

From the Margins: The Themes of the 20th and 21st Century

Christine Quynhanh Hoang

New York University

Author Note

An analysis of a selection of Major 20th and 21st Century literature works and the overarching themes of racism, class systems, and gender inequality.

Table of Contents

Abstract..... 5

From the Margins: The Themes of the 20th and 21st Century 6

Introduction..... 6

Writing in the Modernist Era 7

 Settings..... 8

 Sentence Structure & Choices 9

 Framing & Story Timelines 12

 Narrators 14

 Language..... 15

Racism..... 17

 Racism Hidden by Good Deeds 18

 Voices of Black Americans & Africans 21

Class Struggles & the American Dream 25

 In America..... 25

 The American Dream Elsewhere 28

Gender Inequality & Social Movements..... 30

 Feminism..... 30

 Sparking Change..... 32

Personal Journey 37

My Individualism.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Reconciling Heritage with My Own History	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Bibliography	45
Tables	48
Figures.....	51

HOANG

*Modernism is typically defined as the condition that begins when people realize God is truly
dead, and we are therefore on our own.*

Philip E. Johnson

Abstract

Modernism, the child of the 20th century, was born amidst World Wars, the Great Depression, and overarching tension between countries and people alike. It came on the heels of the ornamental, rigid century before and sought to stand out. In many ways, society during the 20th century went as far as to rebel against what was the status quo. As literature is often a reflection of society of that time, the works of the modern 20th century were defiant – changing what was usual like the simple act of moving their settings from the idyllic countryside to cities and abroad, putting destiny in the hands of the narrators instead of a God, to outright critiquing the times and society and changing the way literature was written and acceptable, like changing perspectives, adding unreliable narrators, or a plot that doesn't follow chronological order. This paper seeks to analyze a small corpus of major 20th century works to represent these forms of rebellion.

Keywords: Modernism, literature, rebellion

From the Margins: The Themes of the 20th and 21st Century

The marginalized voices of society finally found a forum in the twentieth century by ways of literature. Some spoke to us through memories and stories, using the narration of characters, and others seemingly poured out their feelings onto the pages of a letter, speaking directly to us as if we were their intended reader. The modernist movement of the 20th century was a freedom literature and the arts hadn't had before – but now they had it, and writers took full advantage remarking on everything from racism, class systems, to the vaunted American Dream.

Introduction

In the century before, America rose, slavery abolished, and some empires fell. However, the 20th century saw the American Dream become an ideal, racism still remained commonplace, and imperialism spread from the major powers of the Western hemisphere (Britain, France, Spain, and the Dutch) to the African continent. Rebellion, in all ways, was a sign of the times. Hemlines rose. Criticism of society and structure was accepted. Where works of literature of the 19th century still revered God or pondered the existence of a higher power, the 20th century moved on from God and destiny – adopted the American Dream and the idea that only you could make your destiny, forgone any work based in religion or praising God, and instead operated as if we are the only higher power in our lives. Consciousness and bitter truth became the norm.

This era questioned everything before it. The Roaring Twenties challenged Victorian ideals. Sigmund Freud set our problems as ones of our own making, deep in our subconscious. Albert Camus rejected all philosophy with his own. It was freedom to think as we liked, freedom to say what we liked, it was a freedom to write what we liked. And the literature world responded

HOANG

with a new renaissance and great works of art that has had a lasting impact on art and society since.

Modernism allowed writers a freedom they hadn't before. The 19th century was *proper* reading works of Jane Austen and the Bronte sisters, fantasies from Lewis Carroll and the Brothers Grimm, and adventures from Arthur Conan Doyle and my personal favorite, Alexandre Dumas. But no one toed the line, no one spoke out against the status quo. There was a rigidity there and a right way to do things, leading to books that were acceptable to society, and those who never spoke out against the norm. Twentieth century literature broke the mold with changes in how the authors wrote: the language they used, the structure of sentences or framings of stories, settings, narrators that were unreliable or had their own motivations, and even timelines. The content of these novels shifted from idyllic and idealized to gritty, real, and powerful enough to enact social change. This paper explores the ways that modern, 20th century writers deviated from the norm of the era before them before delving into the themes in which they used words to convey their feelings; themes like racism, class struggles, the American dream and individualism, and gender inequalities.

Writing in the Modernist Era

The 20th century Modernist period spans the years from the 1900s to the early 2000s. It is characterized by a break from tradition and the embrace of criticism and realism. It was a different way of viewing the world – harsh and realistic; no more rose colored, idealized versions of life and the world. However, the content and voice of literature was not all that had changed. The presentation had as well.

Settings

One of the most famous works out of the 19th century was the work of a woman, Jane Austen, set in a small county in the countryside of Edwardian England. Her *Pride and Prejudice* was just one of many novels set outside the city and the nineteenth century was an era of predominantly English literature, the settings were – like Austen’s Meryton and Longbourne – pastoral, quaint, idyllic little towns, clean and inoffensive.

But it was the 20th century before novels began showing us an uglier, grittier side of the world – like the big, dirty cities of smoke, dirt, and vices – or bringing the outside world to the readers who cracks open a book, far away from what they might only know. Modernism moved away from what we knew, what was safe, and set the readers in exotic locales or the urban cities. Some authors stayed close by, choosing New York City with its bright lights and buzzing crowds, like Edith Wharton and Donna Tartt.

Others went to faraway places, but those places were real, actual places. No figment of imagination but they were places that the authors knew intimately and could describe as if we were there, before travel was safe and possible. Nawal El Saadawi transported us to Egypt, to dingy prisons and villages against the Nile, while Mario Varga Llosa took us from the greens of Ireland to the Amazon, to end in a prison. Chinua Achebe and Chimamanda Adichie brought us to their beloved Nigeria on the west of Africa, while Abraham Verghese took us to the east to Ethiopia. McEwan led us on a leisurely Saturday through a foggy London town. Mohsin Hamid showed us a place similar to his native Pakistan, so detailed it is almost like we could feel the dust from the streets. Most recently, Kevin Kwan had taken us to Singapore with his female lead Rachel, splashing glitzy Asia on the big screen and breaking the racial barriers of Hollywood. In sixteen weeks, we crossed the globe from the comforts of our homes, through printed pages and

HOANG

backlit e-readers. Before them, though, it was Joseph Conrad who took us abroad and plunged us deep into the Congo in a time that not many could afford the adventure or had reasons to go.

Through his writings, it was as if we were there on that boat alongside his Charles Marlow.

“Going up that river was like traveling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings. An empty stream, a great silence, an impenetrable forest. The air was warm, thick, heavy, sluggish. There was no join in the brilliance of sunshine. The long stretches of the waterway ran on, deserted, into the gloom of overshadowed distances. On silvery sandbanks hippos and alligators sunned themselves side by side. The broadening waters flowed through a mob of wooded islands...”

(Conrad, Heart of Darkness)

A story's setting could often be seen as an afterthought, but it is a powerful tool. It not only gives a place to a story, it can set the tone, stand for another meaning, or affect the characters and be a character in and of itself. Authors have always used setting to their story's advantage and the 20th century was no different. In fact, it seems as the 20th century used setting to give a new layer to their works more so than before.

Sentence Structure & Choices

The rigidity of the Victorian era forced literature to fall in line. Books were formal and language, itself, was formal and straightforward. Poetry was grand and epic, a la the works of Alfred Lloyd Tennyson, or as pastoral as the musings of the man who stopped on a snowy evening by Robert Frost. Poetry rhymed. It was written in proper English. But it was stifling for the authors of the modernist movement.

HOANG

In the Modernist era, we see choices in grammar (or the lack thereof) that benefited from the freedom for writers to do as they wished, and rules of sentence structure were thrown out the window, so much so that even capitalization was waylaid. One of the most prominent of the 20th century poets was E.E. Cummings, who aside from not capitalizing much of anything, ignored spaces, periods, and other punctuations. *Fig. 1*

Literature in the new era stopped having to follow the rules of English grammar and punctuation as well; the authors were able to do as they wished, like E.E. Cummings, and were able to structure their sentences in less formal ways. It benefitted the readers, turning casual reading into something more entertaining, something more informal than the structure of before.

Symbolism, most importantly, was a characteristic of Modernism, despite being a late 19th century movement. It was a way to acknowledge something more wide, vast, or important, while speaking of something mundane if anything. It used metaphors and images to stand for life, mankind's struggles, or communicate a feeling or message that they did not write. It gave deeper meaning to the book, more than what is taken at face value, and it also let authors say more in the same number of pages.

