CrashCourse Literature: Public Humanities by Reception

Emma Luthi Price
Brigham Young University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/etd

Part of the Arts and Humanities Commons

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation
https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/etd/8956

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
CrashCourse Literature: Public Humanities by Reception

Emma Luthi Price

A thesis submitted to the faculty of Brigham Young University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

Robert Colson, Chair
Marlene Esplin
Seth Jeppesen

Department of Comparative Arts and Letters
Brigham Young University

Copyright © 2021 Emma Luthi Price
All Rights Reserved
ABSTRACT

CrashCourse Literature: Public Humanities by Reception

Emma Luthi Price
Department of Comparative Arts and Letters, BYU
Master of Arts

CrashCourse Literature and other educational YouTube videos are essential mechanisms for connecting students and the general public to the humanities. Public humanities projects are in an intellectual tug-of-war between what academia and the diverse developing public want them to be, but that contention can and should be mediated using new media tools like CrashCourse Literature. CrashCourse Literature’s emphasis on bringing the reader to the text and the text to the reader, echoes the goals of reception theory. Reception theory focuses on finding meaning in a literary text using the reader’s horizon of expectations more than an a traditional, essentialist, ‘original’ reading of a text. Analyzing public humanities projects like CrashCourse Literature through the lens of reception theory can help to show why the public uses them to connect more fully with the humanities. Within the texts of the videos “Fate, Family, and Oedipus Rex: Crash Course Literature 202,” “Shakespeare’s Sonnets: Crash Course Literature 304”, “Like Pale Gold—The Great Gatsby Part I: Crash Course English Literature #4,” and “Was Gatsby Great? The Great Gatsby Part 2: Crash Course English Literature #5,” I see two distinct levels of reception that influence and strengthen each other:

1. First level of reception: CrashCourse interacts with and refracts the texts they are explicating based on where the reader is in time and space.
2. Meta-reception: CrashCourse interacts and connects with the viewers of the video by interpreting their viewers’ responses to said text.

CrashCourse’s use of popular culture references, references to current or familiar social, political, and cultural ideologies, jokes, validations of viewers previous literary experiences, informal language all situated well within sound academic scholarship constitute examples of first-level and meta-reception. CrashCourse Literature sees the humanities, and fictional literature in particular, as exercises in empathy. Accordingly, they treat their approach to the text (first-level reception) and their viewers response to the text (meta-reception) with the same empathetic care. Public humanities projects that use new media well, allow public access to and connection with scholarly discussion and information. If academic institutions want to continue humanities research and discussion in a way that keeps their publics enthusiastically engaged, they will find good tools in CrashCourse Literature, which is engaging precisely in the kind of intellectual work and dialogue the academic establishment needs in order to stay relevant and significant to the publics they serve.

Keywords: YouTube, educational video, CrashCourse Literature, reception theory, horizon of expectations, first-level reception, meta-reception, public humanities
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The work to make this thesis happen has been continuous for almost four years and there are so many people who had a hand in it. Thank you. To all my friends and family members who watched and nurtured my kids while I worked and cheered me on from childhood to the present. To all of my professors within and without the Comparative Studies department—including but not limited to Michael Call, Allen Christenson, Kimball Jensen, Francesca Lawson, Roger Macfarlane, and Carl Sederholm—who influenced and encouraged the connections I made between the humanities, YouTube, and education while at the same time, facilitated me as a student, an employee, a wife, and a mom. To John and Hank Green and Complexly, etc., for CrashCourse being both an academic escape and the start of this academic exercise. DFTBA. To Seth Jeppesen, for his endurance in my struggle through Ancient Greek and his guidance that allowed me to finally figure out how to talk about CrashCourse thoroughly and academically by using reception studies as a framework. To Marlene Esplin, for her constant proddings for me to be thorough in my research, to be conscientious of my limitations—both in academia and life—and to be excellent in general. To Robert Colson, for his patience that allowed me to sit in his office and talk myself into my argument, his long-suffering in reading through and marking up drafts with questions and thoughts both intriguing and instructive, and ultimately, his honest conversations that made this project both doable and possible. To Stephanie Secrist, my editor in chief, who allowed the voice of this thesis to sound like the best version of myself. To Susan Reynolds, for the past six years of listening. To Caleb, my husband, my love, and my chief support system—for riding the train and bus for four hours every day for three years, and always being so kind, loving, and encouraging in every interaction and decision, big or small. To Charlotte, James, and Rosalie, you are my sunshine. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TITLE PAGE</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TABLE OF CONTENTS</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Journey to CrashCourse Literature</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Humanities: An Identity Crisis</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reception Theory: A Refractive Lens</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First-level and Meta-reception in “Fate, Family, and Oedipus Rex”</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First-level and Meta-reception in “Shakespeare’s Sonnets”</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First-level and Meta-reception in “‘Like Pale Gold’ &amp; ‘Was Gatsby Great?’”</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CrashCourse Literature: A New Direction for Public Humanities</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

Recorded video has long been a part of education and academia, with such notable examples as Kenneth Clark’s *Civilisation* and Ken Burns’s various PBS docuseries. However, in the last fifteen years, a new industrial revolution powered by the internet has meant the creation and prevalence of new media\(^1\) technology and tools has positively exploded. The squeak infused hum of the television stand being rolled to the front of the classroom has given way to the hurried, anxious clattering of a teacher attempting to silence the ad before a YouTube video.

Educational television and video have developed immensely with the advent of YouTube, a new public video platform overflowing with everything from cat videos to how-to-DIY videos to academic video series such as CrashCourse. Among the ranks of educational YouTube channels like The Art Assignment, The Brain Scoop, Khan Academy, SciShow, and Kurzgesaht,\(^2\) CrashCourse is an intriguing example of educational video channels finding a home online. The CrashCourse channel includes over a dozen video series focused on different classes found in secondary schools and higher education. These classes range from chemistry and anatomy, to world history and media literacy. Each video series “crash course” comprises 10-60 videos that vary from 10-20 minutes.\(^3\) With its nearly twelve million subscribers and well over 1.4 billion

---

\(^1\) Products and services that provide information or entertainment using computers or the internet, and not by traditional methods such as television and newspapers. “new media,” Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary & Thesaurus, Cambridge University Press, accessed Jan 1, 2021, [https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/new-media](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/new-media).

\(^2\) The Art Assignment discusses art history, art theory, and how fine art relates to pop culture. The Brain Scoop focuses on natural history, museum curation, and even animal dissections. Khan Academy focuses on a variety of subjects from the humanities to math. SciShow focuses on shorter form informational science videos.

\(^3\) For example, the European History course has 51 videos while their Media Literacy course has 13 videos. “CrashCourse Playlists,” Complexly, YouTube, accessed October 20, 2020, [https://www.youtube.com/user/crashcourse/playlists](https://www.youtube.com/user/crashcourse/playlists).
views, it’s seems safe to say the channel’s reach far surpasses the range of most public humanities projects backed by educational institutions. CrashCourse was one of the first, all the way back in 2012—eons ago in internet time—to shape YouTube into what it could be: not just a vehicle for mindless entertainment, but a space for educational material that promoted critical and “generous thinking.” CrashCourse Literature presents a particularly intriguing case in how an educational mission connects to an educational pedagogy. CrashCourse Literature is a YouTube version of an AP-Literature class with in-depth discussions on the ideas, issues, and literary devices found in various texts. Since these videos are built around texts commonly read in secondary school or first year university English classes, their videos are created mainly for those students. However, since the videos are accessible in their tone, language, as well as scholastically sound, which will be discussed more at length later in this paper, anyone looking for more information and context on the texts CrashCourse Literature discuss is able to enjoy and utilize the videos. The educational mission of CrashCourse is to provide academically rigorous educational material to the world free of charge through YouTube videos. This mission models a pedagogy that reflects the company’s desire to connect to the reader in their present historical


5 CrashCourse began creating content in 2012 with World History and Biology. Scishow started in 2012 by Hank Green as the other side of the coin of CrashCourse using part of the same grant that got CrashCourse off the ground. The Art Assignment started their content in 2014, The Brain Scoop in late 2012, Kurzgesaht in 2013. Of the examples cited above, Khan Academy is the odd man out since it started in 2005, but, at its beginning, it was focused on providing very specific math tutoring to the creator’s niece and didn’t expand to other subjects until a few years later. “Art Assignment About,” Complexly, YouTube, October 20, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/user/theartassignment/about. “BrainScoop About,” Complexly, YouTube, October 20, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/c/thebrainscoop/about. “SciShow About,” Complexly, YouTube, October 20, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/c/SciShow/about. “Kurzgesagt – In a Nutshell About,” Kurzgesagt, YouTube, October 20, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/c/inanutshell/about. “Khan Academy About,” Khan Academy, YouTube, October 20, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/c/khanacademy/about.

