

A Novel Approach to Justice: The Power of Fiction in Working for Justice
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I defend the literary imagination precisely because it seems to me an essential ingredient of an ethical stance that asks us to concern ourselves with the good of other people whose lives are distant from our own. Martha Nussbaum

The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function. One should, for example, be able to see that things are hopeless and yet be determined to make them otherwise.

F. Scott Fitzgerald, "The Crack Up."

There have been at work among us three great social agencies: the London City Mission; the novels of Mr. Dickens; the cholera.

James Baldwin Brown, Victorian Preacher.

Abstract:

Novels (and other forms of fiction) can make an important contribution to the work of social justice: novels introduce us to the lives of those different than we are, and they thereby both enable us to sympathize with the characters and gain a critical perspective on reality. To quote Martha Nussbaum: "The novel, so different from a guidebook or even an anthropological field report, makes readers participants in the lives of people very different from themselves and also [makes readers] critics of the class distinctions that give people similarly constructed an unequal access to flourishing."¹ In addition to Nussbaum, I will draw on Seyla Benhabib, who argues that moral reflection requires the presence of the "concrete other," and I will suggest that fiction can provide us with concrete others. The paper will focus on how two novels can be used to teach justice issues: *Great Gatsby* (class issues); *Bluest Eye* (race and gender issues)

Introduction:

In Dai Sijie's short novel *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress*, set during China's cultural revolution in the 60's and 70's, the unnamed teenage narrator is a young man who has been exiled to a mountain village in order to be 're-educated'. The story tells of how this teenager and his friend Luo encounter Western literature, and it

emphasizes the power of literature to free the mind in surprising and uncontrollable ways.

In the second half of the novel, the narrator reads Romain Rolland, and writes of the impact the first volume of *Jean-Christophe* has on him.

Without him I would never have understood the splendor of taking free and independent action as an individual. Up until this stolen encounter with Romain Rolland's hero, my poor education and re-educated brains had been incapable of grasping the notion of one man standing up against the whole world. . . . To me it was the ultimate book: once you had read it, neither your own life nor the world you live in would ever look the same.

Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress describes how literature can be a source of liberation for readers, and makes us privy to the processes the young men go through in their relationship to literature. In this way, I believe the novel serves the work of justice. It important to note, however, that although Sijie celebrates the liberating work of literature, he does not sentimentalize it. We see the dangerous side of the empowerment that comes with the encounter between the characters and literature. We, in fact, get a complex understanding of the dynamics of liberation. But, Sijie's novel works on another level for readers. It serves the work of justice by giving readers a glimpse into the lives of these exiled and imprisoned young Chinese men. It lures us, partly by its whimsical style, to walk for almost two hundred pages in the muck soaked shoes of the two young men. The book, to borrow from Martha Nussbaum, "***asks us to concern ourselves with the good of other people whose lives are distant from our own.***" Although I am interested both in literature as liberation and literature as justice, I will focus on the second issue in this particular paper.

II. Justice

Justice, according to Iris Marion Young (*Justice and the Politics of Difference*) involves:

“the institutionalized conditions that make it possible for all to learn and use satisfying skills in socially recognized settings, to participate in decision making, and to *express their feelings, experience, and perspective on social life in contexts where others can listen.*”² (emphasis added)

In other words, justice is the process by which distinct groups in a society are represented, valued, given voice, and heard -- toward the shaping of that society, including the shaping of its values, procedures and standards.

How do we educate in a way that increases the inclusion of individuals and communities who do not currently share in the goods and power of our society?

In this paper, I will argue that novels (and other forms of fiction) can make an important contribution to the work of social justice. Novels introduce us to the lives of those different than we are, and they thereby both enable us to sympathize with the characters and gain a critical perspective on reality. They not only introduce us to “the feelings, experiences, and perspectives on social life” of those who are different from us; they also do so “in contexts” where we “listen.” Because of this, Azar Nafisi considers novels to be democratic:

“Imagination in [novels] is equated with empathy; we can’t experience all that others have gone through, but we can understand even the most monstrous individuals in works of fiction. A good novel is one that shows the complexity of individuals, and creates enough space for all these characters to have a voice; in this way a novel is called democratic – not that it advocates democracy but that by nature it is so.”³

