Suocai (Larry) Su
Harold Washington College
suocais@yahoo.com or ssu@ccc.edu

Literature 126: Contemporary American Literature

Modern Cities, Modern Identities, and Twentieth-Century American Literature This course explores the complex and complicated images of cities and their profound and significant impact on society and culture as manifested in twentieth-century American literature. Though the course is especially designed for and targeted at an urban student body, it can be used by all students who are interested in reading these Great Books or exploring the common themes of cities and identities in these works.

Aside from being masterpieces of great literary merit, the books studied in this course have written their images, icons, topics, and themes into American culture. Carrie's struggle to find her place in Chicago and New York in *Sister Carrie*, the invisible man's endless pursuit to understand who he is in *Invisible Man*, Gatsby's efforts to decipher what the American dream means to the humble person he is in *The Great Gatsby*, Eliot's meditation on the urban wasteland in *The Waste Land,* and Jasmine's constant reinvention of herself in new identities in *Jasmine* have embodied some of the most important concepts and values in American society. Specifically, in *Sister Carrie*, Theodore Dreiser, through the character of Carrie and her relations with Drouet and Hurstwood, describes a young, beautiful, energetic, intelligent, and resourceful woman who aspires to independence and success. In *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison, through the character of the narrator, portrays the tremendous financial, racial, emotional, and interpersonal barriers he has to overcome to make himself visible in the society. In *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald, through the character of Gatsby, delineates an ambitious young man who, allured by materialism and beauty, turns his humble background around and becomes "successful" at the end. And in *Jasmine*, Bharati Mukherjee, through the character of Jasmine, illustrates a contemporary immigrant woman who, attracted by American ideals, determines to be somebody of her own invention instead of being confined to the traditional roles of a South Asian woman.

These characters affirm and reaffirm the cultural and ethical values and beliefs on which the United States is built. As the inheritors of this nation's rich intellectual and cultural resources, college students have the privilege and responsibility to sustain these literary and cultural values of ambition, self-determination, hard work, and devotion and pass them on to the next generation. The importance of the Great Books in maintaining the nation's cultural heritage, in teaching the general public what should be valued and highlighted in their lives, in cultivating a nation's taste, and in developing its potential for open-mindedness, generosity, and greatness can never be overemphasized.

Table of Contents

The contents of this module are as follows:

- Themes
- Overview of the course
- Discussion questions for *Sister Carrie*
- Discussion questions for *The Age of Innocence*
- Discussion questions for *The Great Gatsby*
- Discussion questions for *Invisible Man*
- Discussion questions for *Death of a Salesman*
- Discussion questions for *Jasmine*
- Questions for research papers
- Important excerpts from texts

Problems and Rewards

Instructors who teach the Great Books have experienced both challenging times and exciting moments. The challenges come from students' motivational difficulties and their lack of literary and background knowledge in reading these books. As can be seen from the list, these books studied in this course are of various lengths. *Sister Carrie* and *Invisible Man* are very long, over 500 pages each. *The Great Gatsby*, *Jasmine*, and *Death of a Salesman* are comparatively shorter, but each presents its own difficulties because of its experimentation with literary styles. Eliot is known to be a very hard writer to read. The varying lengths and special difficulties of these texts may pose challenges for students who normally lack the intellectual skills and cultural literacy to work with lengthy and difficult texts. Therefore, students need patience and encouragement as they read through and analyze these works.

The other challenge to students is that these books are distant from students who usually do not possess the skills that come from a trained literary imagination, and that will enable them to extract universal values from the particular settings of these works. Therefore, guidance should be directed to the universal nature and appeal of these books, and students should be encouraged to apply the issues raised in them widely to other situations.

Lack of literary and historical knowledge might be other challenges that students face in this course. Because the books selected for this course range across the entire spectrum of the twentieth century, they intersect with many literary movements, such as realism, naturalism, modernism, and postmodernism. Therefore, it is important that instructors should introduce these literary movements to students, particularly their characteristics and how they are used in these works. Creative pedagogies such as presentations or group projects should be used to inform students about these movements. After finishing each book, there should be a summarizing session in which students discuss why that particular work is a Great Book on the basis of its literary values, and in which they explore the themes that are the focus over the semester. Likewise, students should also be informed about the historical and biographical

backgrounds in which these works were produced. Reading these works with a clear literary and historical context will help students to understand the books and appreciate them.