6 In her book of the same name, Kathleen Fitzpatrick defines “generous thinking” as “a mode of engagement that emphasizes listening over speaking, community over individualism, collaboration over competition, and lingering the ideas that are in front of us rather than continually pressing forward to where we want to go.” Kathleen Fitzpatrick, Generous Thinking: A Radical Approach to Saving the University (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), 4.
and cultural moment, a pedagogy in line with the principles of reception theory and exhibited in the videos I will analyze later in this paper.

Reception theory is used, traditionally, to examine literary texts based on the historical/cultural moment of the reader, so it follows that CrashCourse Literature is using the refractions of reception theory to expound on the literary texts they are discussing. Refractions, according to André Lefevere, are the interpretations of a literary work seen through the lens of certain “frameworks.” Likewise, if “a work of literature [is adjusting] to a different audience, with the intention of influencing the way in which that audience reads the work,” these refractions shift the work from the system it was written in to the system it is being read in.7 CrashCourse focuses on bringing the text to the reader as well as bringing the reader to the text by refracting the text through their viewers’ historical and cultural moment and, therefore, acknowledging the reader’s and the text’s historical subjectivity. Reception theory centers around the idea that that each reader brings their previous readings, experiences, biases, frustrations, and presumptions to their interaction with a text. I will be focusing primarily on Hans Robert Jauss’s discussion and his definitions of various terms related to reception theory including horizon of expectations defined as a “‘system of references’ or a mind-set that a hypothetical individual might bring to any text”.8 A first level of reception entails an interpretation or refraction of a text based on where the reader is in time and space. A second level of refraction, one I will describe as meta-reception,9 consists of, instead of interpreting the text, interpreting a reader’s response to the text. While the first level of reception connects the

---

9 Meta-reception is a term I developed as I was studying reception theory and applying it to educational YouTube videos.
reader to the text based on the reader’s current cultural and historical moment, meta-reception goes a step further to deal with interpreting the reader’s response to their new refractions of the text. To illustrate the first level of reception and meta-reception, suppose I was reading an annotated version of Hamlet with notes throughout the text providing definitions to now unused words and explanations of manners in sixteenth-century royal courts. These explanations and notations are examples of the first level of reception. Meta-reception is a tool that is only initiated by bringing an educator into the reading process, with those teachers and professors asking and answering questions based on the thoughts and ideas their students express concerning the text and its historical context. The teacher may say, “Oh, you think the play is long and boring and should just get to the point? The play is long, but when was the last time you saw the ghost of your father and it asked you to kill your uncle? Would you do it right away?” This meta-reception takes into account the student’s time and place as well as the work’s to derive meaningful conclusions.

CrashCourse Literature’s textual analysis and reader-focused refractions offer an inviting and noteworthy model for humanities-centered educational outreach and other public humanities projects. While classroom teaching is still widely regarded as the best way to educate students, helping the public to be involved in humanities learning outside of the classroom has been a struggle for many humanities institutions. Even with the increase in the creation and use of online coursework, resources, and other kinds of public humanities, the fear for the future of the humanities and humanities education remains a problem as academics and “the public” struggle

---

10 Fitzpatrick notes in *Generous Thinking* that there have been attempts made at “ed-tech disruption” with MOOCs (or massive open online courses) trying to displace the university altogether and replace it with free education, anywhere in the world, and entirely online but, the attempt didn’t work. Problems with cost and “questionable educational outcomes” made those projects unsustainable. Fitzpatrick instead argues for “a revolution in our thinking” focused on developing social values instead of economic values. Kathleen Fitzpatrick, *Generous Thinking: A Radical Approach to Saving the University* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), 199-200.
to define exactly what the public humanities are, what they are supposed to do for the public, and who that public ultimately is. These are complicated questions, and the scholarly conversation concerning those questions has not led to a widely accepted definition of public humanities. In this project, I define the public humanities as the decoupling of academic dialogue and research from the traditional publishing and teaching structure within the university to focus instead on facilitating research, conversation, and new interest in students and the general public outside the lecture or performance hall and therefore, that CrashCourse Literature and online resources like it are examples of public humanities projects.

But offer a studious and engaging example of scholarly engagement with a CrashCourse does not attempt to supplant traditional educational systems but to supply those systems with new tools specifically geared towards students and the public.

If we define the public humanities as the scholarly interplay between academia and a community partner in ways that promote social and intellectual “knowledge-creation,” it follows that CrashCourse Literature is a prime example of a public humanities project that is bringing the humanities to an enormous number of viewers. The 10–20-minute videos are no the end all be all of any one subject or, in the case of CrashCourse Literature, any literary text. CrashCourse Literature focuses on one literary work at a time and focusing on a few of the prominent scholarly discussions surrounding those texts, and while they do limit themselves, the

---


12 The Special Issue of *University of Toronto Quarterly* cited above is a prime example.

13 I will overview the contributions to this definition, including essays by Gregory Jay and Julie Ellison and Kathleen Fitzpatrick’s book *Generous Thinking* later in this paper.

relative shortness of the videos, combined with the quick jump-cut heavy editing, and the fact that they cannot be edited after they are posted, leave some room for discussion on if what CrashCourse chooses to take out, is the right stuff to leave out. If humanities academics and institutions disregard the internet as a vehicle for public humanities projects, they ignore a powerful and familiar social and intellectual resource for both the contemporary student and the contemporary public. CrashCourse Literature echoes the focuses of reception theory in that it attempts to not only interpret literary works, but also to encourage viewers to think critically about literature within the time period when the work was written, as well as within their own historical context in a way that expands their horizon of expectations for that particular literary work. I examine how CrashCourse Literature models first-level reception and meta-reception in their videos “Fate, Family, and *Oedipus Rex*: Crash Course Literature 202,” “Like Pale Gold—The Great Gatsby Part I: Crash Course English Literature #4,” “Was Gatsby Great? The Great Gatsby Part 2: Crash Course English Literature #5,” and “Shakespeare’s Sonnets: Crash Course Literature 304” to engage their viewers and create a public humanities project sought out and studied by the public, students, teachers, and academics alike.\(^\text{15}\) First, I will introduce and give context to CrashCourse Literature as an educational tool. Next, I will discuss how public humanities projects are in an intellectual tug-of-war between what academia and the diverse developing public want it to be and how this dichotomy might be mediated with new media tools. I will then expand on my claims regarding Reception Theory, its history, and discuss how analyzing public humanities projects through its lens allows the public to connect more fully with the humanities. Human creations are the center of our cultural inheritance and public

\(^{15}\) I have shortened the video names to the following phrases for the remainder of the paper: CrashCourse Oedipus for “Fate, Family, and *Oedipus Rex*”, CrashCourse Sonnets for “Shakespeare’s Sonnets”, CrashCourse Gatsby 1 for “Like Pale Gold” and CrashCourse Gatsby 2 for “Was Gatsby Great?” as that was their chronological upload order.
humanities projects that examine human creations in a way that is scholarly and accessible are worthy of further analysis.