Entering the Dwellings of Strangers

Martha Nussbaum argues that the novel: “makes readers participants in the lives of people very different from themselves and also [makes readers] critics of the class

distinctions that give people similarly constructed an unequal access to flourishing.”⁴ In a scene from Charles Dickens’ *Hard Times*, Louisa, the (nineteen year old) daughter and dutiful student of Thomas Gradgrind -- champion of the reigning fact-obsessed utilitarian philosophy of the day (mid-1800’s) -- encounters working class persons (“The Hands”) for the first time. Because they live on another side of town, she had only known “The Hands” through statistics and general theories about their role in the economic system. The face-to-face interaction rendered this category of people human to her for the first time. When she enters the dwelling of the ‘other,’ she also brings the reader with her.

For the first time in her life Louisa had come into one of the dwellings of the Coketown Hands; for the first time in her life she was face to face with anything like individuality in connexion with them. She knew of their existence by hundreds and by thousands. . . . but she knew from her reading infinitely more of the ways of toiling insects than of these toiling men and women. Something to be worked so much and paid so much, and there it ended . . . this she knew the Coketown hands to be. But, she had scarcely thought more of separating them into units, than of separating the sea itself into its component drops.⁵

The movement from the abstract to the concrete, from the biased theory to an open engagement, enlarged, indeed changed, her understanding. “The Hands” were now Stephen and Rachel. And, of course, the novel itself was written to enable the reader to make the same kind of move that Louisa made. The novel was written to introduce 19th Century readers steeped in utilitarianism to the individuality of the “units” in their theories. This is why James Baldwin Brown, Victorian Preacher, considered Dickens one of the three ‘great social agencies’ of his day. And, despite some literary flaws, the novel continues to enlarge the world of its readers.

As this excerpt demonstrates, novels, as opposed to other forms of literature, tell of ordinary, often overlooked people. Michael Cunningham, author of *The Hours*, named

this as the particular genius of Virginia Woolf's writing. Woolf, according to Cunningham, "knew that everyone, every single person, is the hero of his or her own epic story," and she realized:

there are no ordinary lives, just inadequate ways of looking at them. ... most of our lives look ordinary from the outside, but ... to us... they are anything but; to us our lives are enormous and fascinating, even if they appear to be made up largely of work, errands, meals and sleep. [Virginia Woolf] spent her career writing the extraordinary, epic tales of people who seem to be doing nothing unusual at all. ... Through her books we understand that the workings of atomic particles are every bit as mysterious and enormous as the workings of galaxies --- it all depends on whether you look out or look in.⁶

II. The Literary Imagination

In her 1995 work, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life*, the philosopher Martha Nussbaum [currently Professor of Law and Ethics U of Chicago] argues that there is an "ingredient in public discourse" that is too often "missing" --- storytelling and literary imagination.⁷ She argues that novels, by laying the claim of another's story, can play a crucial role in public reasoning. Novels cultivate the imagination, which Nussbaum argues contributes to and deepens the capacity for moral reflection. She focuses on "the characteristics of the literary imagination as a public imagination, an imagination that will steer judges in their judging, legislators in their legislating, policy makers in measuring the quality of life of people near and far."⁸ Nussbaum goes so far as to assert: "If we do not cultivate the imagination in this way, we lose, I believe an essential bridge to social justice."⁹

Why *novels* for public discourse? Though other forms of art and literature would serve public discourse quite well, Nussbaum notes that the novel is a living form and in fact still is "the central morally serious yet popularly engaging fictional form in our

culture.”¹⁰ Moreover, “the novel is concrete to an extent generally unparalleled in other narrative genre.” Because the novel is concrete, its narrative helps those who are reasoning and theorizing to **negotiate between the general and the particular**. Good novels --- Nussbaum privileges realist novels with “social and political themes” --- portray a complex picture of human life that theories obscure. They are akin to qualitative analysis. Therefore, novels, and the imagination they invoke, *should be* incorporated into theoretical reflection. Nussbaum does not disparage reason or “the scientific search for truth.” Yet she does, trenchantly, criticize “a particular scientific approach that claims to stand for truth and reason.” She argues that an abstract and generalized approach to theory building “fails to stand for truth insofar as it dogmatically misrepresents the complexity of human beings and human life.”¹¹ The imagination then, according to Nussbaum, is both creative and “veridical” --- truth producing.

