

Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* Between the Film and the Novel: A Corpus-driven Study of Students' Responses

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Abstract

It is argued that films are valuable parts of our culture, that they facilitate students' understanding of novels, that they make classes more interesting, and that they should be integrated into the course materials. In line with this contention, this article attempts to explore the significance of film as an educational tool from the students' perspectives.

Students have been given a question focusing on their impressions about the novel and the film. They have been also given a week's reprieve to turn in their responses via e-mail so that they can maintain the necessary privacy and answer freely. In this way, they won't be obligated to choose a given response similar to what occurs in a questionnaire. The discussion demonstrates that most students are not for watching films, and that their responses are indicative of their uncritical viewing of the film. Having no clear idea about cinematic techniques and directors' treatment of texts and changing them into scripts, students are not in a position to evaluate films well.

Key words: Film; Facilitate understanding; Educational tool; Integrate; Course materials; Uncritical viewing; Cinematic techniques; Uncritical responses; Part of culture

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We live in a world replete with moving images that are accessible to all. The value of these images provided by the television set and movies is that they make it easy for us to know about others who live far away from us. These images are also important in their own right as central parts of our culture. Most students come to schools with something of a prior knowledge about the importance of the television and film. It follows that it becomes easy to teach them by building on all that is known and going on to the unknown. As long as students have an idea about films that are cultural expressions, it does make sense to employ them to effect a change in education for the better. This argument is supported by myriad of studies, demonstrating that films add dimensions not present in the traditional methods to the learning process. Arguing in support of this view, Champoux (1999) claims that the unique features of films make them powerful teaching devices (206-217). Following Champoux's steps, Bloom (1956) holds that a "film can take students to the higher levels of application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation as they apply theories to life on the screen, analyze characters, create new scenarios or endings to films". Like Bloom and Champoux, Huczynski and Buchanan (2004) maintain that films can stimulate discussion and thinking on the part of students. Similarly, Vetrie contends, in "Using Film to Increase Literary Skills," that a "film is like any other text and lends itself to rich discussion and analysis like a written text does" (39). Vetrie adds that the "engagement of the film helps to get their minds working and keeps them actively involved in the learning process" (4). Like Vetrie, Sealey (2008) claims, in *Film, Politics, and Education: Cinematic Pedagogy Across Disciplines*, that film, as a classroom tool, "can catalyze a valuable discussion, or display in visual form a critical idea that might remain too abstract or remote when encountered in discussion, literature, or debate" (pp.2-3). Reiterating the former arguments, AL-Shalabi (2011) contends, in "Using Film to Teach American Literature," that "the use

of film in the classroom enlivens it and enriches classes" (3). AL-Shalabi adds that films are useful for teachers and students alike, maintaining that "[while] the film facilitates students' understanding of course materials, it helps teachers with keeping students who avoid reading these materials engaged" (3).

Guided by these arguments, we have determined to integrate films into our course materials to enable students to see how directors change texts into scripts, and to achieve our educational objectives. We have determined not to use film the same way Smith (2009) contends, in "Is Film an Effective Teaching Tool," "as a silencing and stupefying device to distract the student" or "as a bribe or a reward to the students if they perform well on a test or on a big assignment" (5). After reading Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, students were asked to watch a film based on it, to write about their impressions of the novel and the film within a week, and turn the assignments in. We have chosen to act this way to give learners the chance to express their minds as they like, and to maintain the necessary privacy. Moreover, we have made this choice to let them write this way for two main reasons. Firstly, students' writing this way empowers them and boosts their self-confidence. Thus, they write confidently about their own opinions without being impacted by other responses similar to those occurring in a questionnaire, such as "agree," "disagree," "partially agree," "strongly agree," etc. Secondly, students' writing this way is an exercise on writing, and helps us with knowing about their problems with it. When we have known about these problems, we can easily arrange for resolving them.

When the assignments have been all turned in, we started examining students' responses that are left uncorrected in this paper. We felt frustrated because after showing the film we got nothing much back in response apart from "It was interesting" or "I didn't like it." To take an example, a student claims, "Finally, I didn't like the film because it didn't talk about everything in the novel or maybe because I had knew the events before i watched the film" (5). Similarly, another student argues, "Any way, there is no comparison between a book (novel) and it's film, but what I want to say is that I didn't enjoy watching the movie" (6). Response 35, likewise, seems to be as uncritical as the former ones. The respondent says, "The film talks about the novel in general which summaries it in an easy method" (35). These responses indicate that students' viewing of the film is uncritical. They also provide the indication that these two students are too innocent to judge films as long as they are blinded by their illusions, and expect to see in the film all that they have read in the novel. These students should know that directors read the novel the same way they do, and that all that they see in the film does represent the director's own understanding and personal analysis of the happenings in the novel. Furthermore, the responses under discussion show clearly that the respondents have trouble

with expressing their opinions in good English, which is manifest in the number of mistakes occurring in their responses.