**The Journey to CrashCourse Literature**

CrashCourse started because brothers Hank and John Green, who already had an online following through their companion channel Vlogbrothers, wanted to expand access to free educational material for both students and the general public. After years of video blogs, the Green brothers were often struggling for new and interesting ideas for videos. Being nerdy and unabashedly enthusiastic about learning was, and is, part of their brand so the Green brothers decided to incorporate educational videos into their content. They discussed everything from the French Revolution, probability, and the American healthcare system. However, it was difficult if not impossible to continue making those videos on a more consistent basis on the Vlogbrothers channel, even when their audience responded enthusiastically to it, due the cost of research and graphics. John Green recalled that, “For years, we held onto this dream that someday we would be able to make, like, high quality educational video with cool production values that, you know, looked like YouTube but at the same time was rigorous and intellectually engaged and nuanced.”16 Google—the owners of the YouTube website—gave the brothers a one-time grant to create and showcase more “professional-looking content”17 on YouTube. Thus, CrashCourse and SciShow were born. Since its inception in 2012, CrashCourse has produced videos on a variety of subjects, including literature, biology, economics, history, and many more, providing free, high-quality, academically sound, educational videos for anyone who wants to view them. In a documentary CrashCourse made about their creation and educational mission in 2018, Blake de

16 CrashCourse, “A History of CrashCourse,” December 4, 2018, Complexly, YouTube documentary, 3:49-4:03, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Q5cPfbmSD8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Q5cPfbmSD8).
Pastino, Chief Content Officer for CrashCourse at Complexly\textsuperscript{18}, remembered the clarifying moment he began to understand who John and Hank thought the CrashCourse videos were for:

“The way Hank described it to me once was that I asked him, ‘Who are we trying to reach?’ Because I was used to working for these online operations where the answer is always, ‘Everybody. Just as many clicks as possible.’ And he said, ‘First, I want to make sure that people who need to know this stuff are going to need it and watch it. And, also, people who are just interested in it are going to watch it.’ And that was very clarifying for me, you know. We didn't have to be clickbaity about it.”\textsuperscript{19}

That sentiment has continued to this day. Teachers and students all over the country use these videos as supplemental materials in their classrooms. People outside the classroom, with the same enthusiasm for learning that brought educational videos onto the Vlogbrothers channel at the very beginning, also watch and enjoy the videos “not because they're trying to do well in a test, or because they're trying to get a job, they just want to learn about stuff.”\textsuperscript{20} Hank, with degrees in environmental science and biology and a career as an author, presents many of the scientific subjects while John, with degrees in English and religion and a career as an author, presents many of the humanities subjects including world history and literature.\textsuperscript{21} While other educational YouTubers have also had success, CrashCourse is one of the very few to produce videos and series on such a wide variety of subjects and have both videos and secondary content, such as online textbooks and essay questions, to flesh out CrashCourse’s educational initiatives.

After their initial grant expired, funding the project became an essential question again as

\textsuperscript{18} Complexly is the name of the Green brothers’ educational media company that grew out of CrashCourse, SciShow, and other educational channels they sponsor.
\textsuperscript{20} While this sentiment is sincere and anecdotes are real, it is difficult to see numerically how the views and the viewers correspond to those goals. Without the analytics from the CrashCourse channel itself, or the necessary statistical analysis skills, it is difficult to parse out exactly who watches the videos, and it is even more difficult, if not impossible, to determine the reasons behind why they view the content. This is worth further study but outside the thesis bounds of this project. CrashCourse, “A History of CrashCourse,” December 4, 2018, Complexly, YouTube documentary, TIME STAMP, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Q5cPfbmSD8.
\textsuperscript{21} More hosts have come on as the curriculums have expanded.
without that money, John Green recalled that, “CrashCourse was going to become kind of unsustainable overnight.”

Caitlin Hofmeister, Sci-show Senior Producer and Host at Complexly, reiterated the problem of financing educational initiatives by saying, “In funding, you wanna not lose the integrity of the videos that you're making, so making really smart funding choices takes a lot of energy and a lot of research and trusted partners.” The Green Brothers, and Complexly more broadly, have maintained this quality-education-for-free model by partnering with PBS digital studios and opening up a crowd-funding tip jar on patreon.com where people can contribute money for various perks each month while everyone, both those who cannot contribute and those who can, still get all the educational videos with no paywall. CrashCourse Literature specifically came less than a year after the first CrashCourse—World History—launched at the end of 2012 and remains easily accessible on the CrashCourse YouTube channel as of January 2021.

Public Humanities: An Identity Crisis

The goals of public humanities projects are often as foggy as their confused definitions. Most public humanities projects strive to create places for “public scholarship” and make that scholarship a part of civic engagement. Many academics assert they know exactly what public humanities are, what the public humanities should look like, and the best ways to participate in and facilitate the public humanities. Matthew Wickman’s and Jeremy Browne’s “CHCI Public Humanities Survey” as discussed in Matthew Wickman’s article examines the responses to a

---

survey sent to academics to figure out what they think the public humanities are. Wickman makes the point however, that:

Rather than the question that initially incited this survey – “What are the public humanities?” – we might pose a rather different one: “Where are they?” Are they found in old-fashioned outreach, or in newer models of engagement? In research or teaching? Within universities or alongside them? Conceptualizing these questions, and formulating answers to them based on available data, may help scholars in the humanities achieve the public relevance they crave.25

This shifting of the question of what the public humanities are to where the public humanities are, allows more insight into its overall definition. If public humanities are limited to “old-fashioned outreach”, would CrashCourse Literature count at all? If teaching is public humanities, does CrashCourse do enough to engage the public?26 Then again, the definitions of both “public” and “humanities” contain plenty of historical and structural baggage that need to be unpacked on their own. Kathleen Fitzpatrick has done exemplary work recognizing how the structures and institutions we take part in, particularly the university, are limited by how those institutions decide to interact with a quickly changing world.27 Her book Generous Thinking has informed much of how public humanities is framed in this paper because she commends the values of the university without endorsing the inward-looking practices that often turn university-based public humanities projects into an exercise in problematic evangelism. She frames the public humanities debate as a critical or “generous thinking” exercise that focuses as much on listening

---

26 Distilling the fraught definitions of the public humanities and seeing how they apply to the academic material given in the CrashCourse Literature videos was my main objective in this project while discussing the impacts of CrashCourse on the public(s) they reach is outside the scope of this paper. As Wickman says so perfectly in his article: “We should emphasize that actual impacts, notoriously difficult to measure for academic work, let alone in as diffusive a field as the public humanities, were not our target...Instead, we sought to fold multiple perceptions into something like a general view.” Matthew Wickman, “What Are the Public Humanities? No, Really, What Are They?,” in “Publics for the Humanities?” ed. Robert Gibbs, special issue, University of Toronto Quarterly 85, no.4 (Fall 2016): (8; emphasis added), https://muse.jhu.edu/issue/35536.
27 Kathleen Fitzpatrick, Generous Thinking: A Radical Approach to Saving the University (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019).
and understanding as it does on talking and teaching. She makes the point that academia is part of the larger community and should view themselves as such:

It's important for [universities] to ask [them]selves: do we understand the people who are not on campus to be an audience—a passive group that merely takes in information that the university provides? Do we understand them to be a public, a self-activated and actualized group capable not only of participating in multidirectional exchanges both with the university and among its members, but also of acting on its own behalf? Or even more, do we consider them to be a complex collection of communities—not just groups who interact with one another and with us, but groups of which we are in fact a part? How can we shape this understanding in a way that might begin to create a richer, more interactive, more generous sense not just of “them” but of the larger “us” that we together form?\(^{28}\)

However academics and the university see themselves, however they see their peers, and the public(s) they are a part of, are directly related to how those academics interact with those entities. Many university’s policies in interacting with its faculty, administrators, employees, students, and surrounding community have served to grow their own prestige and power instead of building connection, understanding, and knowledge between academia and the general public. This lack of connection between the two impedes the mission of the public humanities and ignores the fact that the public humanities are a changing, multi-faceted dialogue more than they are any one finite, static way of doing things.