Nussbaum teaches a course on Law and Literature, and she assigns novels for the purpose of introducing people to the lives of others. Thus, her focus is on using novels to educate leaders and decision-makers. In connection with literature, her classes discuss “compassion and mercy, the role of the emotions in public judgment, what is involved in imagining the situation of something different from oneself.”

As noted above Nussbaum prefers realist novels, especially Anglo-American novels with social and political themes --- and in *Poetic Justice* she focuses on Charles Dickens’ *Hard Times*. *Hard Times* offers several and diverse measures for understanding persons in a variety of social positions, and it particularly takes us into the limits the upper classes imposes on the lower classes.

Fiction, then, contributes to the form and content of justice. It ignites imagination, enabling greater sympathy for others; and it exposes us to others, enlarging our knowledge and understanding. Leslie Silko, a novelist whose Pueblo upbringing and Pueblo/Mexican heritage has led her to an interest in achieving social justice for Native Americans, initially studied law until she realized that literature would be a more effective tool for her. In an interview included in Ellen Arnold's edited volume *Conversations with Leslie Silko*, Silko states that for her, writing a story is more effective than political activism. Or, rather, that it is her form of political action.¹²

Thus, to summarize the argument so far: one of the primary contributions novels make to theory building and public reasoning is that novels introduce us to the lives of those different than we are, and they thereby both enable us to sympathize with the characters and gain a critical perspective on reality. As Nussbaum states, "the ability to imagine the concrete ways in which people different from oneself grapple with disadvantage" has "great practical and public value" (xvi).

The fact is, novels which introduce us to those who are different might also resonate with the difference within. There is sometimes the unlikeliest of connections. "If I were to choose a work of fiction" that would "resonate with our lives in the Islamic Republic of Iran," wrote Azar Nafisi, it would Perhaps be Nabokov's *invitation to a Beheading*, or better yet, *Lolita*. A little later she asks, "Are you bewildered? Why *Lolita*? Why *Lolita* in Tehran?" As a matter of fact, I was bewildered; I, for one, asked that question the minute I saw the title of the book. But, of course, the desperate truth of *Lolita*'s story is . . . *the confiscation of one individual's life by another*, which is how Nafisi, and her the group of women who formed a book reading class, felt after the

revolution. In fact, in that world, girls as young as nine could be married to men older than Humbert Humbert.

I want to add to my thesis now by drawing on the political philosophy of Iris Marion Young, who suggests that narrative as a mode of discourse increases inclusion.

III. Fiction and Inclusion

In her work, *Inclusion and Democracy*, **Iris Young** argues that political inclusion requires openness to a plurality of *modes* of communication.¹³ When argument is the preferred form of discourse in public arenas, persons not groomed for argument can be “internally excluded” even if they are invited to participate. *Internal* exclusion refers to the “ways that people lack effective opportunity to influence the thinking of others even when they have access to fora and procedures of decision-making.”¹⁴ Young argues that an inclusive conception of democracy requires concerted attention to, and description of, forms of communication *additional to making assertions and giving reasons* that can contribute to political discussion “that aims to solve collective problems justly.”¹⁵ Young suggests that narrative and story-telling increases inclusion. “A norm of political communication under these conditions [mass society with little knowledge of others] is that everyone should aim to enlarge their social understanding by learning about the specific experience and meanings attending other social locations. Narrative makes this easier and sometimes an adventure.”

Young argues for testimony type telling of stories in public arenas, and I want to extend her argument. I argue that fiction can also increase inclusion -- inclusion of the absent. Fiction can bring stories of those silent, those not present, those who have a right

to be included in discussions concerning their lives. Leslie Silko's stories, for instance, make aspects of Native America available to those who are not Native American.

The use of novels in educational and political arenas, furthermore, develops the habit of learning through story. Frequently, exclusion is addressed by working to extend (Freire) the valued skills of the dominant culture to others. This works the other end, it trains the dominant culture to value and become used to the valued skills of non-dominant cultures. When we read novels in law school, business school, theological schools, and even churches, we accustom ourselves to learning through narrative – which opens us up to hearing and learning from those groups who are story and narrative (rather than theory and argument) oriented.

