiful music in their splendid Tuscan countryside
    - Then, the narrator concludes his musing with a curious statement contained in the last two lines of the poem

- After listing the several pleasures of bon vivants that he and his friend might indulge in, the narrator says: "He who of those delights can judge, and spare / to interpose them oft, is not unwise."
- The meaning of these last two lines has polarized Milton scholars and readers alike – What is the narrator saying?
  - The controversy turns on the word "spare" and which meaning of the word is invoked
    - The word spare can mean either 1) to be able to/set aside time for or 2) to refrain from
    - The poem will have a completely different meaning depending on which definition the reader accepts
      - Under the first definition – to be able to – the last two lines read as encouragement to indulge in "those delights"
        - With this definition the poem is saying: who ever can spare, set aside time for, be able to engage in these pleasures of food/drink/song, whoever is able to do that often is not unwise (or, in other words: wise)
      - Under the second definition – to refrain from – the last two lines read as a discouragement from indulging in "those delights"
        - With this second definition the poem is saying: whoever spares these delights, refrains from them and does not indulge often, that person is wise
  - And thus the poem delivers, at the crucial moment of meaning, a massive ambiguity
- Once a reader goes back through the poem looking for evidence of which meaning of "spare" applies, the text again leads in both directions
  - In support of the first meaning of spare (to set aside time for) – the reader can focus on the narrator's desire to "*waste* a sullen day" (suggesting indulgence), how the pleasures mentioned are meant to be rewards, how the "warbling" of the music suggests a chaotic, frenetic movement (what might be associated with indulgence), and how the construction of the poem itself is an interrogative regarding how these indulgences will come about; in other words, the narrator begins the poem and frames it as though he is receptive to these delights
  - In support of the second meaning of spare (to refrain from) – the reader can focus on some of the moderating language, for example that the feast will be "neat…light and choice" (suggesting circumspection and an orderly approach), or on how the narrator addresses his friend Lawrence as "Lawrence, of virtuous father virtuous son" which suggests that Lawrence himself is a virtuous man and therefore likely temperate and self-disciplined
- Thus, there exists a major ambiguity in the poem that, depending on how one resolves the ambiguity, will result in a completely different understanding of the poem
- A debate over the meaning of this sonnet has been going on for centuries with serious scholars on both sides
- Stanley Fish, in his article *Interpreting the 'Varorium'*, written to review a collected edition of Milton scholarship, describes the absurdity of scholars' efforts to resolve this interpretive ambiguity
  - Fish points out that "the proponents of the two interpretations cite as evidence both English and Latin syntax, various sources and analogues, Milton's "known attitudes"

as they are found in his other writings, and the unambiguously expressed sentiments of the next sonnet in Milton's work regarding the same question"
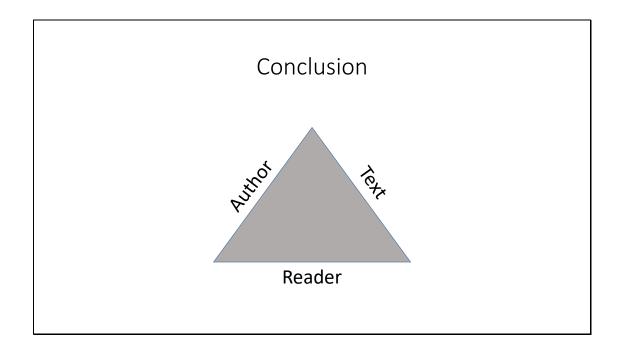 - In the next sonnet in the book published by Milton, the hard working subject is told to put down the insignificant work and go enjoy a "cheerful hour"
- Fish reminds us that scholars on different sides of the debate have often cited the same piece of evidence to support their argument
- Fish – critical of the Formalist approaches to this sonnet – says analysis of this kind is really highly idiosyncratic to the critic and that these analyses will always point in as many directions as there are interpreters
  - Fish: Evidence will not only prove something, it will prove anything
- Thus Fish is unimpressed by the attempts to resolve this dilemma and proposes a new lens through which to view the poem
  - Fish argues that the ambiguity does not exist to be solved, but to be *experienced*
  - Fish notes that readers have experienced this ambiguity for centuries
    - So instead of asking what the word "spare" means (a question we can't answer), what if we asked "what does it mean that the understanding of the word 'spare' has always been an issue" (a question we can answer)
    - To Fish, the latter question means that both interpretations are equally available
    - He acknowledges that the last two lines "generate a pressure for judgment" and then ultimately "decline to deliver this judgment"
    - This pressure therefore is not resolved and does not go away; it is, rather, transferred to the reader
    - And so the reader receives not resolution from this poem but what Fish identifies as a "responsibility"
      - As Fish points outs, "those delights" remain delights under either interpretation, and now it is up to the reader to decide when and how often – if ever – to indulge in them
- And, according to Fish, those attempts to find a certain meaning for the last two lines are really attempts to transfer the responsibility back to the text
  - And the text refuses to accept this responsibility
  - For even if we pin down a meaning for the word "spare," Fish points out that we are left with the message that the person engaging in or refraining from "those delights" is "not unwise" – and thus no matter what course of action is chosen by the subjects in the poem, it cannot be definitively said that the choice is wise (merely that it is "not unwise")
  - Fish discusses how past critics have shown that the phrase "not unwise" really acts to prevent us from attaching the label "wise" to any of the possible actions (engaging in/refraining from the delights)
- So inescapably, the poem transfers the pressure of judgment to the reader and leaves it up to the reader to "choose and mange" for themselves
  - So no matter what, no matter how much evidence is adduced for either interpretation, it can never completely remove the ambiguity and so the reader will always have the responsibility of deciding
- This is a compelling analysis of an obvious textual problem and pushes criticism into a new direction by admitting a role for the reader

