New Historicism Essay on *The Great Gatsby*

**Basics:**
- 4-5 pages
- Outside research required (one primary source from the 1920s and one secondary source)
- Library/research time will be provided in class (Friday, Nov. 20 and Monday, Nov. 30)
- Essay proposal and works cited page due Friday, December 4
- Final draft due Wednesday, December 16 Huntoon; Thursday, December 17 Tomatis.

**Background:**
New historicism is a theoretical approach to literature that looks at a written text as a nexus through which various social and political currents circulate. Thus, to new historicists literary texts are primary sources. New historicists often analyze literary texts in the light of other primary sources from a given time period and region (popular literature, songs, cartoons, advertisements, photographs, paintings, newspaper articles, films, etc.) They look at all works from a particular time and place as products of a specific socio-cultural milieu (remember 10th grade history!) New historicists set out to investigate how a literary text participates in conversation with other primary sources about specific social and political issues.

**Your task:**
Consider *The Great Gatsby* as a primary source revealing attitudes or biases towards a particular political or cultural issue. Find a second primary source from the 1920s that also relates to that issue, and at least one secondary source. You will craft an original thesis statement explaining the position each text takes. You will support your thesis through (1) an analysis of the literary text itself and (2) an analysis of your other primary source. You will refer to your secondary source in order to provide accurate historical information about your issue. You will show how the two primary sources from the 1920s speak to each other about this issue, and show how your analysis of the second primary source sheds new light on Fitzgerald’s text.

Within the body of the essay you will spend more time focusing on the literary text itself than on your other primary source from the 1920s. When focusing on the novel, you will analyze the way language works to produce meaning (as in other essays you have written for English class). However, you will be able to draw broader and more interesting conclusions through references to historical background and an analysis of the second, contemporaneous text. This essay should be four to five pages, and because your primary focus will still be analysis of the literary text, you should limit your discussion of the other primary source to one of those pages (more or less).

**Example:**
If you chose to write about consumer culture in the *The Great Gatsby*, you could analyze not only the language Fitzgerald uses to write about buying and selling, purchased goods, and advertising, but also an actual advertisement from the 1920s. You would analyze that advertisement to see what it reveals about consumerism that might be similar to or different than what Fitzgerald’s text reveals. Your secondary source might give information about the changes in mass market advertising and American consumer culture in the early 20th century.
Topics
Here are some possible topics to help you get started. Do not feel limited to these! If one of these interests you, you will need to narrow it down before you begin. Your thesis, of course, will need to state exactly what you think the texts suggest about your topic and why.

Gender in the 1920s: Consider the way Fitzgerald explores notions of femininity and/or masculinity. Which characters seem to challenge gender norms and which characters conform to them? What do these gender norms seem to be, and why are they interesting? How are gender norms portrayed in your other primary source? You could narrow your topic by focusing on only a couple of characters, and/or by focusing mainly on either masculinity or femininity. Make sure to cite good secondary sources before making claims about historical changes in gender norms before or during the 1920s.

Social Class in the 1920s: To narrow this topic down you might focus on the way class consciousness motivates particular characters. What defines social class for these characters, and how do they try to maintain or rise in social class? You might examine the idea of new vs. old money in *The Great Gatsby*, or the relationship between Wilson's life in the Valley of Ashes and the lives of characters from both East and West Egg. How are class differences explored in your other primary source? Make sure to clearly distinguish between social and economic class. The two are not the same in 1920s America.

Consumer culture in the 1920s: For either novel, you could consider how and when characters buy things or how and when they display their purchases. You could consider women or men as consumers, the link between consumerism and social status, or changes in consumer culture in the 1920s. You could even write about the role of advertisements in the novel. What attitudes towards consumerism do Fitzgerald and the author of your other primary source reveal?

Marginalized ethnic/racial groups in the 1920’s: Notice where race is mentioned in *The Great Gatsby* and where it is not. What viewpoint on race does Nick’s first person narration give? What purpose do these glancing references to racial difference seem to play for Fitzgerald in the novel? What attitude towards race does your other text from the 1920s reveal?

Popular culture in the 1920s: To narrow this topic down you could examine the role of music, dance, cinema, or visual art in shaping the identities of specific characters in *The Great Gatsby*, especially in relation to class, gender, or any of the other topics mentioned above.

East Coast vs. Midwest in 1920's America: How and why does Nick oppose the Midwest to the East Coast in *The Great Gatsby*? Where are images of the American landscape important in the novel? What do these regions represent for Nick and how does Fitzgerald use them in the construction of the novel? Is his concept of the American continent reflected in other texts from the 1920s?
Kinds of primary sources to look for:
Cartoons
Advertisements
Photographs
Paintings
Sound recordings
Films
Newspaper or magazine articles
Poems
Legal documents from court cases
Letters
Song lyrics/musical scores
Any text of any sort from the 1920s not covered elsewhere on this list!

Kinds of secondary sources to look for:
Any online source you use must be an electronic version of something that also appears in print.

Scholarly articles
News and magazine articles
Book chapters

Some places to look for primary and secondary sources:
The *Annals of America* series in the library reference section: R 973 A
BAISL databases (use “gryphon” password to enter from library website) such as: General OneFile, Biography Resource Center, Literary Resource Center
Grove Art Online (use “CSULibrary” as username and “gryphon” as password)
JSTOR (Enter from library website; see Ms. Garman for password!)
Ms. Garman will also set up a reserve shelf in the library for this project.