Additionally, when academics have differing opinions on what projects are considered “public humanities,” they may disregard those projects instead of seeing them as a step in a new direction. In her essay in PMLA, Julie Ellison acknowledged these dismissals while simultaneously reminding us that the same academics making declarations and pronouncements regarding the ongoing humanities crisis or the definition of public humanities are slow to allow necessary changes that would expedite “working across academic-public boundary from the

---

The academic desire for increased public connection to the humanities seen in the establishment of new humanities and cultural centers at universities around the world reads more as lip service when combined with academic institutions’ unwillingness to promote new or expanded ideas for public humanities projects. This institutional cognitive dissonance often means students and faculty go into intellectual lockdown instead of being willing to engage new intellectual crossovers. Most of these centers’ goals are to help connect with the public by creating more humanities performances and displays, including exhibitions at museums, symphonies, etc. Gregory Jay describes that even if exhibitions of this type work well in giving the public a taste of the humanities, they do not do as much to encourage “collaborative cultural development work…[or] collaborative knowledge-creation” between the academic and the public spheres. For both Jay and Ellison, seeking out new ways of learning and applying the humanities in student’s lives comes first by reaching out beyond the students to the community and public to see what can be learned from the curious and inquisitive minds found there. Fitzpatrick notes this attitude as “generous thinking,” a practice that gives both students and community partners something to work on and work through together.

Arguably, new media is one way the system is changing to better mesh academia and the underserved or any community that is not old, white, or male. New media tools, like CrashCourse, can help fill in potholes in the road to humanities education by making that education accessible and less formal and allowing marginalized groups to have more access to their own cultural content along with more reasons to interact with it. Public humanities have had

---

31 Extensive examples are given in Ellison’s article including but not limited to literacy and oral history projects that included working as a part of the community in gardens and participating in other community events.
32 The “old white man” has been the traditional mascot of academia since, well, forever.
to deal with the foibles and idiosyncrasies that make up its own definition, and it should continue to do so. Jay recognized this idea and advocated that new media is a tool to make public humanities work for a more complete and a more diverse public. The social dialogue within humanities scholarship cannot be made or maintained without confronting what the “public” in public humanities means. For Jay, who the “public” is cannot be limited or restricted and the opportunities brought by new media are essential parts of the ever-developing definition of the “public’:

So as we debate the merits and character of ‘public scholarship,’ we need to sustain the critique of the notion of the ‘public’ that exploded forty or more years ago, when the narrow definition of who, or what, counted as the ‘public’ was challenged by so many who had been excluded from it. New media mean new opportunities for creating public humanities events of an interactive kind, in which the presentation of knowledge happen interdependently and simultaneously. New media are changing the very nature of the ‘public,’ and thus what we might conceive of as public scholarship.

Jay suggested this issue has come to the forefront in academia since the 1960s with more nuanced and diverse texts included in the “canon” and becoming “classics.” However, this restructuring did not immediately proceed to a more diverse western canon. This canon is still not very accessible to the marginalized groups it was now supposed to champion—for women to an extent and people of color in particular. In this flourishing age of new media, scholastic

---

33 It is difficult to analyze whether CrashCourse is reaching a more complete and diverse public without access to their channel analytics, and may be even more difficult to parse out since all of their courses are within one YouTube channel. However, their accessible content is being further expanded with their plans to recreate previous courses in new languages, with CrashCourse World History in Arabic being their first complete example, to recreate previous courses with different cultural or philosophical perspectives, with CrashCourse World History 2 taking a thematic approach to history, and developing CrashCourse in a way “that supports lots of different kinds of learners.” CrashCourse, “A History of CrashCourse,” December 4, 2018, Complexly, YouTube documentary, 17:09-17:39, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Q5cPfbdmSD8.

34 Jay’s article was published in 2010.


36 Fitzpatrick quotes and then explicates on Mary Beard’s Women and Power to make just this point regarding how various marginalized groups do not fit easily into the university framework saying, “You cannot easily fit women into a structure that is already coded as male; you have to change the structure. That means thinking about power differently. It means decoupling it from prestige” (86-87)…And so of difference of many kinds: you cannot easily fit people of color into a structure that is already coded as white,” She goes onto explain that the disconnect between
discussion of canonical literary works is finally becoming available to a broader and burgeoning “public.”

One new theoretical mindset that bloomed not long after this disruption of the cultural hierarchy was built and refined by Hans-Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser and is one more way of creating space within the western literary canon for marginalized groups. Reception theory, with its converted way of elevating every reader’s power over the text in comparison to the reader’s former subjection to formalist or historically objective readings will be discussed more in depth later in this paper. To make public humanities flourish, Jay advocates that the humanities are made more relevant through “project-based engaged learning and scholarship, on the one hand, and the continued advancement of digital and new media learning and scholarship, on the other hand.”37 Public humanists cannot hope to create a productive social dialogue and make the humanities more accessible without investing in projects made through and being integrally tied to new media like YouTube. I agree with Jay’s supposition that new opportunities are what the public humanities need. I agree with Ellison that expanding our ideas of what the public humanities are and should do is essential to their continual success. I agree with Fitzpatrick’s points that only outreach and a willingness to change the system—systems that are at times nostalgic and resolute—will allow the university and the public humanities to succeed.

---

Impactful public humanities must strike a careful balance between the stricture of the academic establishment and connecting the humanities with the infinitely varied publics. Public humanists must do so while also maintaining a scholarly interplay between the academic and the community partner in ways that promote social and intellectual knowledge-creation. In discussing his hopes for CrashCourse, John Green echoes Kathleen Fitzpatrick’s hopes for generous thinking’s effects on the university and the public. He said:

We want to be useful to schools and teachers and students but we also want to be useful to people who are just excited about learning because it's possibly the meaning of life…My biggest hope is that in five years, CrashCourse will [continue]…teaching lots of people, and not just teaching people about various topics, but helping people to get excited about learning, and to feel that unironic enthusiasm that you can have in those moments where you realize that this is not just something that you have to do so that you can get a diploma, this is not some random hurdle that the system put in your way that you have to jump over in order to achieve adulthood, or whatever. This is, instead, like, the work of adulthood. And that's what I think CrashCourse can be best at, not just sharing information but also getting people excited about learning.

CrashCourse’s goals of engaging and entertaining the public with educational content that expands their understanding of themselves, their communities, and the world are the same goals as the public humanities. The breakdown and restructuring of the public humanities show that new media like CrashCourse Literature are nothing to shy away from even if they are a medium unfamiliar to the classroom and lecture-based teaching found in most universities. Although perhaps unfamiliar to many educational institutions with an established traditional institutional pedagogy, CrashCourse is not a replacement for the university but a new media tool with the potential to be a vital force in educating students, teachers, and whoever else wants to learn. YouTube is not the end all be all for public humanities projects outside educational institutions, even with the normalization of both longer form and educational content over the last few years,

it still can be a burdensome platform. Algorithm shifts and the need to be “ad-friendly” means discussing distasteful,\textsuperscript{40} but important topics can make it impossible for YouTube channels to survive on ad-revenue alone.\textsuperscript{41} It can be difficult to cite sources in a video context and make those sources as accessible as the videos themselves, because those sources are often within journals, textbooks, and other books only accessible through connection with an academic institution.\textsuperscript{42} CrashCourse attempts to grant some access to these academic ideas by being easily accessible on YouTube,\textsuperscript{43} provides intellectually rigorous content,\textsuperscript{44} and uses partners and Patreon to maintain itself going forward by the community it creates content for. CrashCourse was one of the first to acknowledge YouTube for what it really is: not just a vehicle for entertainment and how-to’s, but a space for educational material to be uploaded, seen, and commented on to create a public humanities project that helps people become “more informed, engaged, and productive citizen[s] of the world.”\textsuperscript{45}

\textbf{Reception Theory: A Refractive Lens}

Analyzing CrashCourse Literature through the lens of reception theory is intuitive since CrashCourse’s pedagogical approach focuses on connecting the text to the reader and the reader to the text. Reception theory was first defined and shaped by Hans Robert Jauss’s effort to bring

\textsuperscript{40} Whether or not the thing being discussed, or how it is being discussed, are truly distasteful is often a matter of arbitrary opinion or world view instead of fact.