In the quintessential Modernist novel, *the Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, symbolism is most apparent, and he uses them to stand for feelings, opinions, and society. Often Fitzgerald displays contrasting ideas (West/East Egg, light and dark), to juxtapose the class struggle in American society – the rich and the poor. He even places Nick Carraway, his ironic narrator, in a small house nearby Jay Gatsby's sprawling mansion. It is the Valley of Ashes in the novel that stands out most of all.

“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

HOANG

desolate area of land. This is the valley of ashes – a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat 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 the powdery air.” (Fitzgerald, Chapter 2)

Ashes has covered this area of land, looked down upon by the story’s characters as if it were a bother to them to deal with or behold. But the valley of ashes only exists as a side effect of their wealth, the product of factories and buildings. The grey of ash is dirt and stands for desperation and the sadness of the poor, so much so that it covers the workers and the poorer characters like George Wilson, as if they are dirt themselves – at least they are to the upper class of this novel like Daisy and Tom Buchanan and Gatsby.

Edith Wharton takes full advantage of the language of flowers in her *Age of Innocence*, the tale of a man’s inner struggle of status and class, tradition and duty, and love. Newland Archer sends flowers to the ladies in his life, but Wharton sends us symbols and meanings. The lily of the valley bouquets to May are white and pure, as seemingly innocent as he believes she is, but they’re just a routine which he adopts for their engagement rather than a genuine show of love, and boring – as boring as he is bored with his New York, upper-crust life. In contrast, the flowers he sends to the Countess, the one he’s truly in love with, are bright yellow roses. Roses are passion incarnate in literary. The color choice is a stray from traditional red, pink, or white and in a way, it’s Newland’s rebellion against the status quo.

Symbolism meant that something could stand for something else, that authors could be saying and sending a message on an entirely different level than the words on the pages. It allowed allusions and nods to society’s taboo topics like sexuality that wouldn’t necessarily have

HOANG

been printed in the century before. It gave freedom for authors to critique everything that they saw wrong but do it in a way that wasn't preaching or blatant.

Framing & Story Timelines

Within the previous era, books – following society rigidity – often followed the same pattern: linear and chronological. They typically followed the usual plotline: an exposition, conflict, rising action, climax, falling action, and the resolution. In modernism, authors were free to do what they wanted with their plotlines and how they presented their stories. Joseph Conrad framed his story within a story, having an unnamed character be someone listening to another (Charles Marlow) tell his story of traveling down the Congo. Achebe wrote *Things Fall Apart* in three parts, like acts of a play, rather than read like a story straight through. True to the times, and like the examples, modernist writings differed greatly from how their stories were structured.

Mohsin Hamid, an author closer to our time than Conrad, chose not to follow the typical plotline structure. Instead, his novel *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* took us at nearly breakneck speeds through the life of someone referred to as “you,” as if we were taking a look at our own lives; that is, if we were a young man, living in an undisclosed but seemingly alike Pakistan or India. The entire story follows along from youthful childhood, a successful adulthood, to crippling old age, with rising actions and resolutions along the way. It had no conflict like within a “hero's journey,” the monomyth of Joseph Campbell, no monsters to battle, and no fairy tale ending. The ambiguity of the namelessness of things in Hamid's novel – Rising Asia instead of a city, you instead of a name – it lends itself to the lessons he wanted to impart on his readers: beauty and material goods fade, that necessity and survival, desperation could drive

HOANG

people to do bad things but it doesn't mean that they don't deserve your sympathy, and that at the end, we are all simply humans.

Rising actions in Hamid's novel were like tides, coming in and out. Conflict came in our character's life struggles, the problems within, and slow-moving time. The resolution was our character's death, nothing that wealth, fame, nor all the bottled water in the world could stop. *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* was styled like a self-help book but warned its readers that it was not, told a story of a life that had seen utmost poverty and ridiculous wealth, and ended like a fable, leaving us a little more aware that money, as our character realizes when he loses it all, was not everything and we really cannot take it with us in the end. It was not traditionally structured but in the modernist era, this was okay, and the message was delivered, as loud and clear as if it were spoken directly to us like a lecture. The reader feels like they lived that life and like Hamid hopes, the reader understands what the "you" character learns.

In contrast to Hamid's life spanning arc or traditional novels that cover a certain number of long weeks and months, Ian McEwan, in *Saturday*, chooses to slow time down to an extreme degree. The entirety of the novel takes place within a single Saturday of a neurosurgeon's life, squeezing everything the author could into the pages. *Saturday* is dense with words, actions; every thought, every feeling, of Henry Perowne's life. It is so meticulously written that it is clear that this is a glimpse into every-day life. And at the same time, it's reminding us of the world's current issues – terrorism, civil unrest, dissatisfaction with the government – and how far we have gone to insulate ourselves from these problems. In one day, some might see the neurosurgeon as *neurotic* in his constant worrying and fretting over the possibility of a terrorist attack or something bad occurring; however, isn't the 21st century world just a varying degree of the same nervousness?

Narrators

Narration in the modern 20th century moved away from first person or an unknown, omniscient voice. More so, the 20th century gave rise to unreliable narrators as well, stories told in their perspective so that we cannot even trust them. Chinua Achebe chose the traditional narrator to tell Okonkwo's story, but Conrad's Marlow told his story, within a story, and Fitzgerald gave the job to Nick Carraway. Nick, who idolized Gatsby, provided his own thoughts and perspectives; yet as readers, we realize we cannot trust him as we did the omniscient, unbiased narrators of stories before. In the 20th century, we even had more than one narrator within a given novel, contrasting opinions, allowing the reader to decide whom they believe and whom they cannot. We once could believe the unbiased, unknown narrator that took us through *Robinson Crusoe*. They were once reliable and trustworthy. But now, like the 20th century authors, our narrators had a new freedom, and a new voice.

The Goldfinch, by Donna Tartt, is written in a first-person narrative, told to us by the adult Theo. The ill-fated trip to the city he had taken with his mother that rainy day was just a memory. He moves, physically and through flashbacks to his childhood, from his humble New York to the famed Park Avenue, to Las Vegas, and ending up where we began - with his adult self in Amsterdam – all the while, firstly still mourning the loss of his mother and living his (or her) life through art in her honor, while making decisions that seemingly are based upon his initial decision to steal the *Goldfinch* from the Metropolitan.

Theo is an unreliable narrator, in the way that first person narratives often are. He tells his story rather truthfully, but the reader must decide if the details are swayed to benefit Theo's character or if he is truly unbiased. Like Joseph Conrad's Charles Marlow, in the *Heart of*

HOANG

Darkness novel or Barbara Kingsolver's *Price women* in *The Poisonwood Bible*, Tartt's narrator speaks directly to us, using the modern century trend of writing as casually as we speak. It lends itself, as well as references to popular culture and fashion, to a refreshing and unsettling modernity of the time in which it is set. Though years go by and our character grows up, it feels as if it could happen now; given the plot device of terrorism upending our narrator's previously content life – it is disconcerting of a notion.

Kevin Kwan's *Filthy Rich Asians* and Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible* used five different narrators in their tales. Kingsolver went as far as to telling her readers to save our sympathy until the end, because only then do we have enough information to decide who is worthy, because each narrator has the ability to skew the story to benefit them. It makes for a refreshing take on the typical novel in that it keeps readers on our toes and offers fresh perspectives throughout the tale.

A rarity in novels is found in *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, in that Hamid uses second-person voice. It takes the reader and plunges us into the thick of the story, into the midst of this unknown but masterfully detailed "Rising Asia." Second person narrations aren't typically found in novels, more suitable for teenaged fanfiction or create-your-own-endings. It uses "you," making the reader the protagonist and the center of attention. At the rate Hamid dashes through this "you" character's life, using the pronoun *you*, he leaves the reader

Language

English and French literature were dominant in the 19th century and marginalized voices weren't allowed to be heard. However, the 20th century brought freedom and was home to literary revivals across the globe, from Europe, the United States, Africa, and spreading down to

HOANG

Latin America. Voices began speaking out, calling for social and racial equality, speaking out against injustice, and making their criticisms of society clear and with choices of language solely their own.