This segment of my argument is not meant, however, to diminish the importance of argument and theory. In fact, according to Seyla Benhabib concreteness can contribute to distanced reflection, especially to moral reflection,

IV. The Narrative “Concrete Other”

Seyla Benhabib, in a widely read essay entitled: “The Generalized and the Concrete Other: The Kohlberg-Gilligan controversy and Moral Theory,” argues that moral reflection, if it is to be truly ‘just,’ requires the presence of *concrete others*. That is to say, mature moral development – morality that seeks justice -- requires more than abstract reflection on ethical behavior, it requires numerous and particular encounters with concrete persons who are different than oneself (the “concrete other”).

Performing what she describes as an immanent critique of Kohlberg and Rawls, Benhabib notes that the moral self, when viewed as a disembedded and disembodied being (ala Rawls, Kohlberg) is incompatible with the criteria for reversibility and

universalizability advocated by defenders of universalism.

According to Lawrence Kohlberg, persons grow in their capacity for “justice reasoning” according to a hierarchy of stages. The attainment of justice marks moral maturity, and it occurs when one achieves the capacity for “impartiality, universalizability, and the effort and willingness to come to agreement or consensus with other human beings in general about what is right.”² Thus fairness, the negotiation of competing rights, and the ability to put aside one’s interests are the primary virtues and cognitive capacities needed. Enmeshment in the particulars of one’s life and relationships are judged in the Kohlbergian model to be less mature than distance from and impartiality toward one’s concrete surroundings. In assessing moral development, which he and his associates did by posing hypothetical dilemmas to interviewees, Kohlberg thus favors abstract theorizing over narrative style, universalizing reflections (what can be said to be true for the “general” person) over contextual judgements (what can be said to be true for specific persons), and a sense of personal autonomy over relationship orientation.

Rawlsian theory is “disembedded” in that it asks us to reflect morally by stripping ourselves of our particularity. So, for instance, we are to determine what distribution of material goods would be most rational and reasonable to adopt if we knew that our society is such that we may be a single mother on welfare raising children in the inner city. The theory, however, does not actually ask: what would it really be like to reason from the perspective of a welfare mother? In Benhabib’s words, it doesn’t really call on us to “face the ‘otherness of the other.’” “Neither the concreteness nor the otherness of the ‘concrete other’ can be known in the absence of the *voice* of the other.” A general or

abstract understanding of the “other” doesn’t really bring us into engagement with otherness or lead to the kind of knowledge one would need to have to make decisions on behalf of those who are very different. Thus, “a universalistic moral theory restricted to the standpoint of the ‘generalized other’ falls into epistemic incoherencies that jeopardize its claim to adequately fulfill reversibility and universalizability.”¹⁶ Moral decision making, in order to be ‘just,’ requires engagement with concrete persons.

It is not hard to see that novels could help achieve the end that Rawls was after – the feelings, experience, and perspectives of the characters – including those with ‘unequal access to flourishing’ -- could become part of the moral situation that contributes to decision making.

It is important here to state that face-to-face interactions, such as Louisa’s encounter with the working class in *Hard Times*, are perhaps a greater source of imaginative and moral enlargement than literary engagement. And, my paper is not intended as a call for the replacement of face-to-face interactions. In a world where the number of face-to-face interactions required for universal justice is near impossible, however, fiction can give us a concrete portrayal of lives different than our own. Fiction doesn’t stand alone, it has its limits, but as a source for conveying the concrete other, it promotes moral reflection.

I’d like to turn now to an actual novel, *Great Gatsby*.

V. *Great Gatsby*, an American Nightmare?

On the surface, F. Scott Fitzgerald’s classic might seem an unlikely choice as an example of a novel that can be read for justice purposes. It’s known to be about the glitz and glitter of the jazz age; lavish parties are plentiful in this story. One of the novel’s

most striking paragraphs is what Arnold Weinstein refers to as an ‘elegy to a pile of silk shirts.’ The novel’s fallen hero, with whom we are led to sympathize, is in love with a woman who glittered “proud above the hot struggles of the poor.” (157) So, how does this novel serve justice?¹⁷

I offer a reading of *Great Gatsby* that focuses on two central themes : 1) the shadow side of the illusory American Dream; 2) Theodicy in metaphor. I think Fitzgerald uses indirect and even subversive patterns in offering these themes, but I think the response the work creates in the reader is to raise questions of justice. To use Stanley Fish’s language – the meaning of *The Great Gatsby* is not so much to be found in the conclusions we draw about what the text says (those conclusions are furiously contested)¹⁸ but rather in what the text *does* to the reader.¹⁹ I believe the text, subtly and subversively, raises questions about justice in the reader by questioning the American dream and the God the Americans believe in.