\textsuperscript{41} Many creators have had to focus their efforts on fundraising through Patreon to make any money at all. CrashCourse also uses Patreon as an essential part of their funding apparatus.

\textsuperscript{42} Catalogs of academic work like JSTOR and muse come to mind as those that are accessible either through a fee, or through an academic institution.

\textsuperscript{43} The disparities in public and student access to broadband internet connectivity in this era of new media developments in education cannot be overlooked. These disparities have been brought to the forefront and exacerbated by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The demographics of who looks up educational content on the internet, I would assume, leans both younger and whiter. However, who is accessing the internet and who has access to the internet is outside the specific thesis of this paper and I will not discuss it more fully here, but it certainly merits further research especially in light of the expansion of internet based educational initiatives like CrashCourse.

\textsuperscript{44} I will discuss the scholastic merit of the information CrashCourse Literature provides later in this paper.

\textsuperscript{45} CrashCourse, “The Agricultural Revolution: Crash Course World History #1,” Posted January 26, 2012, Complexly, YouTube video, 0:11-0:20, \url{www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yocja_N5sI}. 
a reader’s literary history into the study of the western literary canon. As a part of the
hermeneutic tradition, Jauss looked for the most appropriate way to interpret texts by
understanding their literary and historical context to make the texts’ meaning(s) as obvious and
understandable as possible. Texts were, and sometimes still are, interpreted by academics with a
formalist-objective or self-contained ‘unchanging’ essentialist reading. Jauss took issue with the
quest for an authentic original reading and particularly how texts are interpreted as a part of
literary criticism. 46 Condensing a text down to a singular ‘original’ meaning does a disservice to
that text’s inherent multiplicity. As Paul de Man notes in his introduction to Jauss’s Toward an
Aesthetic of Reception, “The suspicion of essentialism arises whenever the study of the
production or of the structure of literary texts is pursued at the expense of their reception, at the
expense of the individual or collective patterns of understanding that issue from their reading and
evolve in time.” 47 Jauss was not convinced that the classics of the canon could be or should be
read in a singular ‘authentic’ way. In fact, he maintains that critics’ attempts to pigeonhole
textual meaning into the ‘original’ meaning limits their own understanding of literary progress:

For the quality and rank of a literary work result neither from the biographical or
historical conditions of its origin [Entstehung], nor from its place in the sequence of the
development of a genre alone, but rather from the criteria of influence, reception, and
posthumous fame, criteria that are more difficult to grasp. And if a literary historian,
bound by the ideal of objectivity, limits himself to the presentation of a closed past,
leaving the judgment of the literature of his own, still-unfinished age to the responsible
critics and limiting himself to the secure canon of “masterpieces,” he remains in his
historical distance most often one to two generations behind the latest development in
literature. At best he partakes of the contemporary engagement with literary phenomena
of the present as a passive reader, and thereby becomes in the formation of his
judgement, a parasite of a criticism that he silently despises as “unscholarly.” 48

46 For more discussion on authenticity in interpretation and performance, reference Mary-Kay Gamel’s "Can
‘Democratic’ Modern Stagings of Ancient Drama Be ‘Authentic’?".
47 Hans Robert Jauss, Toward an Aesthetic of Reception, trans. Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis: University of
Minnesota Press, 1982) x.
48 Hans Robert Jauss, Toward an Aesthetic of Reception, trans. Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis: University of
Minnesota Press, 1982) 5.
As Jauss explains, without at least some emphasis on the present points of view concerning a literary text, the literary historian risks misunderstanding or completely missing the current critical debate. In *Reception Theory: A Critical Introduction*, Robert Holub explains Jauss’s insistence that “historiography. . . will play a conscious, mediating role between the past and present period instead of simply accepting the tradition as a given” causing them to think and “rethink” current readers’ relationships to the “Canon.”"^{49} The meanings found in a text by past readers are important because they show the complex interplay between an author and an interpreter of any type (literary, historical, etc.) at their particular historical moment.

Therefore, in reception theory, ‘original’ meanings do not take precedence in accuracy because of the time period in which they were made. The interpretations found in literary texts are as varied and singular as the people who read them. Jauss states:

> A literary work is *not* an object that stands by itself and that offers the same view to each reader in each period. It is not a monument that monologically reveals its timeless essence. It is much more like an orchestration that strikes ever new resonances among its readers and that frees the text from the material of the words and brings it to a contemporary existence.^{50}

Reception theory holds no stock in allowing interpretations of texts to be limited to “traditional positivistic attempts to reconstitute ‘original’ meanings as the only true meanings,”^{51} nor is it a theory that gives a simpler or more concrete view of a text. Reception theory instead forces us to try to understand all views of the text as liable to change due to the historical moment of the reader. For these reasons, reception theory is one of the ultimate tools and theories of literary criticism: for me, it is an ultimate theory in that it allows us as readers free reign to use all other

---

theories to interpret and reinterpret texts based on where a reader is in time and space instead of relying on a monological reading. CrashCourse Literature utilizes these ideas as it works to balance the power between past readings and present readings by giving viewers historical context as well as literary analysis to allow the viewer to have both academic and personal connections to each text. Jauss emphasized the benefits of this shifting of academic focus to a reader’s individual interpretation by asserting, “A renewal of literary history demands the removal of the prejudices of historical objectivism and the grounding of the traditional aesthetics of production and representation in an aesthetics of reception and influence.”52 Reclaiming the text for the reader allows for the criticism surrounding that text to grow and develop. The classics of the canon can be seen in ways that work and apply for the readers reading them. Certainly, a white, cisgender, male teenager will read *The Odyssey* differently from a black, homosexual, middle-aged female, especially if he was reading it in 1919 and she was reading it in 2020.

Charles Martindale continues this line of thinking on the undeniable power of a reader’s horizon of expectations on their reading of a text in his book *Redeeming the Text: Latin Poetry and the Hermeneutics of Reception*. Martindale links reception theory, the scholarly dialogue concerning the classics of the western canon,53 and the reader’s reception of these classical texts to argue that separating a reading of a text from its historical moment is not possible. He is even more skeptical of the idea that when a text is being read by a reader or taught by a teacher, that

---


53 Martindale’s ideas center on the “classics” or the writings of ancient Greece and Rome but I am also applying his thinking to classics as texts serving as “a standard of excellence [or are] of recognized value” to the Western literary tradition. “classic,” *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, accessed October 29, 2020, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/classic.
the reader can get an unfiltered “true” exegesis of that text when she encounters it.\textsuperscript{54} Martindale asserts that educational institutions cannot treat texts as monolithic, fixed, graven images that hold the same meanings for every reader in every context. Ultimately, it is intellectual folly to think our reading can be separated from our historical moment, which point is especially convincing in examining CrashCourse’s videos regarding some classics of the canon: \textit{Oedipus Rex}, Shakespeare’s sonnets, and \textit{The Great Gatsby}.\textsuperscript{55} No text is immune to this historical and ideological subjectivity, not even the presumably eternally valid classics. Jauss’s idea of each reader having a unique “system of references” or “mindset” known as a “horizon of expectations”\textsuperscript{56} allows a reader and a text to coexist together. That does not mean the texts themselves are damaged because of the uniqueness of individual reader’s historical and cultural background, but simply that all interpretations and readings “emphasize some details at the expense of others.”\textsuperscript{57} The text may not change, but the horizon of expectations each reader brings does change. We cannot assume the interpretations or ‘meaning’ of a text will stay the same from past to present just because it is the same text when, in fact, it is a different text to each reader. Martindale makes this very clear in arguing that “\textit{Meaning… is always realized at the point of reception}; if so, we cannot assume that an ‘[authorial] intention’ is effectively communicated within any text. And also, it appears, a writer \textit{can never control the reception of}

