American Studies in an ideal medium for creating an understanding of the relationship between text and context in literature, helping to produce the kind of lateral thinking which is highly sought after in today’s job market. The relationship goes beyond merely understanding the historical context in which a book is set, and involves a close reading of both historical fact and literary convention. However, it is unlikely that there will be an American Studies A level in the foreseeable future, so Judy Newman and Douglas Tallack use the example of "The Great Gatsby" to show how this can be achieved within the context of the English Literature A level.

American Studies in Britain is around fifty years old. However, its founding commitment to interdisciplinary study is relevant to school and college teachers currently seeking to meet two of the most challenging assessment objectives set by the Schools Curriculum and Assessment Authority in the A-level and AS-level English Literature subject core.

Candidates should be able to:

A05 show understanding of the contexts in which literary texts are written and understood;

A06 show understanding of contexts and cultural and historical influences upon literary texts.¹

An understanding of the relationship between text and context - as an aspect of a broader interdisciplinarity - allows questions to be raised which can get overlooked by the alternatives of close textual analysis and full knowledge of the historical context. The former can leave students with skills which yet fail to pose the important So what? questions which make literature worth studying in the first place; while an approach through historical background can reduce complex texts to mere illustrations of events and periods and leave students wondering why they should not just read a good historical account. But when Nick Caraway and Jay Gatsby travel by car from Long Island to New York City in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby (1926) and are overtaken as they approach the city, neither teaching close-reading skills nor providing a general historical background quite catches the meaning of the episode as successfully as working to and fro between text and specific context:

A dead man passed us in a hearse heaped with blooms, followed by two carriages with drawn blinds, and by more cheerful carriages for friends. The friends looked out at us with the tragic eyes and short
upper lips of south-eastern Europe, and I was glad that the sight of Gatsby’s splendid car was included in their sombre holiday. As we crossed Blackwell’s Island 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 toward us in haughty rivalry.

"Anything can happen now that we’ve slid over this bridge,” I thought; "anything at all..."²

T

he words on the page which, together with the other apparently intrinsic qualities of "form [and] structure [which]...shape meanings" (Subject Cores, p. 6), are shot through with the extrinsic social crisis of post-war liberation and anxiety at the forces released by economic push-and-pull factors dating back to the late nineteenth century but given recent impetus by the economic upswing of the Jazz Age. The phase of mass immigration from south-eastern Europe which had begun in the 1890s³ has been superseded by the Great Migration of blacks from the South which had begun in 1914 with the war boom so that the reference to "short upper lips" and "the yolks of their eyeballs" does not necessarily signify an endemic racism but a historically specific fear. In the case of immigrants, the fear provoked Congress in 1921 and then again in 1924 to pass acts establishing quotas for immigrants. These acts hit would-be immigrants from southern and eastern Europe particularly hard. In the case of blacks the fear manifested itself in an increasing ghettoisation in Harlem, Chicago’s South Side and other urban areas as half a million blacks moved north between 1914 and 1919.

Y

et, just as we are on the point of becoming tempted by or overburdened with historical information and risk forgetting that The Great Gatsby is a novel and not palatable history, textual details and structures can be foregrounded. It is because Nick Caraway is both the narrator and a character new to the urban East Coast that the episode on Blackwell’s Island stands out. Coming from the stable Midwest and accompanied by the nouveau-riche Tom Buchanan, Nick cannot but notice race on the move up the historical agenda and - almost in spite of his sympathetic nature - cannot but use racist language. At which point, cross-references within the text become as suggestive as references out to American history. The encounters on the Queensboro Bridge imply a race: Gatsby and Caraway are "passed" by other cars, the last "in haughty rivalry". A few chapters earlier Tom Buchanan exclaims "Civilization’s going to pieces" and asks Nick whether he has read The Rise of the Colored Empires "by this man Goddard" (Gatsby, p.19), a book which - as Mick Gidley (an American Studies colleague) has explained - is the novel’s version of Theodore Lothrop Stoddard’s The Rising Tide of Color Against White World Supremacy (1920), crossed with Madison Grant’s best-seller, The Passing of the Great Race of 1916. Grant had written the "Introduction" to Stoddard’s The Rising Tide of Color.⁴ In [The Rise of the Colored Empires] is a fine book”, Tom insists, “and everybody ought to read it. The idea is if we don’t look out the white race will be - will be utterly submerged. It’s all scientific stuff; it’s been proved” (p. 19).

