

Black Male Marginalization in Early Twentieth Century American Canonical Novels: *The Great Gatsby* and *Of Mice and Men*

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Abstract The aim of this article is to delineate racialized discourse in the two canonical American novels *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald and *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck, which are regaining popularity in the 21st century. The timeliness of this analysis is marked by the continued discussion of race in the United States, particularly oscillating around black and white dynamics, resurfacing, for instance, through the reported increase of inter-racial hate crimes. The chosen novels offer information regarding the genesis and nature of racial bifurcation endemic to the nation's historically evolving conceptions of white superiority and black inferiority. The marginalization of black males bears particular significance in that this phenomenon enunciates the gendered politics of race.

Key words American society; white supremacy; black men; marginalization; race

The Great Gatsby by F. Scott Fitzgerald and *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck are two literary texts of American canonical literature of the twentieth century that have been belabored on by a considerable number of literary scholars. Today in the 21st century the novels are being revisited. For instance, the adaptation of *The Great Gatsby*, starring Leonardo DiCaprio, premiered earlier this year, and a new Polish translation of *Of Mice and Men* was released last in February 2012. Both literary works present images of the class and racial stratification of American society. Although they bear on American social and moral dilemmas engendered by US capitalism in the first half of the twentieth century, they are deemed to be currently informative and enlightening. The books disclose that the forces that led to the marginalization of black men have historical origins earlier than the 1920s and 1930s. They bring to memory the racialized nature of the American society to 21st century readers. The debate about race is an aspect of current social, political, and academic discourse

involving the polemic whether race is still central in the US, in the time of the so-called post-racial era, the “Age of Obama”. The objective of this analysis of Fitzgerald and Steinbeck’s novels is to make an attempt at ascertaining the extent to which racial questions delineated in these works are applicable to present-day American racial reality.

It is common knowledge that the leitmotif of both novels, *The Great Gatsby* and *Of Mice and Men*, is the American Dream. The myth of the Promised Land and the hope for better future prospects have accompanied the ideologies and actions of hordes of peoples seeking social advancement in the New World since the arrival of the first European settlers. The famous words in the final paragraph of *Of Mice and Men* recall the “fresh green breast of the new world”¹ (115) which Dutch sailors ravished in their lust for gain. Not only did the Dutch, but also other Europeans envisioned rebirth in the virginal land, away from their oppressive, corrupt European homelands. The desire for wealth in the New World brought about struggles for prosperity and power, which fostered the necessity to define and utilize categories that divided people and granted the privileges to the emerging dominant group. Race was the category chosen to justify the human, moral, and intellectual superiority of the European immigrants and the inferiority of non-white others. In an interview “The Pain of Being Black,” Toni Morrison explicates the role blackness played as a referent against which the Europeans aggrandized their status in America. She states:

If there were no black people here in this country, it would have been Balkanized. The immigrants would have torn each other’s throats out, as they have done everywhere else. But in becoming an American, from Europe, what one has in common with that other immigrant is contempt for me— it’s nothing else but color [...] Every immigrant knew he would not come as the very bottom. He had to come above at least one group—and that was [black people]. (Taylor-Guthrie 255)

In *The Great Gatsby*, the narrative presents the diseased outcome of the racialized mindset that had been festering in America for four centuries. Aesthetically, whiteness overwhelms the seemingly idyllic surroundings. The spotlessness creates an illusion of moral purity, as some apparently uncorrupt characters wear white clothes, own “white palaces” (6) a “white roadster” (48), speak “as cool as their white dresses” (10) with a “complexion powdered milky white” (20).² Engulfed by whiteness, they relish luxury and lavish parties in celebration of attaining the American Dream. In other words, they seem to have made it.

However, the expansive referencing of widespread happiness, though illusionary,

intertwines with the narrator's, Nick Carraway, allusions to not only inter-class conflict between the generational aristocracy residing in East Egg and the newly established upper-class living in West Egg but also to the racial stratification of American society. The characters' statements on ethnicity are sparse, however when the topic is broached, their utterances are explicit enough to reveal the racial and ethnic thought which permeated the first half of the twentieth century. The America portrayed is a country of immigrants. Peter Gregg Slater, a literary critic, remarks upon the ethnic background of those around Nick Carraway's. He cites Carraway's "Finnish servant who mutters to herself in her strange language, [...] 'a gray, scrawny Italian child' [...] the owner of the coffee joint by the ash heaps as 'the young Greek, Michaelis' [and] 'the lost Swede towns' [which] are a part of the Middle West with which he does not identify" (55). The Euro-Americans are to be found in all social classes. Nick Carraway, Tom Buchanan, and Tom's wife, Daisy represent the most privileged generational aristocracy. Some whites, Jews, and other European immigrants belong to the inferior nouveau riche, like the Jew, Meyer Wolfsheim, who involved Gatsby in the corrupt, though extremely profitable, business of bootlegging. Myrtle and her husband, in turn, are at the bottom of the social ranking.