\footnotesize

\textsuperscript{54} Any notion of a naked encounter between a text and a reader who is a sort of \textit{tabula rasa} is absurd. We all approach the reading of texts with baggage of our values and our experience, with certain categories, assumptions, prejudices and ‘fore-understanding’. To have baggage is what it is to be a human being in history; \textit{without it we could not read at all}. Charles Martindale, “Five Concepts in Search of an Author: Suite,” in \textit{Redeeming the Text: Latin Poetry and the Hermeneutics of Reception} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 5 (emphasis in original).

\textsuperscript{55} While all of these may not be Classical in the strictest sense, they have each become essential, and even eternal, members of the Western canon similar to many Classical works.

\textsuperscript{56} Holub goes on to discuss that this term developed and shifted in Jauss’s writing and thinking over time and especially when it became so widely known it appeared in popular culture of the day. However, in regard to his writing on reception theory in particular, this definition is valid. Robert C. Holub. \textit{Reception Theory: A Critical Introduction} (New York: Methuen, 1984), 59.

his or her work." CrashCourse is leaning into this freedom to interpret by using their videos to
discuss classic canonical texts in ways that directly apply to the students and other viewers who
watch them. Indeed, Martindale argues, “Since the ‘present’ is not one thing, the difference
between the past and present need not be seen as necessarily greater than the difference which
exists today within a single ‘culture.’” He attempts to show the perhaps bemused classicist
reader that changes in interpretations of classical, and by extension all texts, are not shocks to the
system but instead part of a dialogue that happens between and within the historical moments of
readers both past and present. The examples I analyze below show how CrashCourse Literature
is a model for other public humanities projects because it engages directly with historical
subjectivity in how it approaches, and refracts, the various texts. As reception theory allows for
and encourages texts to be continually interpreted and re-interpreted, this exchanging of
understandings is an important tool to the development of the public humanities. This dialogue is
exactly what the public humanities could be, and CrashCourse’s The Great Gatsby,
Shakespeare’s sonnets, and Oedipus Rex videos are excellent examples of an academic and
public dialogue taking place between the text, the reader, and the meaning of the text unique to
each reader’s horizon of expectations.

Reception theory provides the academic community with opportunities to disassociate
from singular essentialist and or ‘original’ readings and, instead, to expand literary
interpretations and meanings to include the reader and the reader’s horizon of expectations with
texts. Reception theory, along with many of the other theories that came to prominence in the last

58 Charles Martindale, “Five Concepts in Search of an Author: Suite,” in Redeeming the Text: Latin Poetry and the
59 Examples of this technique will be discussed at length later in this paper.
60 Charles Martindale, “Five Concepts in Search of an Author: Suite,” in Redeeming the Text: Latin Poetry and the
60 years, requires a shift in how the texts of the canon are taught and distributed to the masses. This shift includes moving away from traditional methods and into new pedagogical frontiers, of which, I would argue “new media” projects, CrashCourse Literature specifically, are intriguing examples. The intertwined relationship between pedagogy and reception in CrashCourse’s Literature videos cannot be overstated. CrashCourse Literature’s videos speak for themselves in describing their pedagogical approach in how they decided to teach the texts in bringing the text to the reader and the reader to the text. A step towards understanding why CrashCourse has been so beloved and utilized by students, teachers, and the public alike is to look at their pedagogical approach through the lens of reception theory. The most vital part of CrashCourse’s discussions of Oedipus Rex, Shakespeare’s sonnets, and The Great Gatsby is that they are academically sound in their analyses and also validate their viewers’ experiences with the texts at the same time. Within the texts of the videos CrashCourse Oedipus, CrashCourse Sonnets, CrashCourse Gatsby 1, and CrashCourse Gatsby 2, I see two distinct levels of reception that influence and strengthen each other:

1. First level of reception: CrashCourse interacts with and refracts the texts they are explicating based on where the reader is in time and space.

2. Meta-reception: CrashCourse interacts and connects with the viewers of the video by interpreting their viewers’ responses to said text.

CrashCourse Literature works from the premise that viewers have already read a text. Then CrashCourse not only interprets that text but reflects on the viewers’ response to that text at the

---

61 Examples of literary theories including reception theory among many others as specific as “death of the author” or more general theories such as gender studies and queer theory, postcolonial theory, etc..
62 Prime examples like CrashCourse’s video “How and Why we Read” amongst others will be discussed at length later in this paper. CrashCourse, “How and Why We Read: Crash Course English Literature #1,” Posted November 15, 2012, Complexly, YouTube video, 6:59, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MSYw502dJNY.
same time by using both the first level of reception and meta-reception. In doing so, they bring classic texts of the western canon to their viewers and their viewers to the texts in an optimal example of participating in and creating a space for the public humanities. These reception-based ideas are essential for CrashCourse to connect their audience to these texts or, in other words, to create a public humanities space. My analysis examines CrashCourse Literature through a theoretical lens, and I hope my paper will encourage further study of CrashCourse and other new media educational tools in the future.

First-level and Meta-reception in “Fate, Family, and Oedipus Rex”

Examples of first-level and meta-reception are integral parts of the argumentation arc of CrashCourse Oedipus. These elements of reception combined with the video’s critical reading of Oedipus Rex provide a helpful and engaging educational tool for viewers. Many of the examples of meta-reception are acts of self-awareness within the lecture as a way to connect more sincerely with the video’s audience. Humanities projects do not work or even truly exist without creating a conversation between the academic and the public and CrashCourse’s first-level reception and meta-reception moments are that give-and-take between the educator and the to-be-educated. The first example comes within the first minute of the video as John Green, the host and teacher, introduces the story of Oedipus and the concept of Greek tragedy more generally by giving a modern pop culture example of a tragic family that might surprise some academics: the Kardashians. Yes, those Kardashians.

---


64 Since CrashCourse videos attempt to connect the texts of the past with the people of the present time, the text of their videos is much less formal and conversational than to more traditional academic writing, which I will discuss at various points in this paper. The medium of video lecture is also much different than the medium of academic writing to an academic audience. Because of these attributes, it follows that the quotes I will use of CrashCourse’s videos may be longer than the length of quotes of other academic writing since CrashCourse’s language is less reliant on jargon as they attempt to bring the text to the reader and the reader to the text at the same time.
John from the Present: Hi! I'm John Green. Welcome to Crash Course Literature. Today we're going to talk about Oedipus. Leo Tolstoy once famously wrote that "All happy families are alike, but each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." And I certainly hope that there's no family as unhappy as Oedipus'.

Ancient Greek playwrights really specialized in the dysfunctional family. I mean, they had plays about wives killing husbands, parents killing children, children killing parents, siblings killing each other, and they also wrote tragedies. But it's hard to imagine a more tragic, dysfunctional family than the Theban clan that Sophocles writes about in Oedipus the King. I mean, except for the Kardashians.

John from the Past: Mr. Green, Mr. Green! Who are the Kardashians? That sounds exotic! Is it something from Star Wars?