Like these responses, six other uncritical responses are in favor of films. In response 7, for instance, a student argues, "... the film is more affected due to the body languages so it's more interesting and attractive than the novel" (7). Equally uncritical is response 8 in which the respondent says: "... we interact with film more than novel; such as, sounds, screams and fun. However, watching film let us to understand novel well, but both of them create the correct picture and send the correct message of the novel" (8). Akin to these responses is response number 12 in which the respondent maintains, "This is the first time that I watch a movie and read its novel. Really it was a fantastic movie and a wonderful American novel" (12). In response number 13 the student claims, "The movie makes me feel happy and I understand the novel easily by watching it as movie, the movie was so clear and it reaches the whole idea to us perfectly"(13). In response 19, the respondent holds, "...I enjoyed watching the film. It shows the story in a bit different way it doesn't detract from its merit" (19). Similar to this argument is response number 20 in which the student claims, "The film is very attractive and interesting more than reading the novel; this is my impression for the film vs. the novel" (20). Like the previous response, the respondent in response number 15 contends, "In my opinion, prefer to see the film than the novel. Although the novel maybe very interesting, i think the film is more closer than it at least for me" (15). Repeating nearly the same argument, the respondent in response number 25 holds, "...the movie is more clear than the novel itself because the movie shows the events in explicit and simple way far of complication and complexities" (25). These responses, likewise, emphasize the impact a film has upon the respondents, and clarify the helplessness of students to judge films and express their minds in good English.

Further examination of responses revealed that thirty per cent of students have focused on the novel, holding it to be better than the film. In response 21, for example, the respondent argues, "I like 'The Great Gatsby' novel more than the film because always enjoy reading novels more than watching their movies" (21). In response number 3, the respondent says, "In my opinion, books are always better than films, because book contains a lot of details than the film due to the fact that the film is only about 2 hours which is not enough" (3). Similarly, in response number 30, a student maintains, "... the novel has more details than the film because there are more omitting in the film for dramatic process" (30). A similar argument occurs in response 28 in which the respondent claims, "My impression at all is very good but I enjoyed with the novel more than the film" (28). In addition to the former responses, a fifth student says, "... the novel could describe to us how the character was actually feeling what

they were thinking The author could also get his feeling toward the character, and the setting, by simply writing it .In the movie I felt as though I had to keep guessing, as to what character was thinking or feeling”(22). Like the former respondent, a sixth respondent maintains, “In my opinion the novel from the book more interesting, and beautiful more than watch it in movie, because in the book the details more, and more reality”(23). Following the steps of former respondents, a seventh respondent says, “... I like reality in the movie the important theme is take a bout the disloyalty, but will I see there other theme important you can centralize, and play it, will I like the end the open end more nice, and reality I like it in the book more than in the movie”(17). An eighth respondent who repeats the former argument verbatim contends, “...I like the novel in the book and I prefer than movie”(18). A ninth student also heaps praise on the novel arguing, “... I think that I like reading this novel more than watching its film because I can’t Notec the symbols in this novel by watching the film only. And I can’t understand the chronological order of the events in the film as in the novel may be because I don’t have the ability to criticize the film” (9). In a similar manner, a tenth student argues, “... I like this novel but indeed I don’t watch the entire movie this all thing and thank you” (10).

Relevant to response number 10, the scrutiny of responses also revealed that nearly 30 per cent of them haven’t watched the movie and haven’t made any mention of it in their responses. This argument is true of a number of responses whose numbers are as follows: 32,33,34,14, 29,27,26, 24,36,37,and 38.Upon inquiring of learners about that, some of them claimed that they had chosen not to watch the movie for religious reasons. Others argued that they had been brought that way, and that films wouldn’t help them with learning. A third group of learners contended that they had not seen any connection between learning and films. Upon hearing that, we elaborated on the value of film as an educational tool, referred to a number of studies confirming this argument, and made it clear to them that we are equally concerned about morals which are central to living happily and peacefully. After listening to us, they expressed their apology for not watching the movie, promising to

cooperate with us and do better next time.

As far as doing better is concerned, we pointed out that learning how to write well is a prerequisite for doing better and succeeding. We advised them to take much care of the grammar of English too able to express their opinions freely and with the fewest number of mistakes. We also demonstrated both our willingness and readiness to help them with improving their performance and learning how to write well. Furthermore, we instructed them on the necessity of leaning more about films that are becoming a shared global language, remarking that, without this knowledge, they won’t be able to make any progress, and compete with others who know well that films are useful. We told them that it is taken for granted that films are engaging tools for learning, that films help learners develop their communicative skills, that films facilitate learning and keep learners involved, and that films have become central to learning. Concerning the films integrated into the course materials, they are meant to promote morals, not call them into question. Therefore, they are carefully chosen, and are subjected to scrutiny before viewing.

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