References to the characters' ethnic background evidence the narrator's tendency to identify with privileged Nordics and to discriminate against non-whites and working-class whites. For instance, Nick Carraway descriptions of Wolfsheim involve the reference to "the 'tragic' and quivering nose, the accent ('gonnegtion'), the cuff-links made of the 'finest specimens of human molars,' and the 'Swastika Holding Company' with its 'lovely Jewess'" (Gregg 56). Nick's prejudicial statements regarding the Jewish millionaire may stem from moral condemnation of Wolfsheim's illegal business. On the other hand, his attitude seems racial or, more precisely, anti-Semitic because he does not reproach in an equally hostile manner Gatsby, who is similarly engaged in the same corrupt activity. Surpassing the narrator's racialized aspersions, Tom Buchanan's infamous comment is the most poignant white supremacist statement. He contends,

Civilization's going to pieces [...] I've gotten to be a terrible pessimist about things. Have you read *The Rise of the Colored Empires* by this man Goddard? [...] The idea is if we don't look out the white race will be—will be utterly submerged [...] This fellow has worked out the whole thing. It's up to us, who are the dominant race, to watch out or these other races will have control of things [...] This idea is that we're Nordics. I am, and you are, and you are, and [...] we've produced all the things that go to make civilization—oh, science and art, and all that. (10-11)

In this passage, Fitzgerald juxtaposes three corresponding aspects of the growth of global Western colonialist modernity—science, civilization, and whiteness. The literary reference to *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World-Supremacy* (1920) by the racial anthropologist Theodore Lothrop Stoddard signified fear that peoples of other races were outnumbering the white population. Moreover, Tom's assertion of white human and intellectual superiority reflects earlier perspectives enunciated by certain Enlightenment philosophers. For instance, regarding black people, Montesquieu posited, "It is impossible for us to suppose that these beings should be men; because if we supposed them to be men, one would begin to believe we ourselves were not Christians" (qtd. in West 61). Voltaire stated, "If their understanding is not of a different nature from ours, it is at least greatly inferior. They are not capable of any great application or association of ideas, and seemed formed neither for the advantage nor the abuses of philosophy" (qtd. in West 62). One of the American Founding Fathers, Thomas Jefferson, went so far to claim "Comparing them by their faculties of memory, reason, and imagination, it appears to me, that in memory they are equal to the whites; in reason much inferior [...] and that in imagination they are dull, tasteless and anomalous" (qtd. in West 62). In the same vein as the quoted Western thinkers, the fictitious character, Tom Buchanan, affirms white supremacy by belittling the capacities of non-white people.

The other characters that represent the members of the privileged white aristocracy in America do not question Tom Buchanan's racist assumptions. His wife, Daisy, in admiration, considers his suppositions as expressions of true scientific knowledge not pseudo-science. When Tom asserts the Nordic identity of his company and sounds the alarm to defend racial purity, he is unopposed.

In Fitzgerald's novel, amidst all the marginalized representatives of multiple ethnicities and nationalities, black men appear as the most fearful group that needs to be excluded. The black male marginalization is not the effect of the 1920s competitive rat race, discriminatory class-consciousness, or ethical ambiguities. The utterances of some characters reveal the systematic, more deeply rooted anti-black racism which advocated multifaceted exclusion from the mainstream American, and supposedly global, community.

Above all, anti-black racism possesses an ontological dimension as it denies the recognition of black people's equivalent humanity and intellectual capacity, as put forward by major Enlightenment figures. Although Tom demeans all 'colored' people when he calls for white civilization's hegemony, he seems to be particularly fretful about black male intrusion into the white male world order. In a heated argument with his wife, Daisy, and her lover, Gatsby, Tom voices his racial fear. First, he

reminds Gatsby of his uncertain origins, saying "I suppose the latest thing is to sit back and let Mr. Nobody from Nowhere make love to your wife" (82-83). At this point, Tom's statement might be interpreted both as reference to Gatsby's ethnic ambiguity or disapproval of his social status, as a member of the nouveau riche who come from 'nowhere'. Further on, Tom shifts from class-consciousness to racialized thinking and considers the ultimate taboo of black/white intermarriage. He complains, "Nowadays people begin by sneering at family life and family institutions, and next they'll throw everything overboard and have intermarriage between black and white" (83). Therefore, Tom sees interracial marriage as a threat to the maintenance of white hegemony within mainstream American society. To him, ontologically, this means racial degradation.

