Meyer Wolfsheim in "The Great Gatsby"
A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: http://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/resource-kits/meyer-wolfsheim-great-gatsby.

Introduction

F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote *The Great Gatsby* in 1925, just a year after one of the most restrictive immigration laws of the twentieth century was passed. This law, along with a booming post-World War I economy, set the backdrop for the so-called Jazz Age of the 1920s, a time of massive social upheaval in the United States.

F. Scott Fitzgerald was born in the 1890s to an upper-middle class Irish American family in the Midwest. Raised Catholic, he was schooled in largely homogenous parochial institutions, later graduating from Princeton. Though he wrote and published a lot during his lifetime, he did not receive critical acclaim until after his death in 1940. *The Great Gatsby*, today a bestseller and required reading in many high school classrooms, was virtually unknown during his lifetime.

This kit will offer teachers tools to examine the instances of racism, nativism, and anti-Semitism present in the book, and in particular to discuss the Jewish character Meyer Wolfsheim.

Cover image: "Arnold Rothstein At His Desk," 1910s, courtesy of Getty Images. Arnold Rothstein was a kingpin of the Jewish mafia and allegedly the inspiration for the fictional Meyer Wolfsheim.

n.b. I'd like to thank Neil Rubin for his interest, ideas, and initial research which informed this kit.

Subjects

Anti-Semitism, Fiction, Film, Underworld, United States

Reading and Background

- In recent years, a number of scholars have reread *The Great Gatsby* through the lens of critical race studies. These pieces include Meredith Goldsmith's "White Skin, White Mask: Passing, Posing, and Performing in *The Great Gatsby*" (2003) and Joseph Vogel "'Civilization's Going to Pieces': *The Great Gatsby*, Identity, and Race, From the Jazz Age to the Obama Era" (2015).
- For more background on Jewish organized crime, see Jenna Wiseman Joselit's *Our Gang: Jewish Crime and the New York Jewish Community, 1900-1940*.
- It may be helpful to provide students with some background information on the portrayal of Jewish characters in literature. Gary Martin Levine's *The Merchant of Modernism: The Economic Jew in Anglo-American Literature, 1864 –1939* provides an excellent overview of the roles of Jewish characters in English-language literature from the United States of America. If students are familiar with Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, check out the Teach Great Jewish Books resource kit on that text for more resources on dealing with literary anti-Semitism in the classroom.
- The Pew Research Center offers an overview of the history of U.S. immigration laws and policies. This timeline can be helpful in explaining the nativism present in *The Great Gatsby*, as well as the racial politics of the 1920s.

Resources

1: Text excerpts: "The Great Gatsby," 1925, "The Rising Tide of Color against White World–

Supremacy," 1921, and "F. Scott Fitzgerald and Literary Anti-Semitism: A Footnote on the Mind of the 20's," 1947.

Near the beginning of *The Great Gatsby*, Tom Buchanan remarks favorably about a book called *The Rise of the Coloured Empires*. To Fitzgerald's contemporaries, this title would have been a clear allusion to T. Lothrop Stoddard's eugenicist manifesto, *The Rising Tide of Color against White World–Supremacy*, a popular book in the nativist political climate of the 1920s and amongst present-day white supremacist groups.

Suggested Activity: Have students read the excerpt from *The Great Gatsby* and the excerpt from T. Lothrop Stoddard's *The Rising Tide of Color against White World–Supremacy*. (Note: These books were initially published just four years apart by the same publisher.) Discuss: How does Fitzgerald portray this interaction between Tom, Daisy, Miss Baker, and Nick? How do the other characters react to Tom's comments? Does Fitzgerald seem to be critical of Tom's attitude or sympathetic to it? What role do you think Tom's views serve in the book as a whole? Why do you think Fitzgerald includes a character with white supremacist views?

Now have students read the quote from *Commentary* magazine. With that quote, Tom's remarks, and the excerpt from Stoddard in mind, have students look through the text of The Great Gatsby for other instances of explicit racism, anti-Semitism, and nativism. Working as a class, compile a list. You may also have students keep their own lists while they read at home and compile them at the end of your unit.

Sources: F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York: Scribner, 2004), 12–13.

T. Lothrop Stoddard, *The Rising Tide of Color against White World–Supremacy* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1921), 164–165.

Milton Hindus, "F. Scott Fitzgerald and Literary Anti-Semitism: A Footnote on the Mind of the 20's," *Commentary*, June 1947, accessed online at https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/f-scott-fitzgerald-and-literary-anti-semitisma-footnote-on-the-mind-of-the-20s/.

2: Article excerpt, "Fitzgerald and the Jews," 2015.

F. Scott Fitzgerald himself held a number of racist and anti-Semitic views that he publically expressed throughout his lifetime.

Suggested Activity: Have students silently read this excerpt from the *New Yorker* with F. Scott Fitzgerald's quotes. Ask them to summarize Fitzgerald's views as expressed in the excerpt. Then ask the following questions (either in conversation or as a writing exercise): Do you think F. Scott Fitzgerald's views, as expressed in this excerpt, are present in *The Great Gatsby*? If yes, where can you find them? How much do you think an author's views and attitudes affect the fictional texts they write? Is it possible that someone with racist views could write a text that isn't racist?

Source: Arthur Krystal, "Fitzgerald and the Jews," the *New Yorker*, July 10, 2015, accessed online at https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/fitzgerald-and-the-jews.

3: Essay excerpt, "F. Scott Fitzgerald and Literary Anti-Semitism: A Footnote on the Mind of the 20's," 1947, and image, "Brood of Serpents," 1934.

There is a long history of anti-Semitic caricatures involving Jews having large noses and grotesque physical features. Critic Milton Hindus argued that Meyer Wolfsheim was a robust example of this genre of anti-Semitism.