The Promise and The Shadow of The American Dream

We meet and get to know Jay Gatsby, a wealthy entrepreneur, through the eyes of Nick Carraway, his neighbor. Gatsby is elusive and mysterious; we ultimately learn his carefully guarded secret: Gatsby started life as James Gatz. Born into a poor family, from his earliest days, like heroes of his era, he worked to rise from rags to riches. “Jimmy was bound to get ahead,” remarked his father at Gatsby’s funeral, describing the physical and intellectual regimens his young son put himself through. Jimmy got ahead by becoming Jay, the fabricated “son of some wealthy people in the middle-west.” Jay Gatsby is a romantic, and tragic, dreamer who cannot stand the shabbiness of his origins.

James Gatz left home at 17, and he changed his name and reinvented himself. As Nick Carraway put it, “Jay Gatsby ... sprang from his Platonic conception of himself. . . . He invented just the sort of Jay Gatsby that a seventeen year old boy would be likely to invent, and to this conception he was faithful to the end.” He rewrote his own history, and tried to woo Daisy, a young woman whose life, whose very voice, oozed wealth; she gleams ‘like silver, safe and proud above the hot struggles of the poor.’ When he first met Daisy, he led her to believe he came from the same social strata that she was in and “that he was fully able to take care of her.” Gatsby was, as Nick Carraway reports, a “penniless young man without a past, and at any moment the invisible cloak of his uniform might slip from his shoulders.” Indeed, Daisy does marry another when the cloak slips. When Gatsby makes his fortune, he moves across the bay from Daisy and her rich husband and makes it his life’s goal to win her back. One of the novel’s central images is Gatsby, with his arms outstretched toward the single green light, minute and far away,” the light at the end of Daisy’s dock. His yearning for Daisy, his sight fixed on the Green Light of her dock, represents his yearning for the Green Light of the American Dream.

No one really knows Gatsby, including Daisy, because he spends so much of his energy trying to cover up his past and recreate himself. Before he reveals Gatsby’s secret, Nick notes his indistinctness: “I talked with him perhaps half a dozen times in the past month and found, to my disappointment, that he had little to say;” he “...began leaving his elegant sentences unfinished;” he asks uncertainly, “what’s your opinion of me anyhow.” One day when Gatsby regales Nick with stories of daring feats, Carraway nearly laughs at the clichéd (“threadbare”) story of himself. Gatsby explains his

uncharacteristic loquaciousness with: “I didn’t want you to think I was just some nobody.”

Gatsby spends his life displaying the accoutrements of wealth, but one realizes he never really lives. He’s caught up in his own dream, and he spends most of his life in one room of his huge mansion. The reader has the niggling feeling that the relationship between Gatsby and Daisy is “an emotional vacuum” into which Gatsby pours “only the most obvious and contrived cheap-novel sentimentalism.”²⁰ Because there is “nobody home” in the re-created Gatsby, and because there never was anybody home is the class and gender constructed (and constricted) Daisy, there are no ‘selves’ to be in-relation. By the time Jay Gatsby dies tragically as an adult man, *the reader is left with the haunting feeling that the real tragedy was Jim Gatz’s death at 17*. In a sense, Tom Buchanan’s snobbish moniker is accurate: Gatsby dies as “Mr. Nobody from Nowhere” (137).

There is a subversive undercurrent to the book – a poignant indicator of the cost of trying to emerge from the lower classes. *The Great Gatsby* subtly suggests not only that there is a cost to leaving behind one’s origins (contra the myth of the self-made man and the American Dream), but that it is difficult for the poor to enter the upper echelon of society and stay there. Even one as disciplined as Jay Gatz, who as a boy scheduled his life from rising at 6am to studying until 9pm, each day regimented with exercising, studying, working, practicing elocution, and more studying; the ascendance is impossible. Interestingly, though Gatsby is in some ways meant to be the poster child for the American Dream, he only achieves it through criminal activities, a portrayal that deflates the myth of the honest and hard-working hero who goes from rags to riches. Fitzgerald

seems to be telling his readers that most do not make it, and the ones who do get there illicitly.