James Baldwin and Ta-Nehisi Coates raged against social injustice and blatant racism in their respective letters to their loved ones, essays of a black man's plight in what was supposed to be the freest country in the world, the United States. They sighed resignedly about their fate based on the color of their skin but hoped for a better future for others after them. But they used language, some inappropriate for society to use nowadays, using colloquialisms and slang as if they were talking informally and intimately, instead of lecturing from a pulpit using big words or formal language. Jesmyn Ward's collection of essays were voices in the same way, with slang and grammar choices unknown to the formal 19th century era. But it made things seem more modern, more "of the times," and in turn, delivers a stronger message and an impact because it is like someone talking to the reader rather than at them.

Language, like sentence structure, became less formal and lend itself more to the author's creativity and preferences instead. But it was not just the choice to write in native languages rather than English, the option to use colloquialisms and slang, but it was also, the way people wrote. Some of the 20th century writers wrote as if they were speaking, complete with stops and nuances that grammar did not allow. It was, truly, representative of the modernist movement – free choice and a divergence from the norm. These breaks from the 19th century structure was able to allow authors to let their feelings out on the page, to bring light to problems that were kept in the dark, and most importantly, help the unheard be heard and social justice to be delivered across the globe – from the Amazons to the Congo – and brought forth changes to imperialism.

HOANG

Colloquialism, informal words or phrases, was employed in the modern 20th century literature – further stepping away from the trappings and rigidity of Victorianism and structured writing styles. Like symbolism, the choice of language usage in writings adds a layer to meanings, subtexts, and characterization to not only the people but the places in the novel. Figures of speech, the odd word, or use of idioms brings the readers down to the characters' level, submerging them in the story, and suspending belief for the length of the reading. The way we talk is so much of a characteristic of our surroundings that even in the U.S., Americans are able to discern where another American is from – be it the deep South, sunny California, or the frosts of Wisconsin. It can put social classes and stations, show a level of education and wealth. It does so much for the depth of characters while making the readers feel as if they're there, right alongside the characters; even if it's in the Congolese jungles along the Price daughters in *the Poisonwood Bible*, watching James Baldwin or Ta-Nehisi Coates speaking to their loved ones, or in a sitting room or at the Opera house with Newland Archer and the rest of New York society as written by Edith Wharton.

Racism

“But race is the child of racism, not the father... the elevation of the belief in being white, was not achieved through wine tastings and ice cream socials, but rather through the pillaging of life, liberty, labor, and land; through the flaying of backs; the chaining of limbs; the strangling of dissidents, the destruction of families; the rape of mothers; the sale of children; and various other acts meant, first and foremost to deny you and me the right to secure and govern our own bodies.”

(Coates, *Between the World and Me*)

Racism Hidden by Good Deeds

History is written by the victors. Unfortunately, no one has lost more, in the pages of history books, than Africa. We read about colonialism in a way to favor the imperial countries – the English, the French, Spaniards, and the Dutch, for example – swooping into poorer countries to *help*. We learned that they brought food, taught them their languages, studies, and religion, they brought their culture. Seemingly, everything about these colonies were subpar. At least, through history lessons, we believed they were. The imperialists, however, were heroes and saviors of the savages.

The British and the Danish had the Congo, shown by Joseph Conrad and *the Heart of Darkness*. Tahar Ben Jelloun, in *The Sand Child*, wrote about Morocco, post French colonization. Imperialism finds a common thread in these novels and here in *Cutting for Stone*, by Abraham Verghese, as well. The Italians left Ethiopia, leaving behind umbrellas and coffee, while making way for civil war, violence, and an emperor and human rights violator called Haile Selassie. Like the French, the Dutch, and the French, the Italians came with good intentions and ulterior motives. They left, like the rest, a country of unrest and power struggles, and our narrators in these novels have to live in the aftermath.

Colonialism, without the rose lenses of history writers, mostly wasn't an act of goodwill. The new colonies and its peoples were told the way they dressed, what they believed, how they ate even, was wrong. It was deemed savagery. It was ethnocentrism at its best. Colonialism brought about slavery, servitude, robbing of resources, losses of religions, language, and culture, uniquely belonging to the colonies. The imperialists' treatment of these colonies was unfair, ethnocentric, and savage in its own right.

HOANG

“Colonialism. The enforced spread of the rule of reason. But who is going to spread it among the colonizers?” (Burgess)

It is this idea that both Joseph Conrad and Chinua Achebe drew upon in their separate depictions of colonization. Conrad’s acclaimed *Heart of Darkness* and Achebe’s equally celebrated *Things Fall Apart* take on colonialism from two different perspectives: the latter from the perspective of the Africans during England’s colonization, and the former from the Englishman’s perspective of the *dark continent*. In fact, it has been noted that Achebe’s novel was in direct response to Conrad’s, after calling the *Heart of Darkness* author a “bloody racist.” (Watts) He, in the same vein as Es’kia Mphahlele, charged Conrad with reducing Africa to a place where colonies existed rather than its own place, with its own history and significance; as if Africa never truly existed before the white men came. (Achebe, *An Image of Africa: Racism in Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness*)

This is where the debate begins; that is, on first glance and reading, Conrad’s depiction of Africa was indeed starkly different than Achebe. Putting a white man, Marlow, as the main character apart of the colonization of the Congo, the narration gave a bad idea of Africa to the English that would be reading it. It gave into the stereotypes that Victorian-aged England and the Western continents had of Africa – of savages and heathens roaming a wild land – in need of England’s saving grace. Portrayals of the Congolese played into the idea that they were just subhuman, as if they were livestock to be chained and owned like dogs with an “iron collar on his neck.” (Conrad)

The *Heart of Darkness* was indeed guilty of this kind of negative portrayal of the Congo and its people. The novel pits London, what the narrator knows, and the dark world of the Congo; told to the narrator by Charles Marlow. Assigned as a captain of a steamboat, Marlow

HOANG

travels through the Congo, coming across sinking boats, attacks with arrows and spears, watching as natives, who apparently worshipped a fellow Englishman, were killed by the “pilgrims.” It could be taken as a racist depiction or at the bare minimum, a blind and ethnocentric depiction; but whether or not Conrad was indeed a racist is something known only to him. His works don’t scream racist and his own life as a Polish man in England gave him his own prejudices to overcome. He could not talk of the Congo without mention of the Congolese, though I agree with the idea that the way he chose to write was uncomfortably ignorant. Perhaps, it was simply a product of the times – he wrote the way that his readers in Victorian-era England would have believed – that the word *savage* had been the only way to refer to the Africans thus far and the only one he knew to use.

“The conquest of the Earth,” Marlow narrates, “which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it’s the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretense but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea.” (Conrad)

The Congolese are represented as human beings in this passage, just with a different skin color or physical features. Conrad negates race by calling it a different complexion. He, a victim of the Russians in his native homeland of Poland, denounces imperialism by saying that it takes advantage of the perceived weaker, akin to robbery, murder, and senseless violence.

Chinua Achebe’s work gave a more personal account of the colonization in Nigeria, but it was also a love letter to his home country, where Conrad had slandered the Congo. In *Things Fall Apart*, there isn’t a story within a story, a narrator narrating someone else. It follows the life of Okonkwo, an Igbo man in Nigeria, who works hard to live in a way his father had not. Things

HOANG

go drastically wrong for the man and he eventually is exiled where he learns of Christian missionaries and the beginnings of the colonization in Nigeria. In the same way Conrad showed the ruthlessness of the white settlers in the Congo, Achebe tells of the blatant disrespect these colonizers showed to the Igbo people, unmasking elders and shaving their heads – going as far as to whip them for their disobedience and rebellion. Where Marlow made it home, disgusted with the colonizers, in Conrad's novel – Okonkwo ends *Things Fall Apart* saddened to realize his people weren't going to fight back – that they were enslaved rather than willing to fight back. Okonkwo commits suicide and dies in shame, as his father had, despite all that he had done to raise himself as a leader and all his attempts at keeping his village and culture alive.

Achebe makes it a priority in *Things Fall Apart* to remind his readers that civilization existed before the colonizers. He despairs, the same way Okonkwo had, that their culture was lost through the colonization and missions of white people in Nigeria. Before Achebe, writings of Africa portrayed them the same way Conrad had – as a dark place. Achebe brought a different viewpoint. He made it more alive, more *alike* the Western world than previously thought. He is able to show how destructive and how heartbreaking the extermination of one's culture is – simply because they're different from someone else's – and that one's culture is not always a blessing for another.