Apart from its ontological dimension, Tom's white supremacy is sexual. His anxiety about black male interference in the white man's order surfaces at the moment when he mentions the threat of interracial marriage. While he is reproaching Daisy and Gatsby for their love affair, black and white relationships enter his mind. Since he is concerned with the white woman's, Daisy, love life, a troublesome black male presence lodges within. Tom's stance is typical of white supremacists in the 1920s, a period of intense activity of the white racist terror group, the Christian Knights of the Ku Klux Klan. Tom is a white man who sees black sexuality as a threat to white femininity, thus to his own wellbeing. In America, white men developed this mindset during slavery, "Slave owners would naturally assume that a slave who desired white women also desired other things that white men had: freedom, wealth, dominance" (Leiter 30). White fear of black male interference furthered the myth of black male hypersexuality and of the black man a rapist (Leiter 49). The white woman, in turn, became the embodiment of femininity and purity, and, as bearer of life, was viewed as instrumental in maintaining a racially pure white society. In post-bellum America, "the fear white men had of black men began to take some of its most lascivious forms. It was then that the myth of the black man's sexuality, the myth of the black man as sexual monster, as a threat to pure white womanhood, began to gain force" (Wallace 23). At this juncture, white nationalism employed a gendered and racialized discourse. Although the prohibition of interracial relationships proscribed intimate relations by whites with black women as well as black men, white supremacists focused more on limiting black men's sexual agency vis a vis white women. Alleged rape of a white woman was frequently used as an excuse for the lynching of black man. Therefore, sexuality was politicized, as professor Roland Murray lays out, "By prohibiting black men sexual access to white females—in ideology and practice—white Americans inscribed their denial of blacks' right to participate in the body of politics and rationalized their violent repression of a race" (72). No wonder that, *The*

Great Gatsby, is “intimately engaged with tropes of identity” (Schreier 153). Tom’s fear of the demise of white civilization is accompanied by a focus on white femininity underlined with the references to almost angelic beauty. The narrator describes Daisy Buchanan and Jordan Baker as “two young women [...] buoyed up as though upon an anchored balloon [...] both in white, and their dresses [...] rippling and fluttering as if they had just been blown back in after a short flight around the house” (7). After Tom’s diatribe against black/white interracial marriage, the white female, Jordan, affirms their whiteness, stating, “We’re all white here” (81). Therefore, not only is whiteness an aesthetic trait, but it also reflects the white supremacist worldview of some characters who fantasize over a supposed black male threat to white male dominion.

Paradoxically, in the midst of the 1920s, the period known as the Jazz Age, the characters imbibe black music. Nonetheless, they reject the recognition of black people as full-fledged citizens of American society. Basically, the explicit black presence is erased from the scenes of *The Great Gatsby*. Only at one time does the narrator stand closely to a “pale well-dressed negro” (98), the witness of a car accident in which Tom Buchanan’s lover, Myrtle Wilson, is killed. The phrase a “pale well-dressed negro” conjures up the slavery term mulatto and colorism involving, a “prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their color” (Walker 290), also known as pigmentocracy, according to which “an African American person’s worth as a human being is determined on an ascending scale based on an admixture of Caucasian blood. The more white-skinned a person is, (supposedly) the greater that person’s psychocultural superiority and capacity to dominate others” (Cannon 72). A value system such as this leads to the privileging light-complexioned black people and the marginalization of the darker-skinned. Seemingly for this reason, in *The Great Gatsby*, Nick Carraway acknowledges the company of an affluent light-skinned black man and is disturbed by darker black people in a passing car “driven by a white chauffeur, in which sat three modish negroes, two bucks and a girl” (44). Carraway responds with the thought “anything can happen now” (44). He comments on their appearance with derision, stating, “I laughed aloud as the yolks of their eyeballs rolled towards us in haughty rivalry” (40), exposing his caricature minstrel show perception of black people which was pandemic in the 19th century, popularized by “blackfaced white men mocking black culture, language, and character” (Bell XVIII).

All things considered, in *The Great Gatsby*, black male marginalization is portrayed through a number of racialized, aesthetic codes. Omnipresent whiteness is a metaphor for white supremacy, and the lack of blackness signifies the marginalization, and even desirable erasure of black men from mainstream American social reality.