Of course, the ones who are already there stay there through exploitation. Nick's indictment of Tom and Daisy at the end of the novel is harsh: "They were careless people, Tom and Daisy—they smashed things and creatures *and then retreated back into their money* or the vast carelessness of whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made...." (188).

It is the case that Fitzgerald leads the reader to lay more moral blame on the rich than the aspiring rich. Fitzgerald never trusted those *born* wealthy, the leisure class (which he reveals in his essay "The Crack Up"). Nick seems to exonerate Gatsby: "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 Nick blames.²¹ His descriptions of Tom are all very weighted; Tom was "one of those men who reach such an acute limited excellence at twenty-one that very thing afterwards savors of anti-climax. His family was "enormously wealthy—even in college his freedom with money was a matter for reproach." Then, of he and Daisy, "They had spent a year in France, for no particular reason, and then drifted here and there unrestfully wherever people played polo and were rich together." Even of his beloved Daisy, Gatsby cries out: "She only married you [Tom] because I was poor and she was tired of waiting for me. It was a terrible mistake, but in her heart she never loved anyone except me!" (137). In fact, I think Fitzgerald is opening the book with a subtle statement when he has Nick report his father's advice: whenever you feel like criticizing anyone just remember that all the people in this world haven't had the

advantages you've had" (5). Fitzgerald is also saying: whenever you feel like admiring anyone, take into account whether they've had their assets handed to them.

Gatsby watches the Green light on Daisy's (and Tom's) dock, assuming that, like the new American made traffic lights, it means for him to go. Dock lights should be red, and the green is symbolic, not of the possibility before Gatsby, but of the ways in which the rich transcend the law.

It is probably fair to conclude, as a Marxist literary critic might, that "as much as Fitzgerald is the critic of capitalism, he is also its "poet laureate;"²² Fitzgerald lures us at times into the gorgeous *world* of the rich even if its people are unworthy of its splendor. We read of the "cheerful" Buchanan mansion overlooking the bay, and endless lush lawn and Italian garden, and a soft, rich heap of shirts so beautiful it brings Daisy to tears. It's as if he is saying, the mansion itself is not to blame for the corruption within it.

It is significant, however, that after Fitzgerald gives the readers the tour of the extravagant (fashionable East Egg) Buchanan mansion in chapter one, he drags them immediately into the hovels of 'the valley of ashes' in chapter two.

The Vacant Eyes of Dr. Eckleberg: Theodicy in Metaphor

The second chapter of *The Great Gatsby* begins:

About half way between West Egg and New York the motor-road hastily joins the railroad and runs beside it for a quarter of a mile so as to shrink away from a certain desolate are of land. This is a valley of ashes –a fantastic farm where ashes grow like what into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens, where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and finally, with a transcendent effort, of men who move dimly and already crumbling through powdery air.

The chapter tells the tale of those on 'the other side of the bridge,' those "ash grey" men and women who we soon learn are the play-things of the rich. We are also

first introduced to the billboard “eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg,” which hover “above the grey land.”

Above the grey land and the spasms of bleak dust which drift endlessly over it, you perceive, after a moment, the eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg Sank down himself into eternal blindness or forgot them and moved away Brood over the solemn dumping ground.

The reader is not surprised later that Wilson, the exploited garage owner whom Buchanan toys with throughout the novel, mistakes the billboard for God. Here is, I believe, a “sub-dominant motif” to the novel. It is as if Fitzgerald is, perhaps even unconsciously, leading the reader to notice: *The gap between the haves and the have nots is watched passive by a billboard god, all seeing and no doing.* Certainly, there doesn’t seem to be a God of justice anyone in the grey vicinity.