John from the Present: Oh yeah, Me from the past! You don't know about the Kardashians. Right now, to you, the only Kardashian you know is OJ Simpson's defense attorney. Anyway, don't worry about it. Just imagine a green light on the other side of the bay that represents the glory you'll never reach. That's the Kardashians!  

There are a few examples in this short snippet of the video of how CrashCourse used self-awareness as a form of first-level reception to lead into meta-reception in referencing the Kardashians and The Great Gatsby. By mentioning the Kardashians, the CrashCourse team does a peculiar thing in that it not only centers this video in a historical moment (first-level reception) but opens it up to other historical moments as well by including John from the Past who does not know who the Kardashians are. The Kardashians are a relatively recent cultural phenomenon who took infamy created by a sex tape and transformed it into a multi-million-dollar reality-TV and cosmetic brand. They tie into several enduring literary ideas including a perpetually self-destructive family, as seen in many Greek tragedies, and the seen but unattainable green light across the bay from The Great Gatsby. Making and facilitating connections are what public humanities projects are all about, and CrashCourse completes the first level of reception by connecting the ideas of a tragic family to a modern-day example—the Kardashians. That connection is made through the intermediary of John from the Past who acts as a comical personal refraction of the audience. Through him, viewers can see their past, immature questions

---

and misguided vitriol regarding literary texts, allowing CrashCourse to connect to the viewer and address them more directly.

CrashCourse moves into the realm of meta-reception by addressing both the viewers and John from the Past by measuring their knowledge of their cultural heritage and connecting the Kardashians to the ideas of loss, desire, and the lost desire of a “green light on the other side of the bay that represents the glory you'll never reach” from *The Great Gatsby*. Since CrashCourse allows blunt questions from John from the Past, and more importantly answers them, a viewer can understand and connect with the cultural references CrashCourse uses and how they tie into a broader literary conversation. CrashCourse Literature creates a public humanities space in companionship with the popular culture of the viewing public by bringing Greek tragedy, tabloid stars, and literary images together. Not only is this an excellent example of meta-reception, but it is also a prime example of how literary works connect across time and space to make us think carefully about what influences our lives.

One of the most startling excerpts from the video (at least for more traditional humanities scholars) may be CrashCourse’s surprisingly reasonable argument for Chewbacca being a tragic hero. I would not be surprised at a reader or viewer being skeptical at why this seemingly unrelated pop-culture reference would be in a literature video at all. Not only that, using pop-culture references as examples to connect the viewer to literary theories and concepts is not widely acceptable in more traditional academic publishing circles. The CrashCourse team is expert in joining the past with the present in order to make themes current and impactful; a passing mention of the Kardashians became an exercise of applying literary themes to the audience’s historical and cultural moment. Similarly, CrashCourse links Chewbacca to a more

---

66 *The Great Gatsby*’s respective CrashCourse videos I will explicate later in this paper.
traditional academic figure, the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle, whose views on theater have permeated every humanities classroom from eighth grade on:

An open letter to the tragic hero, a type of character, of course, exemplified by Chewbacca. He was a Wookiee. He was strong. He was loyal. He was a great man, or at least, a great Wookiee. But it was his loyalty, a desirable trait, that also, ultimately, made him kind of a complicated hero.

I mean, Chewbacca made a blood oath to Han Solo, so if you mess with Han Solo, Chewbacca's gonna rip your arms off. And for those of you who know the Star Wars universe outside the movies, you already know that eventually, that does prove tragic. Chewbacca, you're a hero, but it's your heroism that also was ultimately your undoing. Best wishes, John Green.  

For CrashCourse, Chewbacca follows Aristotle’s line of what it means to be a tragic hero—a person who is noble and tries to do and be good but gets tripped up by their own hamartia or by missing and going beyond their mark. CrashCourse acknowledges the validity of seeing examples of literary terms, such as tragic hero, wherever they might be found, be that in Star Wars or a classic Greek tragedy. In doing so, they evoke both Jauss, in his ideas that literature is seen uniquely by each generation that reads it, and Ellison, in her hopes for the academic institution or the educator to work “across academic-public boundary from the campus side.” The university and other academic institutions cannot hope to connect with the public and create work that is meaningful to them both as academics and as members of the community if they are not willing to reach out and see examples of academia in the culture and literature of the public. Without inviting examples and connections from the public, academia fumbles the opportunity to foster critical thinking connections between the public and the humanities. As Fitzpatrick emphasizes:

---

With public literary criticism: the scholar’s role might ideally be not to instruct others about the meaning of [texts] but instead to enable them to develop and engage with those meanings themselves…It’s a challenging task, but an important one, since it is through such participation that we can begin to demonstrate the importance of the academy to the entirety of the social enterprise.  

Chewbacca might not be the best possible example of a tragic hero, but then again, he just might be. Fitzpatrick’s argument above shows that just because Chewbacca is a movie character from a popular franchise, does not negate him as a possible example of a tragic hero in the classroom, particularly to a student who knows and loves the character. Using Chewbacca as the first level of reception is exactly the kind of participation in meaning development Fitzpatrick encourages. The literary terms and ideas found in the academy are not limited to the traditional canon, but instead can and should be applied to the world at large by educational institutions at a first level of reception. This application of literary terms to pop-culture references, enables students to connect, develop, and engage with the meaning of the texts themselves through both an academic and a public lens.

CrashCourse Literature moves into meta-reception by using Chewbacca’s tragic heroess to contrast Oedipus’s tragic heroess, claiming that Oedipus as a tragic hero is more complicated than even Aristotle thought. And, perhaps more importantly, that even if the text is a classic, CrashCourse viewers can read it today and make connections to their horizon of expectations of a text by using pop-culture references. Chewbacca as a tragic hero is not a random pop culture reference but a reception-based tool or cue to understand the story of Oedipus more deeply (first-level reception). It’s only after this connection to the viewer’s cultural moment that CrashCourse incorporates meta-reception and responds to the viewers’ new interpretation of the ideas of a tragic hero. CrashCourse then applies those ideas to the viewers’ lives in a concrete way by

---

70 Kathleen Fitzpatrick, Generous Thinking: A Radical Approach to Saving the University (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), 112-113.
taking these new, more personal connections to the tragic family, the purposes of tragedy as a medium, and the tragic hero, and using them to question why such literary works and ideas matter in the here and now. CrashCourse connects Aristotle and Chewbacca not as an endgame or a gimmick to get more views, but as a springboard from Greek tragedy to more meta-reception-based discussion in a truly public humanities space. Green makes the jump to meta-reception by bridging what the text says and does directly to the questions the readers find between the lines,

And so, finally, thankfully, I do find myself disagreeing with Aristotle because I don't think that Oedipus was a great man ruined by a great error. I think the story is more complicated than that. So, could Oedipus ever really have escaped his fate? Probably not…

So when you read Oedipus, you realize there are actually two stories: one is about what’s already happened, and one is about what's happening now. It's the second one that interests Sophocles, like, killing the father and marrying the mother—that stuff happens in the past, offstage. Sophocles concentrates on the choices that Oedipus freely makes to find the source of the plague, even when it means implicating himself to gouge out his eyes so that he won't have to look at his parents in the underworld.

So Oedipus can’t escape his fate, but he does have a measure of free will, he does make some choices. What’s interesting to Sophocles isn’t so much the fulfillment of the prophecy as HOW it is fulfilled, and how that affects the present...