John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* presents a more racially explicit image of black male socio-political marginalization. At first glance, the white and black working class representatives appear to be equally positioned at the bottom of the social ladder, forced to perform backbreaking work on a ranch during the Great Depression. The roles of white people are both that of exploiting employers and exploited workers, represented by Curley and his father and George, Lennie, and Candy respectively. Stratification within the second group soon surfaces. Hard labor and resourcefulness were for some the only survival strategies during that time. Those who could not manage were marginalized. The strongest, on the other hand, constituted a separate, unified group. An occasion evidencing division between the two groups occurred when all the strong and young men left the farm for entertainment, leaving behind those who did not belong to their group, mentally impaired Lennie, an old man Candy, a crippled black man Crooks, and a woman, Curley's wife. This is also an instance showcasing the racialized marginalization of the black man where he is degraded to the lowest level of the social rung among the outcasts.

One of the recurring motifs in the novel is loneliness, as George's epigraphic statement says, "Guys like us, that work on ranches, are the loneliest guys in the world. They got no family. They don't belong no place. They come to a ranch an' work up a stake and then they go into town and blow their stake, and the first thing you know they're poundin' their tail on some other ranch. They ain't got nothing to look ahead to" (15). At the same time, George disclaims his and Lennie's loneliness, retorting "'But not us! An' why? Because I got you to look after me and you got me to look after you, and that's why'" (15). Even after George kills Lennie in order to circumvent his subjection to mob violence for the accidental killing of Curley's wife, George has companionship, because Slim accompanies George and consoles him. At this point, "Steinbeck is stressing the significance of the new relationship between George and Slim" (Owens 20). Also Curley's wife, no matter how possessive her husband is, sometimes succeeds in communicating with other men, in resistance to her husband's oppression. Besides, playing games and partying together, the ranch laborers find opportunities to socialize.

In contradistinction, the black man, Crooks, is the most marginalized person on the farm. His isolation is not existential but racial. Crooks inability to participate socially with white people is emblematic of the pervasive racial segregation in America. When Lennie inquires about his separateness, he responds, "Cause I'm black. They play cards in there, but I can't play because I'm black. They say I stink. Well, I tell you, you all of you stink to me" (68). Further, he implies that although Lennie does not fully belong to the more privileged group as a retarded person, he still faces more prospects and holds a better position to that of Crooks, who states,

"You got George. You *know* he's goin' to come back [...] S'pose you couldn't go into the bunk house and play rummy 'cause you was black. How'd you like that [...] I tell ya a guy gets too lonely an' he gets sick" (72). The sickness he speaks of refers to the aloofness he develops as a survival strategy. Cognizant of his deprivation, he is adamant about dominating his own space. Seeking to be a ruler at least within his closest surroundings, he manages to create the illusion of an ability to decide about himself. For this reason, he lets it be known that, "This here's my room. Nobody got any right in here but me" (68). When Lennie responds that he decided to trespass Crook's threshold because he saw the light as an invitation, Crooks reproaches him, "Well, I got a right to have a light. You go on get outta my room. I ain't wanted in the bunk house, and you ain't wanted in my room" (68). Crooks later appears to seek sincerity in his communications with Lennie and Candy. He is well aware of his powerlessness and the threat whites present. He begins to speak to Lennie in a more hesitant and "softer" (70) tone when Lennie approaches him with a menacing look. Possibly, it is wariness of the mentally challenged white man's higher status in the social hierarchy that induces the black man to temper his demeanor. On another occasion, Crooks is taken aback when Candy enters his space and he voices the comment that it is out of the ordinary for white people to visit "a colored man's room" (75) and "Candy quickly change[s] the subject" (75). The racialized marginalization of the black men is entirely ignored, although Crooks attempts to initiate serious, honest conversation about his status and his feelings regarding it. Lennie and Candy avoid it, choosing to dream on about their future farms, possessions and their own autonomy.

Another symbolic, and not uncharacteristic, manifestation of black male marginalization entails the juxtaposition of the black male's status with that of the white woman. As has been pointed out earlier, apparently, the white woman, Curley's wife, also lives a relatively marginalized existence to varying degrees distinct from that of Lennie, Candy, and Crooks. Like the three men, she is left behind, alone, on the farm, while more privileged others leave for entertainment in town. The withholding of her name highlights her subjugation. She is known only as Curley's wife. Unrecognized, possessed by her husband, and lacking identity, she seeks emotional closeness with other men, who she hopes can offer some consolation and compassion. In doing so, she approaches them with seductive gestures. Although her husband dominates her, and other men fear him, she does not hesitate to take the risk. The only man with whom she reverses her role from oppressed to oppressor is the black man. Discourteously interrupting conversation between the three discredited men, she denigrates all them, inquiring, "An' what am I doin'? Standin' here talkin' to a bunch of bindle stiffs—a nigger an' a dum-dum and a lousy ol' sheep" (78). In