The eyes of Dr. Eckleberg function as a metaphor for God, articulated explicitly by George Wilson (167). Pointing to the sign, George exclaims: God sees everything. Despite the ridiculousness of confusing a billboard with God, the reader still faces the fact that God sees but does not act in Ash Valley as two inhabitants are destroyed. Fitzgerald, who is spare in this book, does not have George exclaim over and over “Oh my God” [145, 146 (x4), 164, 166] for no reason. The author is asking, and prodding the reader to ask, *Where is God in a world where folks from one side of the bridge control, exploit, and destroy folks on the others side.*²³

This is the picture of “unequal access to flourishing” to Nussbaum names. “The only way out of capitalism’s ‘dumping ground,’ as George and Myrtle both finally learn, is in a coffin,” notes Lois Tyson. And, in a sense, Gatsby learns that as well. His

rise was brief. All this takes place under the ineffective “watch” of a one-dimensional, uninvolved -- perhaps departed or faded – God whose eyes watch impassively.

[[Note to RIG: I will add a section on *Bluest Eye*; I argue that this novel also deals with the American Dream, showing it’s underbelly even more fully.]]

¹ *Poetic Justice*, 46.
2.p.91

³ Nafisi, Reading Lolita in Tehran,32.

⁴ *Poetic Justice*, 46.

⁵ Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* [1854] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 209.

⁶ Michael Cunningham (2002), *The Hours: Why Virginia Woolf?*, www.thehoursmovie.com, page 1.

⁷ Martha C. Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).

⁸ *Poetic Justice*, 3.

⁹ *Poetic Justice*, xviii

¹⁰ *Poetic Justice*, 6.

¹¹ *Poetic Justice*, p.44.

¹² Ellen Arnold, ed. *Conversations with Leslie Silko* (University Press of Mississippi, 2000), pp. 8, 23.

¹³ Iris Marion Young, *Inclusion and Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 12.

¹⁴ Young, *Inclusion and Democracy*, 55.

¹⁵ Young, *Inclusion and Democracy*, 77.

¹⁶ Seyla Benhabib, “The Generalized and the Concrete Other,” in *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (New York: Routledge), 152.

¹⁷ My reading of *The Great Gatsby*, especially pertaining to the “self-made man,” has been influenced by Arnold Weinstein, even when I depart from his conclusions. See *Nobody’s Home: Speech, Self, and Place in American Fiction from Hawthorne to DeLillo* (Oxford University Press).

¹⁸ According to Arnold Weinstein, though there is a ‘realist’ side to *The Great Gatsby* that deflates the American Dream, Fitzgerald in the end celebrates the American Dream of self-invention – even when the dream does not fulfill expectations. The capacity for construction, creation, imagining is still valorized. Nick, who is meant to be a fairly reliable narrator sums up Gatsby (p.6): He described Gatsby as having an extraordinary gift for hope (see whole quote in book). . . .”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.”

¹⁹ Stanley Fish, “Affective Stylistics.” I was first introduced to Fish’s work through Jane Tomkins, who describes the move she made from New Criticism to Reader Response. I have been influenced by Charles Melchert, *Wise Teaching*, as well. Melchert uses reader-response to suggest what the wisdom literature does to the reader. I will, further, draw on David Bleich’s work on “subjective criticism,” from *Readings and Feelings: An Introduction to Subjective Criticism*.

²⁰ Tom Burnam, “The Eyes of Dr. Eckleburg: A Re-examination of *The Great Gatsby*” in Arthur Mizener,

ed. *F. Scott Fitzgerald: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1963), 107.

Interestingly, Fitzgerald considered the emotional vacuum to be a flaw in his novel, but Burnam argues this is an unconscious and ironic point of the novel. Burnam supports my thesis that there are “sub-dominant motifs” in *TGG*, but to my disappointment he merely mentions but doesn’t actually treat the theme of “The Eyes of Dr. Eckleberg,” he merely uses the metaphor for his own adjusted reading of the text.

²¹ Many interpreters (including Weinstein) consider Nick Carraway to be a ‘reliable narrator’ whom the reader is set up to trust. Others, however consider Nick himself to be “seduced by Gatsby’s dream” (Lois Tyson, *Critical Theory Today*) and therefore “unreliable” (Kent Cartwright, “Nick Carraway as Unreliable Narrator”).

²² Lois Tyson, *Critical Theory Today*, 77.

²³ There is lateral exploitation as well – in fact, it all seems to converge on George Wilson, whom I will argue further is an “anti-Job Job.” He is the one who starts with nothing and has that nothing taken away.