Challenging as some of these books are, they give students tremendous satisfaction and benefits. Though I have taught some of these works in literature courses before, this is my first time to teach them as a Great Books project and focus on one common theme. While it is difficult to predict the exact happy moments of teaching these works, some of the exciting moments that I had before in teaching these works can be equally achieved in this course. Of course, the greatest moments come from knowing that students are able to read these books, talk about them, and appreciate their great values. As they share their favorite episodes or chapters with other students, they demonstrate that the Great Books have reached them. They become interested in the characters or issues, can identify with them, or feel strongly about what they have read. Such are the great moments for both the teachers and students. When students become more adept at reading and understanding these works; when they change from being frustrated by a certain difficult chapter or passage to being excited by their ability to decipher a difficult metaphor or symbol; when they can build connections between what happens in the book and what is going on in the present world, then they will have noticed that their reading, analyzing, and writing abilities have sharpened and improved. Their ability and confidence in working with difficult texts have increased. These epiphanies are the satisfaction of teaching the Great Books.

Themes

Many twentieth-century American writers such as Theodore Dreiser, Edith Wharton, Djuna Barnes, F. Scott Fitzgerald, T.S. Elliot, Ralph Ellison, Arthur Miller, John Updike, Saul Bellow, and Bharati Muhkerjee have written about American cities. While some writers have focused on the negative aspects of cities, such as poverty, pollution, violence, corruption, commercialization, human isolation and alienation, estranged family relations, racial or class tensions, and lack of moral certainties, others have focused on the positive aspects of cities: they are liberating, compelling, vital, diverse, pluralistic, alluring places that offer a bounty of commercial, financial, cultural, and personal opportunities for their inhabitants. Yet most American writers view cities as paradoxical mixtures of utopia and dystopia: alluring and ugly, comprehensible and elusive, hopeful and dreary.

This course explores American writers' complex and multifaceted images of cities and their profound and significant impact on our society and culture in the twentieth century. Specifically, we will look at how cities are represented in the great novels, poems, and plays studied in this course. The issues under discussion will include but are not limited to the following. How do race, class, and gender in the urban setting affect the characters' struggle for survival and identity? How do the writers create urban settings as problematic sites, as a locale of tensions and contradictions, for the characters? How do the writers comply, challenge, or complicate our traditional understanding of American cities? How do the writers' own lives shape their understanding and creation of these urban novels? What literary techniques are used by the writers to represent cities? And how does reading each of these books help us to better understand our cities and the environment in which we live?

The central questions that we will focus on in exploring the connections between cities and identity are as follows.

- How do the conservative and bohemian sections of New York in Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* provide contrasting environments that limit or liberate the characters?

- How does Fitzgerald in *The Great Gatsby* depict New York and Chicago as the paradox of both the American dream of wealth, love, and opportunity and as a hell to trap, corrupt, and finally destroy the characters?

- What do modern cities like New York and Chicago mean to an innocent and ambitious country girl like Sister Carrie in *Sister Carrie*? How does Dreiser use the shifts of urban and rural settings to convey his general themes about industrialization, human nature, and the interaction between the environment and the individual?

- How do great twentieth-century American poets like T.S. Eliot, Allen Ginsberg, and Gwendolyn Brooks portray cities? Do they exhibit different sensibilities from the novelists and playwrights?

- How does the competitive and indifferent business world of the big city affect family relations as depicted in Arthur Miller's estranged father and sons in *Death*

of a Salesman? How does Miller use the Loman family as a symbol by which to comment on the issue of what constitutes the American dream? How do the dynamic political, economic, and interpersonal shifts in post-World War II society affect traditional American values such as hard work and belief in the American dream?

- What does the urban setting mean to minorities like blacks and to immigrants like the recent arrivals from South Asia? How does race function as an important factor—like class and gender—in literary works written by minority and ethnic writers? What hopes and opportunities does the urban setting create for the characters? And what perils and challenges do the urbanites face in their daily struggles for survival and identity?

- What are the similarities or differences among these books in their literary merits and in their explorations of the common themes of modern cities and identity? Can you summarize the characteristics these books have in common?