W

ho has the right to be on the Queensboro Bridge? And in a fast car, itself a sign of the conspicuous consumption of the 1920s. The description of the black people in the car similarly sends us into and out of the text: the black triangle of "two bucks and a girl" echoing that of Tom, Gatsby and Daisy, and the modish dress of the blacks suggesting that while Nick and Gatsby are on their way to Forty-second Street the real insiders are headed towards Harlem, where the rival black Modernism of the Harlem Renaissance was underway by the mid-1920s and had been formally announced by Alain Locke in The New Negro, published the year before Fitzgerald’s novel. That the episode en route to New York City is the only overt mention of blacks in this quintessential novel of the American dream offers a revealing perspective for today’s readers on an American classic. Moreover, it asks today’s readers to wonder whether Fitzgerald’s readers in the 1920s would have responded in an enlightened way and, perhaps, to go on to speculate about what, in our reading of contemporary texts might reveal our cultural pre-occupations.

W

hat sets of values are in contention in this "race" to the city involving Midwesterners, first or second-generation European immigrants, and blacks? These sample questions are difficult to answer satisfactorily unless students have been helped to pick up the historical or contextual resonances of
key words and the significance of the first-person narrative structure in drawing attention to the extra-
ordinary quality of an apparently ordinary episode on the highway. It is the textual/formal dimension
which transforms the 1920s' social and racial context into a dynamic interpretative factor rather than
an inert historical background. And, as so often, the best way to be a historical or contextual critic of
literature is to be a good close-reader of texts - but a close-reader who acknowledges that words have
historical meanings. While, on the other hand, the general requirement that "A/AS syllabuses in
English Literature should... indicate, where appropriate, ways in which the study of the subject can
contribute to an understanding of spiritual, moral and cultural issues" (Cores, p. 3) would make no
sense if the text was studied in a historical vacuum. Or - worse - might encourage an easy
acceptance of universal values. It is only when the text is historically alive that the issues have any
meaning and provoke meaningful comparisons with the different historical situations of readers.

The reorganisation of the National Curriculum, combined with general pressure of work on teachers
has made the establishment of an inter-disciplinary American Studies A-level unlikely in the
foreseeable future. This is certainly the message which is passed on by school/college teacher-
members of the British Association for American Studies (BAAS). Nevertheless, set texts in an A- or
AS-level syllabus can be the occasion for localised explorations of inter-disciplinary study. And, as the
d example from The Great Gatsby has sought to demonstrate, building up a specific context is both
more satisfying than providing introductory overviews of "The Twenties" or "The Jazz Age" and more
do-able because the demands of the text set limits upon how much context needs to be understood.
Naturally, as university teachers in an inter-disciplinary subject, we would welcome more of this kind
of text-context study in the 16-19 English Literature core curriculum because the transition to higher
education for the kind of lively, wide-ranging students we like to teach is made that much easier.
These students are already asking the So what? questions when they study the texts we assign in our
introductory courses. However, there is also a lesson at the other end of higher education which might
courage teachers to see Assessment Objectives 5 and 6 as an opportunity rather than a hurdle.
Our American Studies students frequently come back from job interviews and report that employers
interpret our carefully planned inter-disciplinary degree programmes as excellent training for the kind
of flexible, lateral-thinking people they want to take on because they have proved themselves capable
of handling different bodies of material (texts and contexts?). While slightly irritating for an academic,
who probably designs courses for quite different reasons, it is apparent that the doing of inter-
disciplinary study, the effort to relate text and context, creates a bridge between liberal learning and
the professional/vocational preparation which - with the best will in the world - many of us interested in
literature cannot get enthusiastic about. A "transferable skill" need not lack intellectual content within
inter-disciplinary study.

Notes

1. ACAC, CCEA and SCAA, *GCE Advanced and Advanced Subsidiary Examinations Subject Cores for English Literature*
   (January, 1997). Subsequent references are included in the text.
   included in the text.
3. The intricacies of text-context relations are sometimes signalled by doubt over which tense to use. Here, the present tense
   seems strangely appropriate.
   pp. 171-81. This article shows how American Studies critics anticipated what now goes under the name of "New
   Historicism."
5. Interestingly, Assessment Objective 3 of the History A-level subject core reminds historians of the importance of close (textual?) attention to source material "in relation to the historical context".

6. In return, the British Association for American Studies is encouraging its members who teach in universities to offer a series of one-day Teachers Conferences in the hope of fostering better relations between 16-19 and higher education. The relation between text and context is likely to be a central methodological concern in such conferences. If teachers have advice to offer on which American literary/historical topics form part of their syllabuses and would therefore make useful conference themes, Douglas Tallack (address below) would be very pleased to hear from them.

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