Voices of Black Americans & Africans

The way we look has long defined us, sorted us, and separated us throughout history. The Greeks praised the gladiators' bodies though they were naught but slaves. Hitler prized blonde hair and blue eyes, claiming a dominance of race based on what he assumed classified as pure genetics. In the long history of the U.S., white men owned black slaves, and the U.S. and

HOANG

European powers traded and sold African people easier than they did cattle and crops. Ta-Nehisi Coates writes to his son in *Between the World and Me*, about his experiences and knowledge of being black in modern-day America. When children are taught that policemen are heroes, Coates laments that he is scared and that his son and his peers should be fearful of the same men – simply because of the color of their skin that seems to dictate whether or not those same policemen shoot first and ask questions later. His way of life is filled with fear with an underlying edge of survival to the point he wonders, on page nine, of how-to live-in America; the same way that one would wonder how to survive in the wilderness or upon the battlefield. (Coates) He writes expressively. He paints a picture. He uses language of his time, casual as if he's speaking directly to his son.

A half century before Coates, before his work *Between the World and Me*, there was James Baldwin and *The Fire Next Time*. The piece gave a nod to Baldwin's two essays, often drawing comparisons or paired together nearly like a prequel and sequel of a series would. While the similarities cannot be denied, it is not entirely fair to either author to group them together; each author takes a different approach to telling their stories, sharing their lives as black men, and airing their similar grievances, hopes, and fears.

Coates is the contemporary; his references pulled from enough of recent history that the younger generations can read and understand, thereby making his message poignant – the same way musicians participate in civil rights movements of the today through their lyrics. He's softer, quietly defiant, a little resigned, and holds an anger stemming from sadness and disappointment. He even questions how to live just a normal, everyday life. (Coates, 9) The atheist in him doesn't ask God why his life is this way, why he is afraid of policemen, why should he live in fear when he's done nothing except be born black. The pragmatist asks us why. The pessimist leaves his

HOANG

son with a sad resignation at their lot in this life and that things won't change. But Baldwin, on the other hand and fifty years before, reads like a sermon from an age where reverends and preachers like his personal friend Martin Luther King Jr. were sparking civil rights movements. He is an exuberant preacher. His voice ringing loud and clear, filled with emotion, delivered through the essays like a sermon on a Sunday morning. He doesn't question, he doesn't wonder. Baldwin states and he lists. *The Fire Next Time*, fittingly then, is Baldwin's version of Martin Luther's 95 Theses, printed and published rather than tacked onto the closed doors of the Catholic Church. Baldwin doesn't question Catholicism in his essays, but he questions Christianity as a whole, from the rights and views of a black man. He airs his grievances, extols his anger, and weeps through words at his fate and the fate of African Americans in America; he rages and rallies, much like a preacher, he is afraid. However, in the end, he hopes. In the end, Baldwin is the optimist that Coates fails to be.

Where Coates questions how to live as a black man, Baldwin embraces it as much as he is seemingly resigned to it. "You were born where you were born," he writes in his letter to his son, "and faced the future that you faced because you were black and for no other reason." (Baldwin, 21) A few pages before, however, he warns his son, "You can only be destroyed by believe that you really are what the white world calls a nigger." (Baldwin, 18) That is, Baldwin has seen and knows what his son will face being black in America in the 1950s much like Coates fifty years later – the struggle, unfortunately, remains the same. But Baldwin makes it a point to note that being black isn't an impediment as Coates says, that his son won't lose in this life, per se, so long as he doesn't become what the racist, white America calls a nigger and all of the negative connotations that it stands for and implies.

HOANG

Baldwin implores his son to not be what they think he is. Don't, he says, be the same kind of black as the racists believe. Some of us may not wholly understand what either Coates or Baldwin is talking about in their letters to their loved ones because we weren't born black; we cannot empathize. However, we can sympathize, and we can take his lessons learned to heart. Moreover, we can take Baldwin's warning – his message – and use it towards our own lives. He really says to be yourselves, not what society dictates, or prejudices hold of us; if you change to fit them, you lose yourself, and that is the true tragedy.

Not all of 20th century literature about racism is dark, sad, and tugs at emotional heartstrings. It, like in *Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, could be a critique yet remain lighthearted, sassy, and an easier, leisurely read. The racism apparent in *Americanah* is as blatant as it was in the *Heart of Darkness*, *the Poisonwood Bible*, or as damaging as James Baldwin, Ta-Nehisi Coates, or the writers in Jesmyn Ward's collections of art. Racism, shown there, is more every day. It's casual and almost accidental. There is aggression but there's more assumptions and incorrect correlations that Imefelu, Adichie's female character, runs into which Adichie uses to show how easy and often racism can slip into every day life.

The young author Adichie makes almost a mockery of these accidents and microaggressions but in the same vein of things, she almost excuses it as well. Sometimes, people might not notice that what they say could be taken the wrong way, as shown by a few of the characters, and certainly, everyone has been misunderstood, once or twice before. Adichie makes no excuses for racism, however. But instead of an angry, hurt, sad letter, insightful essays, Adichie chooses to use humor and lightheartedness to bring light to these issues. It's not everyone else's fault that people say things that is taken the wrong way, but at the very least, we

HOANG

should know now that it can be taken the wrong way and that we should be more careful in how we use our words.

Adichie's critique is clear, both in the Western world and in Nigeria. She makes no victim of one while bolstering the other. The author sees the hypocrisy and racism, narcissism and materialism, in both societies. But rather than being scathing or harsh, she is gentler and almost fond, in making fun while still being clear in getting her message across.

Class Struggles & the American Dream

“But what you do sense, what is unmistakable, is a rising tide of frustration and anger and violence, born partly of the greater familiarity the poor today have with the rich, their faces pressed to that clear window on wealth afforded by ubiquitous television, and partly of the change in mentality that results from an outward shift in the supply curve for firearms.” (Hamid, *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*)

In America

In Fitzgerald's novel, Gatsby isn't a good man though some readers might see him as such. His wealth is accumulated by mysterious and suspicious means and he spends it, frivolously, obsessively, and wastefully, in pursuit of Daisy – a married woman, who isn't nearly in love with him than he is with her or she is with the idea of a sordid affair to one-up her husband's. It is not a tale of *carpe diem*, a warning that money can't buy happiness (at least not for Gatsby, his party revelers seem to have had plenty happiness), or to see the good in people or that “whenever you feel like criticizing any one, just remember that all the people in this world haven't had the advantages that you've had.” (Fitzgerald, 5)

HOANG

The Great Gatsby is racist, in a way that would not last on the shelves in today's world: "a limousine passed us, driven by a white chauffeur, in which sat three modish negroes, two bucks and a girl. I laughed aloud as the yolks of their eyeballs rolled towards us in haughty rivalry," or calling the Jewish character Meyer Wolfsheim a "flat-nosed Jew," within the same page. (Fitzgerald, 73) *The Great Gatsby*, at face value, shows us money can buy happiness – Daisy is more than glad to run back to Tom whom she knows cheats on her, Tom "seduces" Myrtle in a way that sounds like force and borderline assault, and the duo runs away merrily after murdering Gatsby and running over Myrtle. It shows that the rich are above the working class, and the working class serve no other purpose than they are so named.

What Fitzgerald gets right is that he writes it in such a way that it becomes a mockery of the American dream of freedom, equality, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, a parody of sorts of the American dream – that all it takes is lots of money and a general ambivalence about others' lives. Perhaps, in this way, the story inadvertently becomes a parody of itself – showing the same and true American landscape that Baldwin and Coates feel that America has become. He ends his most famous novel with a hopeless, sighing, and exasperated line – so reminiscent of the same tiredness of Baldwin and Coates - "So, we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past. (Fitzgerald, 189) That is, the more we try and move forward and away from the past, we get pushed back by some other current.

Coates writes that the U.S. – said to have built on that freedom and equality – had been built on the backs of slaves and black people today. "For so long, I have wanted to escape into the Dream, to fold my country over my head like a blanket. But this has never been an option because the Dream rests on our backs, the bedding made from our bodies." (Coates) Our apparent freedom and equality is thanks to oppression and exploitation, and the American Dream

HOANG

is not in his grasp because the American Dream is “a white way of life,” and not for him. A select few – the rich for Fitzgerald, white Americans for Coates – are living the ideal sort of life that the authors wish for themselves. But “Unless,” Baldwin writes, “we can establish some kind of dialogue between those people who enjoy the American dream and those people who have not achieved it, we will be in terrible trouble... we can talk to each other, at least on certain levels...” (Baldwin, *The American Dream and the American Negro*)

Edith Wharton, a member of the same upper New York caste, wrote a love story called *The Age of Innocence*. At least, it was what it seemed at first glance; a tale of the wealthy Newland Archer and his struggle between loving the society girl May and the vivacious Ellen. Underneath the glitz and glamour of flowers and calling cards, *The Age of Innocence*, is a sociological or anthropological study of a society: the wealthiest of New York society. It is a case study of unwritten rules and constructs, seemingly pointless to today’s readers, while at the same time, a criticism and mockery of the materialism and snobbery.