- This problem of ambiguity, which Fish analyzes in other Milton sonnets as well, is both a great example of Reader-based criticism and of the technique of activating the reader
  - Merely reading the poem will not offer a typical crisis-climax-conclusion formula for the reader
    - In fact, reading the poem will commit the reader to an unavoidable interpretative act: deciding
    - This is a brilliant and bold maneuver accomplished with a single word, "spare"
- This reading of Milton by Fish is an excellent introduction to a similar dilemma in *The Great Gatsby*, namely Nick's opinion of Gatsby
- There is a good deal of equivocation and inconsistency in how Nick describes his feelings for Gatsby
  - This is important because largely we trust Nick as the narrator and see the story through his lens, so inevitably his opinion of Gatsby will serve as a starting point for our own opinion of Gatsby and inevitably color our judgments
    - Does Nick sympathize with Gatsby, and thus, by extension, ought the reader sympathize with Gatsby
    - We are always making moral choices (consciously or not) and thus we need to know if Gatsby's choices are moral, if they are wise or unwise, and ought to be emulated and to what particular degree
- Nick gives contradictory evidence of his opinion of Gatsby
  - Ch. 1 – Nick describing what effect the events of his forthcoming story have had on him. Nick: "When I came back from the East last Autumn I felt that I wanted the world to be in uniform and at a sort of moral attention forever; I wanted no more riotous excursions with privileged glimpses into the human heart. Only Gatsby, the man who gives his name to this book, was exempt from my reaction. – Gatsby, who represented everything for which I have an unaffected scorn."
    - This example seems to contradict itself in the same sentence
  - Ch. 1 – Nick foreshadowing the story: "No - Gatsby turned out all right in the end; it is what preyed on Gatsby, what foul dust floated in the wake of his dreams that temporarily closed out my interest in the abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men."
  - Ch. 3 – Nick's famous and glowing description of Gatsby's smile. Nick: "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."
  - Ch. 4 – Nick and Gatsby driving to lunch in Manhattan together; Gatsby telling Nick a story about his past. Gatsby: "'Look here, old sport," he broke out surprisingly. 'What's your opinion of me, anyhow?'" Nick: "A little overwhelmed, I began the generalized evasions which that question deserves."