- Reflect upon your experiences with reading these books. How do they affect your understanding and awareness of the issues raised in these works? Have they changed your personal perspectives or attitudes to life? Would you recommend this course to your friends so that they can benefit from the Great Books that you are reading?

These general questions will serve as guides as we work with these texts over the semester.

Overview of the Course

Required Texts

Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*
Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*
F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*
Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*
Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman*
Bharati Mukherjee, *Jasmine*
T.S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," *The Waste Land*, and other poems

Goals and Objectives

- To enhance students' critical reading, thinking, and writing abilities

- To sharpen students' ability to read and appreciate the Great Books

- To cultivate students' ability to read on a certain theme and to see how different literary works build on this theme

- To explore the complicated images of cities created by twentieth-century American writers

- To explore how diverse literary strategies are used by novelists, playwrights, and poets to create these images
- To encourage students to build connections between the urban experiences represented in literature and their own experiences

Course Requirements

Quizzes: 15 percent

Unannounced quizzes will be given from time to time to make sure you read the materials and keep up with the readings. These are brief-answer questions. If you read the works carefully, you will get the answers correct.

Journals: 20 percent

You are required to write one two-page entry for each book we read in class. Please do these entries after we finish each book. Consider your journal entries as personal spaces in which you reflect on the readings and tie them to the themes under consideration for the semester. In other words, these concise, concentrated, and well thought-out entries should reflect your deep engagement with the issues. There is no need to summarize the book's plot. I want you to address a fundamental theme, chapter, character, or symbol, and connect them with the broad themes we are concerned with over the whole semester; namely, the representation of cities and the literary strategies employed. I will not grade the entries for grammar, but I will look for deep, high-quality thinking.

Presentations: 15 percent

You are responsible for giving one presentation on one writer. I will pass a sign-up sheet for your favorite writer. It is also possible for two or more students to work on one writer. When a few of you work on the same writer, I want you to discuss among yourselves in order to avoid overlapping. You can cover different aspects of the work. When you are in class, give a formal presentation on the aspect you have chosen. Be prepared with notes and insights. You should be considered the experts on that particular text on that day, and be ready to lead us through the important points you want us to know.

Midterm Exam: 20 percent

You will have two or three essay questions that test how well you understand what you've read and your ability to make comparisons and contrasts of how different writers deal with the same issues. No questions will be asked on basic facts such as dates, names, etc.

Research Paper: 20 percent

This will consist of six to eight pages; involve at least two works; and focus on how the two works address the issues that we have been discussing. The paper must include three or four outside sources and use MLA format.

Attendance and Participation: 10 percent

Your attendance is recorded each class period. The student who expects to do well without attending classes will be gravely disappointed with his or her grades, for lectures

and discussions are as important as your own reading. So attend your classes and participate actively in the discussions.

Syllabus

Weeks 1, 2 and 3	*Sister Carrie*
Weeks 4 and 5	*The Age of Innocence*
Weeks 6 and 7	*The Great Gatsby*
Weeks 8, 9, and 10	*Invisible Man*
Weeks 11 and 12	*Death of a Salesman*
Weeks 13 and 14	*Jasmine*
Week 15	"Alfred J. Prufrock," *The Waste Land*
Week 16	Finals week: Research paper due

Discussion Questions for *Sister Carrie*

1. How does economic class govern the characters' relationship to money in *Sister Carrie*?

2. What is the relationship between money and sex in the novel? How do they play out in Carrie's relationships with Drouet and Hurstwood?

3. What are the major conflicts in the novel? How are they structured? How do they help to reveal the characters?

4. What role does Carrie's unsatisfied desire play in the novel? Consider the nature of consumer society, the distinction between imitation and the genuine, and the book's portrayal of conventional social attitudes toward womens' sexual desire.

5. What is the relationship between power and performance in the novel? How do the men of the novel—Hurstwood and Drouet, in particular—gain power over Carrie by performing certain roles? How does playing a role allow Carrie to assert her own power?

6. How is Carrie's identity developed over the course of the novel? Consider how her identity changes from the time she arrives in Chicago, and in the course of her relations with Drouet, with Hurstwood, her acting experiences, and her associations with other people. Are there any significant differences in these changes during these stages? What has she gained or lost in the process? What motivates these changes?

7. Find passages that describe New York and Chicago. What do these two different cities represent for Sister Carrie and other characters? What is the writer trying to say to the reader through his depictions of the two cities?

