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What Makes a Book a Classic?

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When I was younger, I asked my dad what a classic was. He told me that a classic had to be at least 100 years old. As many children do, I took what my parent said as the universal truth. However, as I grew older, I began to wonder if there was more to what might be considered a classic. To satisfy my curiosity, I gathered information on what others classified as classic texts and began formulating my own conclusions. I quickly realized that the age of the text was of little relevance. In fact, I realized there is no definitive, universally agreed-upon definition of a classic, which leaves room for individual interpretation. As such, *The Great Gatsby*, published less than 100 years ago yet appearing on many lists of classics for decades, is perfect for discussing what makes a book a classic. *The Great Gatsby*, by F. Scott Fitzgerald, illustrates what makes a book a classic because it transcends time and creates meaningful and lasting impressions on readers. However, this conceptualization of a classic must also be tempered with discussions of the impact of culture on what makes a book a classic.

Culture is one of the most important things to consider when defining classics. In Western civilizations, the list of novels generally accepted as classics is a predominantly, sometimes solely Eurocentric list. However, the list of classics in other parts of the world might not have a single book in common with that of the Western world. In addition to culture determining what is accepted and promoted as a classic, some novels that are considered classics in one culture may be disparaging to other cultures. For example, while *The Great Gatsby* is regarded as a classic, it must be acknowledged that it may not appear on a list of classics in non-Eurocentric cultures for its blatant Nordicism from, namely, Tom Buchanan. He speaks about how the Nordics are the dominant race who built civilization and how they cannot let other races consume them (Fitzgerald 17). While this was a typical attitude of the 1920s, constantly being barraged with racist messages when trying to read this classic should bring into question the idea

of classics transcending culture. As such, culture needs to be contextualized when discussing what makes a classic. People raised in different regions, countries, and backgrounds will differ in their fundamental beliefs and values, influencing everything in their lives, including the literature they consume and enjoy. Not everything meaningful to one individual will be meaningful to another; therefore, different books will be considered classics in different cultures and perhaps should be reconsidered based on evolving cultures.

While culture impacts what is considered a classic, a classic still needs to transcend time. A text must remain as relevant or important now as it was when it was first written because it gives a different perspective on current issues with a historical lens. *The Great Gatsby* has remained relevant even today, in part, because it explores the fallacy of the American dream. The American dream, the idea that equal opportunity for success exists for everyone remains an ideology sought after by people worldwide and is part of America's identity. However, the American dream is something that doesn't genuinely exist. Fitzgerald illustrates this using the character of Jay Gatsby. Gatsby, for example, started to chase after wealth to win the affections of Daisy Buchanan. Gatsby starts to develop a constant desire for more. Even when Daisy finally admits to loving Gatsby, he is still not satisfied, even though this is the exact thing he has been trying to achieve for years. Gatsby then tries to get Daisy to admit that she never loved Tom, her husband, something that Daisy refuses to do. This example illustrates that the American dream is unattainable because no matter how much someone accomplishes, they will always want for more. *The Great Gatsby* transcends time because the American dream will always be relevant in a money-driven world.

If a novel does not make a lasting impression, it cannot be considered a classic. These lasting impressions are due to the novel's message; if a novel doesn't feature a message, it lacks

depth and substance. Anyone in Western Culture who has ever taken an English Language Arts course has probably heard the last lines of *The Great Gatsby* at least once. *The Great Gatsby* has a lot to say about escaping the past, or the impossibility of escaping the past, and Fitzgerald drives this idea home with his last line: "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past" (159). Not only have these lines left a lasting impact on its readers, but it is recited so often that even people who have never read the novel may recognize this line, 95 years later.

The Great Gatsby is an excellent example of what makes a book a classic because the themes and lessons within transcend time. It has therefore made a lasting impression on generations of readers. However, the definition of a classic is subjective and culturally bound. As such, the question we should ask ourselves is: What does a classic mean to me?

Works Cited

Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953.