- Ch. 4 – Nick reacting to Gatsby asking Nick to do a favor for him that Jordan Baker will explain. Nick: "I hadn't the faintest idea what 'this matter' was, but I was more annoyed than interested. I hadn't asked Jordan to tea in order to discuss Mr. Jay Gatsby. I was sure the request would be something utterly fantastic, and for a moment I was sorry I'd ever set foot upon his overpopulated lawn."
- Ch. 5 – Nick's reaction to Gatsby asking if he wants to be part of one of Gatsby's business ventures: "I realize now that under different circumstances that conversation might have been one of the crises of my life. But, because the offer was obviously and tactlessly for a service to be rendered, I had no choice except to cut him off there."
- Ch. 6 – Nick describing how he thinks Gatsby thought of himself. Nick: "The truth was that Jay Gatsby of West Egg, Long Island sprung from his Platonic conception of himself. He was a son of God – a phrase which, if it means anything, means just that – and he must be about His Father's business, the service of a vast, vulgar, and meretricious beauty."
- Ch. 6 – Nick reacting to Tom Buchanan's calling Gatsby a bootlegger. Tom: "'Who is this Gatsby anyhow…some big bootlegger?'" Nick: "'Where did you hear that?'" Tom: "'I didn't hear it. I imagined it. A lot of these newly rich people are just big bootleggers, you know.'" Nick: "'Not Gatsby,' I said shortly."
- Ch. 7 – Nick's reaction to when Gatsby definitively proves in front of Tom that he indeed attended Oxford University for a period of time, thus technically making him an "Oxford man." Nick: "I wanted to get up and slap him [Gatsby] on the back. I had one of those renewals of complete faith in him that I'd experienced before."
- Ch. 7 – How Nick responds to Gatsby's incorrect assumption that no one witnessed the fatal car crash involving Gatsby's car. Nick: "I disliked him [Gatsby] so much by then that I didn't find it necessary to tell him he was wrong."
- Ch. 8 – As Nick begins to feel unsettled about the car accident and the possible danger posed to Gatsby. Nick "Toward dawn I heard a taxi go up to Gatsby's drive, and immediately I jumped out of bed and began to dress – I felt that I had something to tell him, something to warn him about, and morning would be too late."
- Ch. 8 – After Nick and Gatsby have been talking for a while about Gatsby's past and the conversation is coming to an end. Nick: "I didn't want to go to the city. I wasn't worth a decent stroke of work, but it was more than that – I didn't want to leave Gatsby. I missed that train, and then another, before I could get myself away."
- Ch. 8 – When Nick and a despondent Gatsby break-off their conversation and Nick leaves Gatsby's house, and Nick pays Gatsby a compliment. Nick: "We shook hands and I started away. Just before I reached the hedge I remembered something and turned around. 'They're a rotten crowd,' I shouted across the lawn. 'You're worth the whole damn bunch put together.' I've always been glad I said that. It was the only compliment I ever gave him, because I disapproved of him from beginning to end."

- Ch. 9 – After Gatsby's death and the mania surrounding the police inquiry Nick says: "I found myself on Gatsby's side, and alone."
- Ch. 9 – Regarding Gatsby's funeral and lack of interest. Nick: "I wanted to get somebody for him. I wanted to go into the room where he lay and reassure him: 'I'll get somebody for you, Gatsby. Don't worry. Just give me time and I'll get somebody for you."
- Ch. 9 – When Nick receives word that Gatsby's business partner Wolfshiem won't attend the funeral. Nick: "When the butler brought back Wolfshiem's answer I began to have a feeling of defiance of scornful solidarity between me and Gatsby against them all."
- Ch. 9 – When Gatsby's father arrives for the funeral and asks Nick if he was "a friend of my boy's...." Nick: "We were close friends."
- The play of ambiguity and contradiction in Nick's statements about Gatsby makes understanding his exact opinion difficult
    - And one of the playful rhetorical tricks that Fitzgerald treats the reader to is that just as Nick is telling us how much he dislikes Gatsby, he is often doing something to help him
        - E.g.: Getting to know Gatsby, setting up the rendezvous with Daisy, arranging Gatsby's funeral, growing indignant at the people who don't pay their respects, demeaning Gatsby's enemies
- Nick is obviously conflicted about Gatsby – he does not know what sense to make out of everything Gatsby did and stood for
    - What conclusion, then, can the reader draw when plausible evidence can be marshaled by both sides of the argument (that Nick loved Gatsby/that Nick resented Gatsby)
- This interpretative moment is ripe for Fish's critical theory: that the ambiguity is not meant to be solved but to be experienced
- There is, as Fish would say, a pressure for judgment being generated – how should we interpret Nick's opinion of Gatsby
    - As our narrator we want to understand Nick's positions clearly so as readers we can understand the story
    - Another wonderful rhetorical device Fitzgerald uses is his framing device of the whole concept of "Judgment"
        - The novel opens with some of the most famous lines in literature
        - Chapter 1: "In my younger and more vulnerable years my father gave me some advice that I've been turning over in my mind ever since. 'Whenever you feel like criticizing any one,' he told me, 'just remember that all the people in this world haven't had the advantages that you've had.'"
            - Before Fitzgerald does anything else in the story, he directs the reader's attention to the perils of judgment and moral outrage
            - In the ensuing opening sentences Nick says: "In consequence I'm inclined to reserve all judgments."
            - Elaborating even further, Nick says: "Reserving judgments is a matter of infinite hope…And, after boasting this way of my tolerance, I come to the admission that it has a limit."