8. What is the theme of the novel? What does Dreiser expect to achieve through describing Carrie's ups and downs in life?

9. Many critics consider *Sister Carrie* as a naturalistic novel. What are the naturalistic ideas that are illustrated in the novel? How do the novel's naturalistic characteristics help readers to understand Carrie?

10. Does Dreiser describe the country and cities in the same way? How are they different? What is the message he is trying to convey through such contrasts?

11. What makes *Sister Carrie* a Great Book? Explore this question both from the literary point of view and in terms of the common theme we are focusing on in this course.

12. What important qualities or values can readers draw from Carrie? Is her life experience of any interest or relevance to young people today?

Discussion Questions for *The Age of Innocence*

1. Several years ago, *The Age of Innocence* was made into a critically acclaimed film directed by Martin Scorsese. Watch this movie and talk about its similarities and differences with the novel. If you notice any digressions from the novel, think how these changes are caused by cinematic requirements. Do these changes better reveal the characters?

2. How do you understand the title of the novel? Is this truly an age of innocence, according to Wharton? If not, are there certain people who are innocent? In what ways are they innocent? Is there some significance to their innocence? How is their innocence contrasted with other people's sophistication?

3. What are some of Newland Archer's characteristics? How do his characteristics change through his relations with May and Ellen? How do you assess these changes?

4. What types of characters do Newland, May, and Ellen represent? What is the significance of describing them?

5. Is *The Age of Innocence* a tragedy? Why or why not? Who are the victims in the tragedy?

6. Describe the differences between Newland's outlook on society and Ellen's. What do their views have in common? On what grounds do they differ?

7. Who is Countess Olenska? And why is she a threat to the social order in New York? How is New York different from European society? What influence does Ellen have on New York's high society? Why do the society people reject her? What does it say about the community and her? Does Ellen's identity change over the course of her stay in New York? How do you assess such changes? What role does her New York experience play in her whole life?

8. Wharton is noted for her use of setting to describe characters. What images does she want to present about New York's high society? What characteristics does this society have? How does it affect the characters in the novel? Does Wharton use other surroundings such as architecture, painting, and social occasions to reveal the characters?

9. What makes *The Age of Innocence* a Great Book? Explore this question from both the literary point of view and the common theme we are focusing on in this course.

Discussion Questions for *The Great Gatsby*

1. Discuss Gatsby's characteristics as Nick perceives him throughout the novel. What makes Gatsby "great"? Do you agree with Nick's portrayal of him?

2. What is Nick like as a narrator? Is he a reliable storyteller, or does his version of events seem suspect? How do his qualities as a character affect his narration?

3. What are some of *The Great* Gats*by*'s most important symbols? How do they contribute to the theme of the novel?

4. How does the geography of the novel dictate its themes and characters? What role does setting play in *The Great Gatsby*? How does Fitzgerald describe New York, Chicago, and the American Midwest? Do these urban and rural settings carry any specific significance for the characters? Do they have any special impact on the characters' identities?

5. In what sense is *The Great Gatsby* an autobiographical novel? Does Fitzgerald write more of himself into the character of Nick or into the character of Gatsby, or are the author's qualities found in both characters?

6. How does Gatsby represent the American dream? To what extent is this dream related to the urban setting? In what ways do the themes of dreams, wealth, and time relate to each other in the novel's exploration of America in the 1920s?

7. Compare and contrast Gatsby and Tom. How are they alike? How are they different? Given the extremely negative light in which Tom is portrayed throughout the novel, why might Daisy choose to remain with him instead of leaving him for Gatsby?

8. What makes *The Great Gatsby* a Great Book? Explore this question from both the literary point of view and the common theme we are focusing on in this course.

Discussion Questions for *Invisible Man*

1. What makes Ellison's narrator invisible? What is the relationship between his invisibility and other people around him? Is the protagonist's invisibility due solely to his skin color? Is it only the novel's white characters who refuse to see him? What other factors contribute to his invisibility?

2. What are the narrator's dreams and goals? How are these variously fulfilled or thwarted in the course of the book? What are the particular difficulties—race, class, gender, or others—that block his success? Does he overcome these difficulties? What motivation does he have to overcome them?

3. What is the significance of the grandfather's deathbed speech? Whom or what has he betrayed? How does the narrator deal with this betrayal? What other characters in this book resort to the same strategy of smiling betrayal?