“An unalterable and unquestioned law of the musical world required that the German text of French operas sung by Swedish artists should be translated into Italian for the clearer understanding of English-speaking audiences. This seemed as natural to Newland Archer as all the other conventions on which his life was molded: such as the duty of using two silver-backed brushes with his monogram in blue enamel to part his hair, and of never appearing in society without a flower (preferably a gardenia) in his buttonhole.” (Wharton)

As a reader progresses through Wharton’s novel, the protagonist slowly realizes the rules in which he found such solace and pride in following were suffocating. He resigns himself to the fate he’s made for himself and even at the end, free from May’s death, he cannot bring himself to

HOANG

go to Ellen. He tells his son to go ahead and walks away to go back to the hotel. With all that he's realized, he has raised his son to move towards progress and away from convention while he remains behind with a monotonous life.

The American Dream Elsewhere

Through the narrator, in Hamid's work, *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, we live a life of poverty, determination, and a street-hardened, desperate lack of morality in selling bootleg DVDs, expired foods, and less than filtered bottled water. We grow rich, and absurdly so, and lose it all. We build a life, we marry, and have a child. Our family leaves but there is a pretty girl, that drifts in and out of "our" life – we find her again towards the end, staying until the end, while we learn that money isn't everything.

A running theme through Hamid's work and in his first novel *Moth Smoke* is the idea of social mobility, class structure, and materialism. His character, like Jay Gatsby in *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, shares a humble beginning. They, being "you" and Gatsby, achieve their wealth through less than legal means, and built empires in their respective worlds; Gatsby in Long Island, and "you" in your unnamed southeast Asian country. They use their wealth to obtain other things of their desire, not wanting accumulate wealth per say, but prestige, acceptance into the upper classes of which they longed to belong to, and ultimately, the pretty girl. In the closing pages of their respective novels, our unreliable protagonists meet their ends. One – you – broke, alone, and resigned. Nick Carraway imagines Gatsby feeling the same way, meeting his death at George Wilson's trigger, alone as he always was, without Daisy. Their wealth did nothing to stop time, to hold onto their "true loves," or to grant them happiness.

Both novels are remarkably the same archetype at their cores, a rags-to-riches tale, with

HOANG

the class system fully present and looming over the characters. No matter what, the you in Hamid's tale, and Gatsby in *The Great Gatsby* could never forget that they weren't born to the upper class. You eventually lost your fortune and everything that went with it – an unremarkable death for an unremarkable man - and Daisy chose her old money beau and society.

The American Dream, the ideal of individualism, and forging a destiny that is outside the scope of God's predestination and powers, was a thought of the modernist movement. Before, things were attributed to God and to destiny. The modernists believe that instead, God is no more – not in atheist sort of way (though Coates is an atheist) but rather, that we alone are in charge of our destinies.

Ta-Nehisi Coates proclaims he is an atheist, boldly proclaiming that “history is a brawny refutation for that religion brings morality.” Though Catholic schooled, Chinua Achebe criticized missionaries in Nigeria. James Baldwin once said, “I was behind the scenes and knew how the illusion was worked,” about being a preacher. Gatsby changed his lot in life, through unscrupulous means, and Hamid's “you” did the same, through expired food and bottle water. But they changed the predicament in which they were born, they became filthy rich, by themselves not of some divine power. Oleanna Price and her daughters questioned the religion that brought them to Africa while Nathan Price was driven to madness for the same. Neurotic and paranoid Henry Perowne goes and thinks out of his way to avoid danger, but never once ponders a divine being. Newland Archer creates his destiny by his own decisions. Theo Decker ponders pre-destination, wondering if people are hardwired for good or evil, and uses it to justify his bad doings. There, in secular writing, is no more outright praising of the divine or clarity between good and evil. This is where we begin to see the divergence of religion and society. Though it is true, as Tartt writes, in all our characters. “Something in the spirit longs for meaning

HOANG

– longs to believe in a world order where nothing is purposeless, where character is more than chemistry, and people are something more than a random chaos of molecules.”

Gender Inequality & Social Movements

“When the British came to Ibo land, for instance, at the beginning of the 20th century, and defeated the men in pitched battles in different places, and set up their administrations, the men surrendered. And it was the women who led the first revolt.” (Achebe)

Feminism

Men had led the way in history for the better part of history, but women were close behind towards the end of the 19th century with female authors like the Bronte sisters and Jane Austen paving the way. By the modern 20th century, women had arrived. Maya Angelou, Pearl Buck, Harper Lee, and Ayn Rand, for example, were just some of the most influential female writers of the era and women began to become strong lead characters in novels as well.

Barbara Kingsolver’s *The Poisonwood Bible* casts five women as narrators of the story of the Price family and their ill-fated trek into the Congo on a missionary. Nathan Price, the father, is the clear head of household at the beginning of the – but through the story and with great irony, Nathan becomes delegated to a crazy man living in the forest – so much like Kurtz in Conrad’s novel. Meanwhile, the women grew bolder and they grew stronger.

Despite the modernist era, the 1960s in which the novel was placed – especially in the deep south – women still held onto lesser roles within the household. Nathan brings his entire family on a misguided mission to convert the Kilanga villagers to Christianity, without any input from the family. He belittles them, he almost ignores them entirely unless it is to punish them with copying verses from the Bible. But, in Kingsolver’s novel, Nathan is not the hero nor

HOANG

portrayed as such. He is an ugly, easily hated character, whose end is almost perfect. In *the Poisonwood Bible*, the women are the heroes – the Price women and the female Kilanga villagers alike. It can be argued that since the narration came from the women themselves, our opinions can be skewed in their favor; but they are heroes because they're faced with unimaginable difficulties, they eventually stand up to Nathan, and they forge their own paths in the end, – Oleanna and Adah back in the U.S., and Leah and Rachel in Africa.

In *Cutting for Stone*, we have the trope of a fleeting girl in our narrators' lives. Pippa in *The Goldfinch*, the Pretty Girl in *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, Daisy in *The Great Gatsby* are all characters, with a lasting impact on our narrators and main characters, who come in and out of their lives throughout the story. In Verghese's work, Marion's fleeting girl is Genet. He loved her, the daughter of his nanny, unrequitedly; his heart was broken upon finding that his brother slept with her, and furthermore, it was he whom everyone thought had slept with Genet, not Shiva. She reappears later on, now a part of guerillas, and Marion – through Genet's friend's accusation - is forced into exile in America because of his relationship to her. Like Hamid's Pretty Girl, Genet was a symbol of what was unobtainable. Like Fitzgerald's Daisy, the idea of Genet was placed to be our character's vice and a source of unfortunate circumstances.

The Countess Ellen, in *The Age of Innocence*, is Hamid's "pretty girl" in *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, Fitzgerald's Daisy, Donna Tartt's Pippa in *The Goldfinch*; she is the girl that's unobtainable, out of our narrator's reach, and flits in and out of our male character's lives. Ellen is different from society, she wishes for freedom, and she is scorned and judged by society but appealing to Archer as the stark contrast from May who bores him. He truly loves Ellen because she's as worldly as he was, that they share the same confusion about society. He only loves May, in society's sense, a loveless marriage, where May and the other female

HOANG

characters can talk of fashion and whoever broke society's rule. Newland Archer laments to Ellen once: "Each time you happen to me all over again." (Wharton, chapter 29) As romantic sounding as it is, it's also accusing and blaming as if Ellen forces him to feel what he does – that she's the cause of his internal conflict between staying with society and May or being with his perceived one true love.

In modern 20th century literature, writing came naturally, uninhibited by structure and formulas. There is a new diverging trend when it comes to women; they're either blamed and scapegoated as the Eve (as in Adam and Eve) like in Verghese's *Cutting for Stone* or they're strong, liberated women like El Saadawi's main female characters in her works. The modern 20th century was the time for sexual liberation, women rights, and civil movements. Fittingly, the century's modernist movement gave a voice that women needed to even the score and steer literature in their favor.