- Even with respect to Judgment as a broad category, not a particular instance that may call for judgment, but with the concept of Judgment itself, even at this higher-level of abstraction, Nick cannot help but equivocate
  - He tells us he often considers the nature of judgment, tells us he doesn't like to judge, and then undercuts that and admits sometimes he cannot help but judge
  - Nick's whole approach to the idea of judgment is fragmented, just as his judgment of any particular phenomenon might also be fragmented
  - In other words, Nick can offer us no definitive judgment or even a definitive stance on the nature of judgment itself and thus these responsibilities are turned over to the reader
  - And so this framing device reinforces the idea that we are on our own to judge Gatsby, if at all, and on our own to put together the pieces that Nick has laid out for us
- And, as previously mentioned, Fitzgerald puts a key structure in his story, what Mikhail Bakhtin called the Carnivalesque – a mode characterized by the loosening or inversion of conventional roles and morals
  - And from within this Carnivalesque framework the possibility of any effective or definitive judgment is even further refracted
- Thus Fitzgerald is demanding an interpretative act on the part of the reader while giving only conflicting bases from which to judge
  - Using Fish's analysis of Milton as a framework, this problem of neatly sorting out plot and character judgments perhaps ought be avoided
  - We are given ambiguity regarding Gatsby's moral posture and Nick's feelings for Gatsby and instead of trying to solve this we might just experience it
  - The ambiguity itself can be meaning and keeps the book constantly fresh in the reader's mind because the dilemma is never resolved

Conclusion

Author — Text — Reader

- **Conclusion**
- Three constituencies come together to create a story
  - They are the triangle of Author – Text – Reader
  - Literary criticism has shifted over time and given careful attention to each member of this triad
  - Often the evolution or shifting in emphasis is a reaction against the immediately preceding school of thought
    - Thus the Russian Formalists react to the ambiguous notions of authorial-based criticism by substituting a more rigid text-based criticism, and Reader-Response theorists respond to the dogmas of Formalism by substituting the subjectivity of the reader as the central critical focus
- In many cases the assumptions of these three different approaches are incompatible, however they can occasionally be used together
  - For example, if a reader response critic accepts the idea that literary tropes in the text help determine the reader's experience of a text, the critic might rely on the work of Formalists in elucidating these tropes and their effects
- What literary theory can do for the writer is give him or her a more informed understanding of how fiction works and what is operating under the surface of a story
  - By better understanding meaning and how it is made and interpreted, the writer can deploy intentionality and literary tropes in a more conscious way and thus tell a richer story that is more likely to move the reader

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- Fig. 1 The Hermeneutic Circle, Screen capture, Available from: Google Image, https://www.google.com/search?q=the+hermeneutic+circle&client=firefox-b-1-d&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjmga344b7gAhUNTd8KHIVtCwoQ_AUIDigB&biw=1536&bih=750#imgrc=okILzgnMZKjF6M: (Accessed 12/13/2018_).

- Fig. 2 Broken Hammer, Screen capture, Available from: Google Image, https://www.google.com/search?q=broken+hammer&client=firefox-b-1-ab&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjt4Zb1r53fAhXuRt8KHQ7CALEQ_AUIDigB&biw=1920&bih=976#imgrc=RTBu-CDBMeY77M: (Accessed 12/13/2018).

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