Suggested Activities: Have students find physical descriptions of Meyer Wolfsheim throughout *The Great Gatsby*. Using these descriptions, have students draw their own versions of Meyer Wolfsheim, staying as faithful as possible to the text. Have them share their images and compare and discuss what they came up with.

Then, discuss and analyze the Hindus quote. What is Hindus saying about Wolfsheim as a character? What does it mean that Wolfsheim is "without any compensations"? What does he mean by "moral physiognomy" and what does he mean by "isolation"?

With the Hindus quote in mind, have students look at the propaganda image published in *Der Stuermer*, a German tabloid that was popular with the Nazi Party. This tabloid was known for pushing virulently anti-Semitic ideas, images, and stories, and as early as

1933, the tabloid called for the extermination of the Jewish people. What is going on in this image? What kind of messages does this image convey to the viewer? In what ways does the image remind students of Fitzgerald's description of Meyer Wolfsheim?

Have students compare their hand-drawn versions of Meyer Wolfsheim to the propaganda image from *Der Stuermer*. Do students notice any similarities between their drawing and the propaganda piece? Do the images they produced look like anti-Semitic caricatures? Why or why not?

Finally, for a more in-depth discussion, return to the Milton Hindus quote and ask students to discern the meaning of the very first sentence of the quote. Help them understand Hindus's rejection of would-be Fitzgerald defenders who say that the author was objectively portraying a certain type of person that actually exists in the world, and therefore it's ok. Ask students: Do you agree with this part of Hindus's argument? If a stereotypical and negative portrayal of a Jew is based on a real person, is it still anti-Semitic? If so, is there any way for an author to write about deeply flawed Jewish characters without being anti-Semitic? What would that look like?

Sources: Milton Hindus, "F. Scott Fitzgerald and Literary Anti-Semitism: A Footnote on the Mind of the 20's," *Commentary*, June 1947, accessed online at https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/f-scott-fitzgerald-and-literary-anti-semitisma-footnote-on-the-mind-of-the-20s/.

"Brood of Serpents," *Der Stuermer*, issue 40, July 1934, accessed online https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/images/sturmer/ds34-40.jpg.

4: Image, "American Gambler Arnold Rothstein At His Desk," 1910s, and text excerpts, "American Shylock/ Arnold Rothstein (1882–1928)," 2012, and "The Merchant of Modernism: The Economic Jew in Anglo-American Literature," 2003.

Many different sources have argued about whether or not F. Scott Fitzgerald based the character of Meyer Wolfsheim on Arnold Rothstein, a real member of the Jewish mafia who, among other crimes, is rumored to have fixed the 1919 World Series.

Suggested Activity: Have students look at the image of Arnold Rothstein while reading the passage where Nick meets Meyer Wolfsheim for the first time. Do students think the description of Wolfsheim from the book matches the image of Rothstein? Why or why not?

Now have students read each of the excerpts. Based on these, do they think that the character of Meyer Wolfsheim was based on Arnold Rothstein? How much does it matter if he was or if he wasn't? Is the portrayal of Meyer Wolfsheim anti-Semitic? Why or why not? Is it still anti-Semitic if it is based on a real Jewish person? Why or why not?

Ask students if they are familiar with the Jewish mafia. Does the idea of the Jewish mafia confirm or challenge stereotypes they know about Jewish people? Then ask them: what, if any, other Jewish characters have you encountered in works of literature? Did these characters conform to stereotypes about Jewish people? Did they transcend or challenge stereotypes?

Sources: Jack Benton, "American Gambler Arnold Rothstein At His Desk," photograph, Getty Images, 1910s.

Ron Rosenbaum, "American Shylock: Arnold Rothstein (1882–1928)," the *New Republic*, October 24, 2012, accessed at https://newrepublic.com/article/109050/american-shylock-arnold-rothstein-18821928.

Gary Martin Levine, *The Merchant of Modernism: The Economic Jew in Anglo-American Literature, 1864 –1939* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 113.

5: Film excerpts, "The Great Gatsby," 1974, 2000, and 2013.

Since its publication in 1925, *The Great Gatsby* has been adapted for film multiple times. As with any creative adaptation, the directors of these films came up with their own interpretations, making choices about what to keep, what to change, and what to cut from the story.

Suggested Activity: A film adaptation is reflective not only of the original work, but also of the values and aesthetics of the filmmakers and of the time period in which it was created. Have students watch the scene between Meyer Wolfsheim, Jay Gatsby,

and Nick Carraway from three different versions of *The Great Gatsby*. How has the director of each version chosen to portray Meyer Wolfsheim? To what degrees do the different versions of Wolfsheim draw upon Jewish stereotypes? Have students think about how they might deal with adapting a work of literature that contains a racist image or stereotype. Would they choose to stay close to the descriptions in the original work, or would they take creative liberties? Why?

Sources: "The Great Gatsby (5/9) Movie CLIP - Meyer Wolfsheim (1974) HD," from The Great Gatsby (1974), YouTube video, 2:26, posted by "Movieclips," November 22, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QxL3vcwOL8E. [Excerpt from *The Great Gatsby*, dir. Jack Clayton, 1974.]

"The Great Gatsby Movie," from The Great Gatsby (2000), YouTube video, 1:30:26 [excerpt of Meyer Wolfsheim scene begins at 25:24], posted by "Knowledge Builder," April 18, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4wAYG03qbEk. [Excerpt from *The Great Gatsby*, dir. Robert Markowitz, 2000.]

"Meyer Wolfsheim Scene," from The Great Gatsby (2013), YouTube video, 4:52, posted by "Katherine KOIDIS," April 27, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sSq2B9NyEzU. [Excerpt from *The Great Gatsby*, dir. Baz Luhrmann, 2013.]