4. What cultural tendencies or phenomena does Ellison hold up for satire in this novel? What are the real-life models for the Founder, the Brotherhood, and Ras the Exhorter? What types of ideas do they represent? How does the author convey the failures and shortcomings of these people and movements?

5. Why might Tod Clifton have left the Brotherhood to peddle demeaning dancing Sambo dolls? What does the narrator mean when he says: "It was as though he [Clifton] had chosen . . . to fall outside of history"? How would you describe Ellison's vision of history and the role that African-Americans play within it?

6. More than fifty years after it was first published, *Invisible Man* is still one of the most widely read and taught books in the African-American literary canon. Why do you think this is so? How true is this novel to the lives of black Americans in the twenty-first century? How true is it to the life of every one of us?

7. In spite of its vast success, Ellison's novel—and the author himself—have been fiercely criticized in some circles for insufficiencies in representing the African American community or for representing it in a negative light. Do you think this is true? Do you think Ellison makes artistic compromises in order to make the novel accessible to all readers?

8. How does Ellison describe the South and New York? What do these places mean to the different characters? What role does New York play in the formation of the invisible man's identity? How much has he learned from living in the urban setting? How is the urban setting compared and contrasted with the rural South?

9. What makes *Invisible Man* a Great Book? Explore this question from both the literary point of view and the common theme we are focusing on in this course.

10. In spite of the fact that the protagonist is black, the novel deals with universal issues that are not just limited to blacks or other minority groups. What universal themes has the author explored? Are there any that are relevant or important for us today? How do they help us to understand the human condition and identity?

Discussion Questions for *Death of A Salesman*

1. How does Willy Loman's home function as a metaphor for his ambitions?

2. Willy recalls his sons' teenage years as an idyllic past. What is the significance of this reminiscence? Is this past as idyllic as Willy imagines it to be?

3. How does Willy's interview with Howard reveal his confusion between the professional and personal realms of his life? What does this confusion reveal about his philosophy of life? Does that philosophy work in contemporary America?

4. What is the significance of Willy's missing the distinction between being loved and being well liked? What are the consequences of Willy's failure to distinguish between the two, particularly in post-World War II America?

5. How is Willy's retreat into the past a form of escape from his unpleasant present reality? How does it function as a way for Willy to cope with the failure to realize his ambitions?

6. How does Willy's desperate quest for the American dream represent the struggle of ordinary human beings for their identity and success? How are their successes thwarted by the social, political, economic, and familial forces that overpower them? Is Miller optimistic about the future of the American dream in his play?

7. How does Miller describe Willy's home in urban New York? How does he use the setting to illustrate the characters in the play? Is there any particular significance attached to Willy's urban home?

8. How does Miller describe the relations between Willy and his wife and sons? What characteristics do these relations have? If there are rifts in these relations, what are the causes of them? Does the urban setting contribute anything to the deterioration of father-son relations?

9. Why is *Death of a Salesman* a Great Book? Explore this question from both the literary point of view and the common theme we are focusing on in this course.

Discussion Questions for *Jasmine*

1. What kinds of identities does Jasmine invent for herself as she goes from India to the United States?

2. How are places described in the book? What do India, Florida, New York, Iowa, and California mean for the female protagonist?

3. What do Jasmine's and the other nannies' work in New York say about the work of immigrants in this country?

4. What do the life experiences of the old Indian man who claims to be a professor and the estranged relations between the young American couple say in general about life in the urban environment in contemporary America?

5. Why is *Jasmine* a Great Book? Explore this question from both the literary point of view and the common theme we are focusing on in this course.

Questions for Research Papers

1. How is Carrie's identity developed over the course of the novel? Consider her identity change from the time when she arrives in Chicago, her relations with Drouet, with Hurstwood, her acting experiences, and her associations with other people. Are there any significant differences in these changes during these stages? What has she gained or lost in the process? What motivates these changes?

2. Find passages that describe New York and Chicago. What do they represent for Sister Carrie and other characters? What is the writer trying to say to readers through his depictions of the two cities?

3. Who is Countess Olenska? And why is she a threat to the social order in New York? How is New York different from the European society? What influence does Ellen have on New York's high society? Why do the society people reject her? What does this say about the community and her? Does Ellen's identity change over her stay in New York? How do you assess such changes? What role does her New York experience play in her whole life?