response, simple-minded Lennie is taken by surprise and made speechless, the elderly man Candy questions her authority. When Crooks makes the slightest attempt to defend this trespass into his space, the white woman immediately threatens him with lynching. Expressing her power over black men, she reproaches him, "Listen Nigger, [...] You know what I can do to you if you open you trap? [...] I could get you strung up on a tree so easy it ain't even funny" (80). As a result, Crooks "reduce[s] himself to nothing" (80). Therefore, although Curley's wife has somewhat lower status in certain situations on the white male dominated farm, she knows she is at least one level above black men. Crooks, in turn, ceases defense in awareness of the lethal threat a white woman could be to the existence of black men in racist America. His reducing "himself to nothing" (80) represents the "fear of the white woman instilled in the [black men's] minds [compelling the black men to] "avoid the woman that is white, act as if she does not exist" (Hernton 58). The white woman's threat of lynching reveals knowledge of the white group's mob mentality.

Lastly, black men's marginalization in *Of Mice and Men* testifies to the colonial model of white supremacy in America. In colonialist terms, the American society regards "the black community as an underdeveloped colony whose economics and politics are controlled by leaders of the racially dominant group. [...] black men [...] remain, a group subjected to economic exploitation and political control; they lack the ability to express their cultural values without incurring serious consequences" (Staples 39-40). Correspondingly, the black male character, Crooks, recalls his nostalgic past, growing up on his father's prosperous ranch in California. Paradoxically, his family had what the white men around him dream of - land of their own. However, he discerns the analogy between the racialized societal realm in the past and the present, stating, "There wasn't another colored family for miles around. And now there ain't a colored man on this ranch an' there's jus' one family in Soledad" (70). Moreover, as he was not allowed to play with white children in his neighborhood before, now, he is not allowed to socialize with the white men on the ranch. His status has even deteriorated as he does not live and work on his own land. Like a colonized object, he is forced to serve the dominant group.

In summary, *The Great Gatsby* and *Of Mice and Men* delineate the complexity of black male marginalization in American society as a result of the politicization of race. F. S. Fitzgerald reconstructs white supremacy mostly aesthetically, through the implementation of omnipresent whiteness. This corresponds with Toni Morrison's observation regarding representations of whiteness characteristic of canonical American literature containing:

images of impenetrable whiteness (that) need contextualizing to explain

their power, pattern, and consistency. Because they appear almost always in conjunction with representations of black or Africanist people who are dead, impotent, or under complete control, these images of blinding whiteness seem to function as both antidote for and meditation on the shadow that is companion to this whiteness—a dark and abiding presence that moves the hearts and texts of American literature with fear and longing. (Morrison 33)

In *The Great Gatsby*, omnipresent whiteness accompanies references to barely visible blackness. Whenever the white characters mention a black presence, they are skeptical and refuse to recognize its existence within the white dominated realm. Black males appear to constitute a particular threat to the white male order, as evidenced by the character Tom Buchan's statements. In *Of Mice and Men*, the white male dominated ranch serves as a microcosm of an America society stratified by race and class, where black men are positioned at the lowest rung. Although some white characters fail to realize their dreams, like, for instance, Lennie or Curley's wife, the reason, in their case, is existential not racial. All in all, with their 21st century resurgence in popularity, both novels engage in recalling the forces that formed the racialized construction of American society. They refer to the 1920s and 1930s deep-seated racial segregation, when efforts to further promote white hegemony sought to eliminate black participation in the general society. The derogatory, stereotypical descriptions of the black characters, their social degradation, the refusal to acknowledge their advancement, and their isolation from the dominant group are all factors in relegating black people to the inferior status of so-called second-class citizens. An awareness of these tactics seems crucial in the 21st century, a time when anti-black racial hate crimes are reported to be on in America. For instance, soon after the election of President Barack Obama, in November 2008, the reports of a "white backlash" flooded the American press with headlines such as "Cross burnings, Schoolchildren chanting 'Assassinate Obama', Black figures hung from nooses, Racial epithets scrawled on homes and cars" (Washington). Most revealing is the fact that "hate crimes are not committed against people because of their personal identity. Those who commit hate crimes are not focused on *who* the victim is, but rather *what* he or she is" (Parks and Jones 1313). Therefore, anti-black hate crimes do not result from direct inter-personal conflicts but from mindsets that envision black men as potential enemies. In this context, the novels *The Great Gatsby* and *Of Mice and Men* are certainly worthy of revisiting.

Notes

1. Quotations from *Of Mice and Men* see John Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men* (London: Penguin Books, 2000).
2. All quotations of *The Great Gatsby* are from F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 1993).

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