Sparking Change

Heart of Darkness does a great job at also highlighting the savagery of the colonization, called the "civilizing mission," in the novel, and the plights of the Africans under English rule. Marlow, as told by an unnamed narrator, was on a "civilizing mission," as if the Congo was lacking in civilization before the English arrived but through it, came across other Englishman like Kurtz who had become the savages that they believed the Africans were. Kurtz's moral decline into someone who sticks heads on spikes, surrounding himself with them while justifying them as categories such as "rebels," was less than Christian and civilized than his African counterparts. In the end, Marlow has seen too much in his time in the Congo and hates the "civilized" world that he once came from. There is a clear criticism of the colonization veiled

HOANG

within his worlds and Marlow even goes as far as to align colonialism as a robbery, slavery, and murders. Conrad, himself, redeems himself from what his critics call him – at least in my eyes – by this passage:

“The conquest of the Earth,” Marlow narrates, “which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it’s the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretense but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea.” (Conrad)

The Congolese are represented as human beings in this passage, just with a different skin color or physical features. Conrad negates race by calling it a different complexion. He, a victim of the Russians in his native homeland of Poland, denounces imperialism by saying that it takes advantage of the perceived weaker, akin to robbery, murder, and senseless violence.

In 1864, a humanitarian known as Roger David Casement was born. (Daly) To the Irish, he was a revolutionary hero, unfairly executed, defending Ireland’s freedom from British imperialists. Though he was slandered as a sodomite and charged with treason at the end of his short life, Casement was knighted and heralded, though not for his Irish nationalism, but for the voice he was for the Congo and African continent instead. His life was chronicled in two works: the infamous, and allegedly written Black Diaries, and Mario Vargas Llosa’s slightly embellished for literary purposes, *The Dream of the Celt*.

Casement would grow up to meet Joseph Conrad, a Poland born Brit, in the Congo years later. They came in the same way their characters had, with dreams of doing good and delivering salvation however they could to the poor Congolese.

HOANG

“He arrived in the Congo imbued with all the fantasies and myths used by Leopold II to create the image of a great humanitarian, a monarch determined to civilize Africa and free the Congolese from slavery, paganism, and other barbarities,” writes Llosa, about Casement in his novel, meeting Joseph Conrad – born Konrad Koreniowski.

They left, however, knowing another truth. But they didn’t remain quiet for long. Conrad came home and published *The Heart of Darkness*, a short story, framed with first person narration and storytelling. While critics have questioned Conrad’s ethnocentric kind of writing, the way the Congo was presented in a way that touts the idea of a wild, unlawful, barbaric land, it is almost sarcastic. It is so sensationalized that it reads almost like a critique of the times, rather than the land; that the Congo cannot possibly be as wild as he had written. More importantly, however, *The Heart of Darkness* shed light onto the atrocities of these so-called civilizing missions and loudly, and popularly, critiqued imperialism for all of its hypocritical worth. Casement would return to the Congo, on the behest of the British government to investigate King Leopold II’s control of the land. He’d go on to thoroughly investigate and record the abuse, injustice, and brutality of imperialism in the region.

The Congo wouldn’t be the only place he’d help, the only people he’d speak out for, because later on, he’d do that same in the Amazon. When he returned to Ireland, Casement was loudly speaking out on behalf of the Irish nations under the thumb of Britain. For that cause, he would meet his untimely end, but not before becoming one of the world’s greatest humanitarians and a hero to nationalists around the globe. His work in recording these brutalities led to changes in colonialization.

In Mario Vargas Llosa’s *The Dream of the Celt*, readers get to hear about Roger Casement’s story from an omniscient narrator. Llosa took a few creative liberties with his life

HOANG

and as such, it reads as a novel – told via narrator, with a dashing hero. Roger Casement was a lifelong humanitarian before he became the Irish revolutionary hero that he is remembered as today. Though he was slandered as a *sodomite* and charged with treason at the end of his short life, Casement was knighted and heralded, though not for his Irish nationalism, but for the voice he was for the Congo and African continent instead.

Llosa begins the story in a jail cell, whereupon we meet Casement, following his memories through the Congo, the Amazon, and in Ireland, to his ultimate and tragic end via hangman. Like Conrad's Charles Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*, Casement begins his foray into the Congo with optimism and soon would see the truth. "He came and went through Africa, on one hand, sowing desolation and death... and the other opening routes to commerce and evangelization." (Llosa, 26)

They left, however, knowing another truth. But they didn't remain quiet for long. Conrad came home and published *The Heart of Darkness*, a short story, framed with first person narration and storytelling. While critics have questioned Conrad's ethnocentric kind of writing, the way the Congo was presented in a way that touts the idea of a wild, unlawful, barbaric land, it is almost sarcastic. It is so sensationalized that it reads almost like a critique of the times, rather than the land; that the Congo cannot possibly be as wild as he had written. More importantly, however, *The Heart of Darkness* shed light onto the atrocities of these so-called civilizing missions and loudly, and popularly, critiqued imperialism for all of its hypocritical worth.

Casement would return to the Congo, on the behest of the British government to investigate King Leopold II's control of the land. He'd go on to thoroughly investigate and record the abuse, injustice, and brutality of imperialism in the region. The Congo wouldn't be the only place he'd help, the only people he'd speak out for, because later on, he'd do that same in

HOANG

the Amazon. When he returned to Ireland, Casement was loudly speaking out on behalf of the Irish nations under the thumb of Britain. For that cause, he would meet his untimely end, but not before becoming one of the world's greatest humanitarians and a hero to nationalists around the globe. His work in recording these brutalities led to changes in colonialization.

The rights of women are a major theme of Nawal El Saadawi and a major theme of her own life as well. The author defied society as a woman, who not only became a doctor, a male dominant profession throughout the world, but in a staunchly traditional and patriarchal land such as Egypt. Even in 2013, the pressure remains, and the BBC reported that Egypt topped the list by gender experts of the worst country for women's rights. (BBC) At school, she realized that the notion that men were genetically superior to women, taught to her by her mother, was wrong. From then on, El Saadawi worked towards making others know what she learned. *Women and Sex* talked about sexuality in her community. *Woman at Point Zero* brought light to women's oppression. *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor*, El Saadawi's most popular English translated work, is the story of a woman doctor's life, her realization, and oppression in the workplace amidst a patriarchal society.

The author has recurring issues threaded between her books: sexism, feminism, and tradition. Her female characters all feel the pressure of a patriarchal society but rebel, quietly and academically or scandalously and loudly. As a human rights or social justice activist, El Saadawi uses this publishing platform to speak out about what most women cannot, to show women that they have the right and power to do the same.

How great of a power, a freedom, it is to be able to do what one wants. It is an American ideal, boiled down to three things penned by Thomas Jefferson, "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." It is, for most of the Western world, a birthright. For a majority of history, it was a

HOANG

right reserved for men and *white* men at that. Women, across Western civilization, only received the right to vote in the early 1900s; but the power to do what they wanted, some would argue, is still out of grasp. The minorities (being women and minorities) don't have that freedom. Whether it is apparent or absolute freedom is a topic for another time, but either way, the Western world has taken it for granted. Some don't often think twice about speaking their minds. Some definitely do not notice going outside or moving around town on their own. Those are privileges that are out of reach for many still today. Women are still enslaved by patriarchy, misogyny, or interpretations of religion, even now in the present day. Minorities are held back by racism, be it casual, unintentional, or intentional.

Personal Journey

To summarize my personal journey through these readings this semester, as easily and simply as possible: I've realized. I've realized more than I thought I would, reading works of fiction and voices, rather than a textbook. In sixteen weeks, I don't hate *The Great Gatsby* as much as I used to do, and I feel as if I've crisscrossed the globe as I've always wanted to do in person. Most of all, I realized one major about myself: that I have been immensely privileged and lucky to have my lot in life even if it's not all fun and games at times. Unlike Baldwin and Coates, I have never once feared the police, unless they are in my rearview mirror. I've never once had a policeman's hand stray to the gun holstered at their side. Unlike El Saadawi, I've never once had someone belittle me on the basis of being a woman. I've never struggled with hateful racism or insensitivity. Almost every time I read one of those books, or delved further into the author's portfolio of works or their lives, I had the same thought: "I'm lucky I..."

HOANG

One simple statement Coates writes in his book stayed with me over the course of the summer. He questions how to live, within a country lost in the (American) dream, and that that very question has defined his life. It was poignant for me because it was something, out of all the pages of the book, that I could identify with most. I will never truly understand what Coates experiences as a black man, though through his writing I have some pseudo-semblance of his life, but I find I can understand that question he poses himself. Admittedly, it is hard to knowing how to live in America these days, no matter who you are; though I must stress, Coates' struggle is a matter of survival while mine, and most others, is merely a question of quality of life.