4. Wharton is noted for her use of setting to describe characters. What images does she want to present about New York upper-class society? What characteristics does it have? How does it affect the characters in the novel? Does Wharton use other surroundings such as architecture, painting, and social occasions to reveal the characters?

5. How does the geography of the novel dictate its themes and characters? What role does setting play in *The Great Gatsby*? How does Fitzgerald describe New York, Chicago, and the American Midwest? Do these urban and rural settings carry any specific significance for the characters? Do they have any special impact on the characters' identities?

6. What makes Ellison's narrator invisible? What is the relationship between his invisibility and other people around him? Is the protagonist's invisibility due solely to his

skin color? Is it only the novel's white characters who refuse to see him? What other factors contribute to his invisibility?

7. How does Ellison describe the South and New York? What do these places mean to the different characters? What role does New York play in the formation of the invisible man's identity? How much has he learned from living in the urban setting? How is the urban setting compared and contrasted with the rural South?

8. In spite of the fact that the protagonist is black, the novel deals with universal issues that are not just limited to blacks or other minority groups. What universal themes has the author explored? Are there any that are relevant or important for us today? How do they help us to understand the human condition and identity?

9. How does Willy's desperate quest for the American dream represent the struggle of ordinary human beings for their identity and success? How are their successes thwarted by the social, political, economic, and familial forces that overpower them? Is Miller optimistic about the future of the American dream?

10. How does Miller describe Willy's home in urban New York? How does he use the setting to illustrate the characters in the play? Is there any particular significance attached to Willy's urban home?

Important Excerpts from Texts

The following are important passages that focus on urban settings. Discuss how these passages highlight the themes we are exploring in these texts and how they affect the identities of the characters.

> For those who pass it without entering, the city is one thing; it is another for those who are trapped by it and never leave. There is the city where you arrive for the first time; and there is another city which you leave never to return. Each deserves a different name.
>
> —Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*

> The City is a discourse and this discourse is truly a language; the city speaks to its inhabitants. We speak our city, the city where we are, simply by living in it, by wandering through it, by looking at it.
>
> —Roland Barthes, "Sociology and the Urban"

> With cities, it is as with dreams: everything imaginable can be dreamed, but even the most unexpected dream is a rebus that conceals a desire or its reverse, a fear. Cities, like dreams, are made of desires and fears, even if the thread of their discourse is secret, their rules are absurd, their perspectives are deceitful, and everything conceals something else.
>
> —Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*

In 1889 Chicago had the peculiar qualifications of growth which made such adventuresome pilgrimages even on the part of young girls plausible. Its many and growing commercial opportunities gave it widespread fame, which made of it a great magnet, drawing to itself from all quarters, the hopeful and the hopeless—those who had their fortune yet to make and those whose fortunes and affairs had reached a disastrous climax elsewhere. It was a city of over 500,000, with the ambition, the daring, the activity of a metropolis of a million. Its streets and houses were already scattered over an area of seventy-five square miles. Its population was not so much thriving upon established commerce as upon the industries which prepared for the arrival of others. The sound of the hammer engaged upon the erection of new structures was everywhere heard. Great industries were moving in. The huge railroad corporations which had long before recognized the prospects of the place had seized upon vast tracts of land for transfer and shipping purposes. Street-car lines had been extended far out into the open country in anticipation of rapid growth. The city had laid miles and miles of streets and sewers through regions where, perhaps, one solitary house stood out alone—a pioneer of the populous way to be. There were regions open to the sweeping winds and rain, which throughout the night were yet lighted with long, blinking lines of gas lamps, fluttering in the wind.

—Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*

He could not fail to notice the signs of affluence and luxury on every hand. He had been to New York before and knew the resources of its folly. In part it was an awesome place to him, for here gathered all that he most respected on this earth—wealth, place, and fame. The majority of the celebrities with whom he had tipped glasses in his day as manager hailed from this self-centered and populous spot. The most inviting stories of pleasure and luxury had been told of places and individuals here. He knew it to be true that unconsciously he was brushing elbows with fortune the livelong day; that a hundred or five hundred thousand gave no one the privilege of living more than comfortably in so wealthy a place. Fashion and pomp required more ample sums, so that the poor man was nowhere.

—Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*

I began to like New York, the racy, adventurous feel of it at night, and the satisfaction that the constant flicker of men and women and machines gives to the restless eye. I liked to walk up Fifth Avenue and pick out romantic women from the crowd and imagine that in a few minutes I was going to enter into their lives, and no one would ever know or disapprove. Sometimes, in my mind, I followed them to their apartments on the corners of hidden streets, and they turned and smiled back at me before they faded through a door into warm darkness. At the entrenched metropolitan twilight I felt a haunting loneliness sometimes, and felt it in others—poor young clerks who loitered in front of

windows waiting until it was time for a solitary restaurant dinner—young clerks in the dusk, wasting the most poignant moments of nights and life.

—F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

I spent my Saturday nights in New York, because those gleaming, dazzling parties of his were still with me so vividly that I could still hear the music and the laughter, fainter and incessant, from his garden, and the cars going up and down his drive. One night I did hear a material car there, and saw its lights stop at his front steps. But I didn't investigate. Probably it was a final guest who has been away at the ends of the earth and didn't know that the party was over.

—F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

One of my most vivid memories is of coming back West from prep school and later from college at Christmas time. Those who went farther than Chicago would gather in the old dim Union Station at six o'clock of a December evening, with a few Chicago friends, already caught up in their own holiday gayeties, to bid them a hasty good-bye. I remember the fur coats of the girls returning from Miss This-or-That's and the chatter of frozen breath and the hands waving overhead as we caught sight of old acquaintances, and the matchings of invitations: "Are you going to the Ordways'? the Herseys'? the Schultzes'? and the long green tickets clasped tight in our gloved hands. And last the murky yellow cars of the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul railway looking cheerful as Christmas itself on the tracks beside the gate.

When we pulled out into the windier night and the real snow, our snow, began to stretch out beside us and twinkle against the windows, and the dim lights of small Wisconsin stations moved by, a sharp wild brace came suddenly into the air. We drew in deep breaths of it as we walked back from dinner through the cold vestibules, unutterably aware of our identity with this country for one strange hour, before we melted indistinguishably into it again.

—F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

Most of the big shore places were closed now and there were hardly any lights except the shadowy, moving glow of a ferryboat across the Sound. And as the moon rose higher the inessential houses began to melt away until gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes—a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby's house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood or desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder.

—F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

The New York of Newland Archer's day was a small and slippery pyramid, in which, as yet, hardly a fissure had been made or a foothold gained. At its base was a firm foundation of what Mrs. Archer called "plain people"; an honorable but obscure majority of respectable families who (as in the case of the Spicers or Leffetses or the Jacksons) had been raised above their level by marriage with one of the ruling clans. People, Mrs. Archer always said, were not as particular as they used to be; and with old Catherine Spicer ruling one end of Fifth Avenue, and Julius Beaufort the other, you couldn't expect the old traditions to last much longer.

—Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*

Old-fashioned New York dined at seven, and the habit of after-dinner calls, though derided in Archer's set, still generally prevailed.

—Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*

New York was inexorable in its condemnation of business irregularities. So far there had been no exception to its tacit rule that those who broke the law of probity must pay; and every one was aware that even Beaufort and Beaufort's wife would be offered up unflinchingly to this principle.

—Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*

The point now is that I found a home—or a hole in the ground, as you will. Now don't jump to the conclusion that because I call my home a "hole" it is damp and cold like a grave; there are cold holes and warm holes . . . My hole is warm and full of light. Yes, *full* of light. I doubt if there is a brighter spot in all New York than this hole of mine, and I do not exclude Broadway. Or the Empire State Building on a photographer's dream night . . . And I love light. Perhaps you'll think it strange that an invisible man should need light, desire light, love light. But maybe it is exactly because I am *invisible*. Light confirms my reality, gives birth to my form.

—Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

At ten in the morning on a Monday I arrived in New York City. There were scores of policemen swinging nightsticks, but none of them pounced on me at the bottom of the escalator. They were, indeed, watching. A black man in shredded pants asked for a handout. Beggars in New York! I felt I had come to America too late. I felt cheated. I had Lillian's parting gift of one hundred dollars of which I'd already spent twenty on food, and a bag of Florida oranges and grapefruit as a house present for Professorji.

—Bharati Mukherjee, *Jasmin*