Trying to navigate the often-murky waters of traditionalist customs ideals of an immigrant Vietnamese family and an independent, modern day American mindset is trying at best. Finding that balance between the two, and doing it well, is my question. It is, by far, no matter of actual life and death, no survival, no fear such as what Coates goes through and what he sees as his son's future life – if nothing changes – and in the lives of other African Americans in this day and age. But it is, from my own experiences, what others in my situation, the generation of first truly American born, Vietnamese, deals with daily.

I am an Asian woman but at the same time, I am an *Asian-American* woman, born and bred in California, with Western notions and culture constantly clashing with tradition from the East. Confucius and his philosophies rang as true in my household as the words of the Declaration of Independence, which I had memorized before I had turned ten. Have a voice, be independent, take charge, I was taught. I heard, however, be quiet, be pretty, be seen not heard, not only from the traditionalists in my family but from society. I was confused and wondered, like Coates, how to live in this America. I could live this way back in Vietnam, but I was learning and living something else in my youth.

HOANG

One of the problems I faced as the child of immigrants was that I was told I am a Buddhist. For a long time, I resented a religion forced on me, especially when it was one so different from my peer group, and one they didn't understand. My family gave me no choice and I was a child – what child is smart enough to decide their path towards salvation? I certainly wasn't, *especially remembering I was playing alone when my first tooth fell out and because no one had warned me that it was normal, I proceeded to try and glue it back with an entire bottle of Elmer's glue.* I was embarrassed of my religion. I felt like an outcast because I didn't go to church, I didn't wear a cross, I didn't celebrate Christmas the way it was intended, and I was the only one I knew in my elementary school classes that was a Buddhist. In my older years, I realized the problem I had wasn't with Buddhism, it wasn't that my friends weren't tolerant of it, it was just that I couldn't reconcile it with my surroundings. It wasn't fitting in the other half of my life that I lived as a part of an immigrant family. Now, as an adult, I have a choice in my religion, but I found that I've made peace with already having one.

But, thankfully, aside from miscommunication and religion, the problems I had were few and far apart, if not unimportant or irrelevant now. Unlike El Saadawi and her peers, and girls raised in traditionalist Vietnamese families like my peers, I was never told that men were superior or that I am weaker for it. I was allowed to rebel from those gender standards from the beginning of my life. At two years old, just a few weeks before we left for America, my grandparents took me to the biggest toy store in town to buy me my first toy for my birthday and allowed me to pick from the store. I didn't come home that day with a doll, a fake tea set, or even a cuddly teddy bear, which to this day, my Grandpa still remembers trying to offer me. In the end, I came home, brandishing a toy machine gun, lights flashing, and laser noises wreaking havoc. It would be me who learned to fix cars instead of my brother, who preferred to stick by

HOANG

my mother's side, and get my hands dirty. It was me who was enrolled in martial arts and learned how to ride a dirt bike and shoot guns in the desert. It is me who now works in sports. My family never forbade me from doing more perceived "masculine" things, though with ballet and cotillion classes I had little time for anything else; but instead, they always encouraged me – whatever I was doing, they'd say, if I was going to do it, I better be the best at it. As often as the media speaks about women in sports and what they had to deal with, I'm grateful I haven't dealt with the same problems on the same scale. There will always be a misogynist, in any field, and there will always be a bad person that we'll have to deal with, but it is rare that I've had to encounter it. Unlike the author and her characters, however, I've never dealt with hostility or derision, I've never felt as if I was discriminated against because of my gender. I was lucky.

I was the lucky one, but my family was not. Instead of western colonization, communism rose in Vietnam after the departure of the French – when the major nations began withdrawing from their colonies. My family lived a rather comfortable life under French control. My grandparents grew up in French boarding schools, there was access to French medicine – it was like an extension of the European land. But then they withdrew, and the communists began steadily growing until they eventually took over. Under the communists, religion was banned, education suffered, and a host of policies and laws were changed and abused. In Vietnam, the communist party were Conrad and Achebe's "civilizing missions." It's interesting to see that today, Okonkwo's struggle to retain the old ways remain with the older generation who remembered the times when the French were there.

This older generation miss – not of what Vietnam was (as a fully Asian country devoid of western influence) – but what Vietnam was with the French. They miss Indo-chine. They miss the way western civilization mixed with ancient tradition. Yet, blending what they knew with

HOANG

America was hard in the beginning. But again, I was luckier than most immigrant children. My family adapted after a few years. We surely kept the rituals and traditions from our ancestors – we remember our loved ones who passed away every year with a memorial wake of sorts and usher in the Lunar New Year with family and little red envelopes – but we’ve developed an almost obsessive love for Thanksgiving and they’ve adopted a more Western way of thinking and living. In some way, I think we’ve done what my grandparents had done when the French arrived; we’ve found a happy medium, kept what we loved and what we cherish, and adopted things which we were lacking or needing improvement in before.

More and more, Vietnam is becoming a Chinese territory. The country is losing land, through legal and illegal maneuvers, and like the villagers of the Igbo, the government and majority of Vietnamese citizens are giving up and giving in. I find a similar sadness that Okonkwo has, that the culture and country is slipping away. I understand my father’s and my grandfather’s frustration at how easily those left in Vietnam have accepted their fate and happily going along it, the same way Okonkwo felt seeing his villagers give in. I see the land of my ancestors, my grandparents and parents’ land, slipping away; but America is the land I know, it’s the only home I know. All the time, I answer that I’m an American. That’s it, no more, no less. It’s probably more specific to say that I’m Vietnamese-American, but I wonder if it is the “correct” term. Is Asian-American better? I wish for the day when we can just call ourselves American, without a pesky hyphen before it.

My Journey with Literature

I was named Christine, not from a book of baby names or an actress on the silver screen, but of literature in general. My father’s utmost dream is to recreate his father’s home library, a

HOANG

room with walls of books, one of those nifty rail ladders, and comfy couches to sink into. My mother's dream job was to be a librarian and spend her days rifling through books. My overachieving little brother just received his Master's in Shakespearean English Literature. My grandparents read voraciously, in a time when TVs were just being produced and iPhones weren't even a thought, and still will read rather than watch the movie version. I was named, inspired by Agatha Christie, and of the beautiful, young ingenue in the Phantom of the Opera, and thankfully not the killer car a la Stephen King. I was read French classics as bedtime stories and watched Wishbone on taped videocassettes more often than cartoons. I grew up with books and in a sense, I grew up through books.

For the most part, I've always disliked the books foisted upon us in English classes. I never felt like I could relate, nor the material related to me. I felt as if we were forced to like these novels because what we were taught was that *this* book was the greatest of all time and that *that* book is great, and any dissenting opinion was wrong. I hated the *Great Gatsby* for that very reason. I was never allowed to dislike Fitzgerald's ode to the twenties, despite having quite valid reasons for doing so. I didn't like the idolization of a mysterious, suspected bootlegger. I didn't like that Daisy and Tom could get away with ruining so many lives. I appreciated Fitzgerald's symbolism but felt as if they weren't natural, that they were too blatant to be regarded as symbols or metaphors anymore. Being allowed to choose to re-read *The Great Gatsby*, I've since found an appreciation for what it is. I still don't like it, and that hasn't changed, but I recognize the influence it has and Fitzgerald's writing.

I think I would like to have a chat with Fitzgerald now. He died thinking his most famous novel was a commercial failure and now we're studying it in high schools and watching it on the big screen. I'd like to know what he would think of its success today, of how the American

HOANG

dream has helped or ruined us as a society. With what has been published about him, I think he'd not mind the reasons I have for disliking his masterpiece and I feel as if there would be lively debate about it.

I, most of all, would like to meet Alexandre Dumas, the senior, and author of my favorite novels of all time. I was raised on the adventures of Athos, Aramis, Portos, and D'Artagnan. I learned French through *Le Comte de Monte Cristo* and I still read it once a year, finding something new within the many plots and subplots each time. But after this class, these readings of race and classism, Dumas has become more interesting as a person. His paternal grandmother was an African slave, his grandfather – a French nobleman. A quarter black himself, I have to wonder if he had problems akin to Coates and Baldwin himself. Did he struggle with social classes? Or would he say that the France of the 1800s were more progressive and racism, the way it is now, was not evident.

“In the late 20th century, it became possible to travel between cultures, between the old world and the new, with great ease. So, when you go back, you take the changed person with you who, in turn, changes things that otherwise might have stayed the same.” – Shyam Selvadurai

I started the semester regretting I hadn't read more yet secretly dreading having to read a new book every week. I'm a realist and I knew there would be books that I would love and books that I would hate reading – especially seeing the *Great Gatsby* on the syllabus as a potential read on the syllabus. But as I read, one after the other, with each one lending a bit of itself to the next one, I realized it wasn't as torturous as I thought it would; even the most taxing of the books this semester left me with something. They taught me and made me look at my life a different way.

HOANG

Through these readings, I have traveled. I've gone to Egypt and to the both banks of Africa, forayed into the Amazon, to Singapore, Ireland, and England. I've crossed the country from my couch in California to New York, both physically and through literature. I've learned many things along the way, I've changed, and I hope to change things in my life the same way.

Bibliography

- Achebe, C. (1975). *An Image of Africa: Racism in Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness*.
- Achebe, C. (1994). *Things Fall Apart*. New York City: Penguin Books.
- Adichie, C. N. (2013). *Americanah*. New York City: Anchor Books.
- Baldwin, J. (1965, March 7). The American Dream and the American Negro. *The New York Times on the Web*.
- Baldwin, J. (1993). *The Fire Next Time*. New York City: Vintage International.
- BBC. (2013, November 12). *Egypt 'worst for women' out of 22 countries in Arab World*. Retrieved November 14, 2018, from BBC news.
- Burgess, A. (2012). *Earthly Powers*. New York City: Random House.
- Coates, T.-N. (2013, December 31). The Myth of Western Civilization. *The Atlantic*.
- Coates, T.-N. (2015). *Between the World and Me*. New York City: Spiegel & Grau.
- Conrad, J. (2003). *Heart of Darkness and Selected Short Fiction*. New York City: Barnes and Noble Books.
- El Saadawi, N. (1983). *Woman at Point Zero*. London: Zed Books.
- El Saadawi, N. (1997). *The Nawal El Saadawi Reader*. New York City: Second Impression.
- El Saadawi, N. (2001). *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor*. New York City: City Lights Publishers.
- Fitzgerald, F. S. (1992). *The Great Gatsby*. New York City: Collier Books.
- Ghansah, R. K. (2016). The Weight. In J. Ward, *The Fire This Time: A New Generation Speaks about Race*. (pp. 24-25). New York City: Scribner.
- Hamid, M. (2013). *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*. New York City: Riverhead Books.
- Jelloun, T. B. (2000). *The Sand Child*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

HOANG

Kingsolver, B. (1998). *The Poisonwood Bible*. New York City: HarperCollins.

Llosa, M. V. (2010). *The Dream of the Celt*. New York City: Picador.

McEwan, I. (2005). *Saturday*. New York City: Doubleday.

Tartt, D. (2016). *The Goldfinch*. New York City: Little, Brown and Company.

Vergheese, A. (2009). *Cutting for Stone*. New York City: Random House.

Ward, J. (2016). *The Fire This Time: A New Generation Speaks about Race*. New York City:
Scribner.

Watts, C. (1983). "A Bloody Racist" : About Achebe's View of Conrad. *The Yearbook of English
Studies*, 196-209.

Wharton, E. (1996). *The Age of Innocence*. New York City: Penguin.

HOANG

Tables

Table 1: *Comparing & Contrasting the Novels*

Author	Book	Narrator	Setting	Time	Framing	Protagonist	Devices	Subject	Tone
Ta-Nehisi Coates	Between the World and Me	Coates	America	2013; Modern Day	Letter/Essay	No One	Colloquialism, Allusions (Trail of Tears, Trayvon Martin)	Autobiography, American History, Racism, American Dream	Angry, Passionate, Resigned, Cerebral, Steely
James Baldwin	The Fire Next Time	Baldwin	America	1960s	Letter/Essay; second and first person	No One	Colloquialism	Racism, American History, Religion, American Dream	Cautionary, Sadden, Somber, Tender, Cerebral
Jesmyn Ward	The Fire This Time	Writers	America	Modern Day	Essay/Poetry	No One	Colloquialism	Racism, American History, American Dream	Varying
Joseph Conrad	Heart of Darkness	Charles Marlow	The Congo	1890s	Story Within a Story; Novella	Charles Marlow	Imagery, Colloquialism, Language, Symbolism, Foreshadowing	Colonialism, Imperialism, Racism	Cynical, Poetic,
Chinua Achebe	Things Fall Apart	Omniscient Narrator	Nigeria	1880s	Third Person Narrative - Story	Okonkwo	Imagery, Language, Symbolism, Allegory	Colonialism, Missionaries, Racism	Unbiased

HOANG

Barbara Kingsolver	The Poisonwood Bible	The Price Family (Women)	The Congo	1960s	Alternating Person Narratives; Unreliable	The Price Women, the Congo, the Kilanga villagers	Flashbacks, Colloquialism, Foreshadowing, Imagery, Malapropism, Language	Missionaries, Racism, Politics, Colonialism	Somber, Thoughtful
Mario Vargas Llosa	The Dream of the Celt	Roger Casement	London, Ireland, Congo, Amazon	1890s-1916	Narrative/Fictional	Roger Casement	Imagery, Flashbacks	Colonialism, Slavery, Racism, Imperialism	Wistful, Somber, Naive
Mohsin Hamid	How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia	Omniscient Narrator	Unknown. Pakistan or Alike	Modern Day	Second-person perspective	“You”	Imagery, Colloquialism,	Wealth,	Cautionary
Kevin Kwan	Crazy Rich Asians	Rachel Chu, Nick Young, Eleanor Young, Astrid Leong, Edison Cheng	New York City, Singapore, Hong Kong	Modern Day	Alternating Person Narrative	Rachel Chu	Epigraph, Imagery, Colloquialism	Class System, Wealth	Critical, Cynical
F. Scott Fitzgerald	The Great Gatsby	Nick Carraway	Long Island	1920s	Third Person Narrative; Unreliable	Jay Gatsby	Symbolism, Imagery, Colloquialism	Wealth, Decadence, Idealism, Social Change, American Dream	Dark, Pessimistic, Vapid
Chimamanda Adichie	Americanah	Omniscient Narrator, Imefelu through Blog Posts	Nigeria, America, England	Modern Day	Third Person Narrative; Blog posts	Imefelu and Obinze	Colloquialism, Language, Imagery,	American Dream, Class System, Racism	Funny, Empathetic. Witty

HOANG

Nawal El Saadawi	Memoirs of a Woman Doctor	First Person, Unnamed	Egypt	1980s-	First Person Narrative/Fictional Memoir	Unnamed Narrator	Imagery, Language	Gender, Social Change	Wistful, Disappointed
Ian McEwan	Saturday	Omniscient Narrator	London	Modern Day	Third Person Narrative	Henry Perowne	Language	Terrorism, Social Change, Security	Neurotic, Descriptive, Paranoid
Donna Tartt	The Goldfinch	Theo Decker	New York, Amsterdam	Modern Day	First Person Narrative; Unreliable	Theo Decker	Imagery, Colloquialism, Flashbacks	Terrorism, Pre-destination, American Dream	Dark
Abraham Verghese	Cutting for Stone	Marion Stone	Ethiopia	1950s-	First Person Narrative; Unreliable	Marion Stone	Flashbacks, medical terminology, Imagery	Racism, Gender, Civil Unrest	Bitter
Edith Wharton	The Age of Innocence	Omniscient Narrator	New York City	1920s	Third Person Narrative	Newland Archer	Language, Symbolism	Class System, Imagery	Anthropological, Somber

Figures

Figure 1.1

92

i carry your heart with me(i carry it in
my heart)i am never without it(anywhere
i go you go,my dear;and whatever is done
by only me is your doing,my darling)

i fear
no fate(for you are my fate,my sweet)i want
no world(for beautiful you are my world,my true)
and it's you are whatever a moon has always meant
and whatever a sun will always sing is you

here is the deepest secret nobody knows
(here is the root of the root and the bud of the bud
and the sky of the sky of a tree called life;which grows
higher than soul can hope or mind can hide)
and this is the wonder that's keeping the stars apart

i carry your heart(i carry it in my heart)

HOANG

Figure 1. “[i carry your heart with me(i carry it in]” Copyright 1952, © 1980, 1991 by the Trustees for the E. E. Cummings Trust, from *Complete Poems: 1904-1962* by E. E. Cummings, edited by George J. Firmage.

HOANG