Instead of using the play to stage some sort of fate versus free will debate, Sophocles is interested in asking questions of both fate AND free will. I mean, when we see Oedipus, we should ask ourselves, “How much control do we have over our lives? How much do we owe to genetics, to privilege, to upbringing, to accident, to the choices that we do or don't make?” And those are relevant questions today.\(^7\)

Understanding the relevance of literary works in the here and now is often as difficult for the student to grasp as it is for the teachers and professors to communicate. Connecting ancient Greek theater to the Kardashians or Chewbacca allows new points of reference for viewers to take and apply to the pointed, personal, and relevant questions they lay out. CrashCourse utilizes meta-reception to emphasize the mission of public humanities with these last few italicized

\(^7\) CrashCourse, “Fate, Family, and Oedipus Rex: Crash Course Literature 202,” Posted March 06, 2014, Complexly, YouTube video, (10:31-12:05; emphasis added), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cj7R36s4dbM.
questions: “How much control do we have over our lives? How much do we owe to genetics, to privilege, to upbringing, to accident, to the choices that we do or don’t make?” These direct questions to their viewers, helps the audience see that the questions raised within *Oedipus Rex* are all too applicable to current public discourse. Not only that, the viewers now have the tools to navigate literary culture within their own horizon of expectations and answer these questions.

While formulating reception theory, Hans-Robert Jauss acknowledged the importance of using the texts of the classical canon to see within each reader’s horizon of expectations to dissect it and rebuild it into something entirely new. Therefore, CrashCourse follows Jauss’s interpretation that texts are not beholden to traditional teaching. Instead, as Jauss states in the following quote, teaching should give readers new tools from within their own horizon of expectations to understand the “opaque” reality of these classical texts. Academics serving up an ‘original’ meaning that fosters no personal connections to the text nor any connections to the present cultural moment, fails the texts as much as the students:

Thus a literary work with an unfamiliar aesthetic form can break through the expectations of its readers and at the same time, confront them with a question, the solution to which remains lacking for them in the religiously or officially sanctioned morals…But the literary work can also—and in the history of literature this possibility characterizes the latest period of our modernity—reverse the relationship of question and answer and in the medium of art confront the reader with a new, “opaque” reality that no longer allows itself to be understood from a pregiven horizon of expectations.72

Understanding the old and strange is made easier by incorporating the new and familiar. Anyone can talk about *Oedipus Rex,*73 but in my experience, there aren’t many educators that can simultaneously link Chewbacca to Aristotle’s criteria for a tragic hero, add something to the

---

scholarly conversation, and challenge their audience to think deeply and critically about what literature means in their lives. CrashCourse is checking all the public humanities boxes by using reception tools to meet their audience where they are instead of philosophizing as to where they should be.

As the video goes on, CrashCourse continues to expound on the historical context of *Oedipus Rex* and ancient Greek tragedy, making it easier to understand and allowing viewers to situate it within their own historical/cultural moment. Towards the beginning of the video, CrashCourse includes a summary of the story of *Oedipus Rex* and a summary of how Greek theater and the genre of tragedy worked during the classical period. It makes sense that CrashCourse has to do its academic due diligence and introduce these literary terms, yet in the midst of what could be a very dull discussion, they bring the conversation back to the viewer. Green goes on:

So for a little context, theater was a really big deal to the Greeks. I mean, if you were a male citizen—not a woman, not a slave—attending it was your civic duty. It was sort of like voting, except that it began with ritual animal sacrifice, so it was really nothing like voting. But this civic duty aspect is interesting, because a lot of the plays ask really troubling questions about power and control and the wisdom of rulers. Like, playwrights masked their commentary by setting plays in earlier, mythic eras or in foreign lands, just like Shakespeare did. But they were quite provocative then, and what’s most important is that the best of them are still interesting now.74

By mentioning voting, a “civic duty” the audience is familiar with, CrashCourse brings in something familiar to connect the viewer with Greek theater (first-level reception) in the same moment that it may seem very different due to the ritual animal sacrifice. The audience is challenged in their reception of *Oedipus Rex*, both to acknowledge the differences from their personal lived experience and to still fit the text into their historical moment. At the end of the

quote, CrashCourse mentions that the plays were interesting for the Greeks who were watching them thousands of years ago because they allowed them to think complexly about their current circumstances by imagining them through the eyes of another.

That important connection means that since tragedies often use this kind of meta-reception to apply the lessons of the play to the ancient Greek’s historical moment, then the current audience can use the same meta-reception to do the same for their own time. This endorsement of meta-reception ties well into CrashCourse’s conclusion at the end of the video which states:

But ultimately, what makes Oedipus such a great play is that it stands up to many readings and can inform our lives in many ways. I mean, is he a great man? Does he make a great mistake? Does he suffer his fate because of personal flaws or because of the nature of the universe? Those are big, interesting questions, and it's nice to know that people have been asking them for millennia.75

The Kardashians, Chewbacca, and the other examples of first-level reception and meta-reception all lead to this point: allowing texts to have “many readings” and making literary connections through “unscholarly”76 examples means the “big, interesting questions” actually resonate with a new audience. A relatively new and rapidly evolving video platform like YouTube provides new access for new people as it and its reach expands, and this CrashCourse video works to use it to its full educational potential: combining popular culture references, questions pertinent to the audiences’ day, and then bringing up something as normal as voting to push for more engagement with the text of Oedipus Rex. CrashCourse is not the end-all-be-all for public humanities education, but they certainly are using the tools found in reception theory remarkably effectively to connect with their audience and connect their audience with the text. Even these

few examples generate hope and excitement for the humanities by inviting viewers to engage with humanities texts through first-level reception and meta-reception—exactly what the public humanities are supposed to do. The public humanities benefit from this pedagogical approach because CrashCourse’s videos, particularly CrashCourse Oedipus, connect with their viewers in their own historical moment.

**First-level and Meta-reception in “Shakespeare’s Sonnets”**

Yet, out of all three of these videos, Shakespeare’s work has arguably been the most influential on the viewers’ historical moment, sculpting everything from the viewers’ vocabulary to their popular media. Shakespeare’s works are some of the most quintessential texts of the western English literary canon insomuch that CrashCourse’s discussion of Shakespeare’s work weave in and out of multiple videos across the CrashCourse repertoire. In every example, CrashCourse Literature manages to combine relevant historical information and literary interpretation to give their viewers a deeper understanding of both Shakespeare’s works and the texts they are discussing.  

In the CrashCourse Sonnets videos, CrashCourse focuses their analysis on what are arguably the best known of Shakespeare’s sonnets (18, 116, and 130), and even here, they manage to succinctly provide viewers with the necessary scholarly background on the poems while also providing new interpretive insights.  

---


78 This includes but is not limited to who the poems are for and how they differ categorically and emotionally from each other, of Shakespeare’s need to write and record in this form as a way to become immortal, the mystery of the dedication in the first published copy of the sonnets, Shakespeare’s sonnets not being as well-known or impressive to the masses of his time, how his sonnets were published relatively late in respect to the popular literary forms of his time. For more details on Shakespearean scholarship, see *The Cambridge Introduction to Shakespeare’s Poetry* and *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare’s Poetry*.  

32
level reception and meta-reception throughout the video as they begin by giving the basic history and the components that make up the English or Shakespearean sonnet. As the video gives background on the sonnet as a form, CrashCourse works hard to connect with the viewer by engaging with how they read or have read the sonnets in the past and showing how sonnets are not just a writing form of yore but have connections to their lives today. One excellent example of first-level reception is CrashCourse elaborating on how popular and invested the public was in the sonnet as an artform by comparing it to boy bands. The comparison is not negative or condescending, but another attempt at personal connection to the audience. CrashCourse says, “English sonnets started in the 16th century, and by the 1590s, there was a huge craze for them. Kinda like the craze for boy bands in the 1990’s except with less choreography and hair gel. This is more or less when Shakespeare started writing them.” Importantly, CrashCourse uses this example of first-level reception to allow the viewers to recognize just how culturally relevant this artform was for the public of Shakespeare’s time. CrashCourse’s audience might feel more willing to connect with the sonnets on a personal level because the people of the past did too.

CrashCourse takes it a step toward meta-reception by using John from the Past to ask what a sonnet is, an opportunity to define a sonnet and make sure all viewers are on the same page.

*John from the Present:* Today we’re talking about Shakespeare’s sonnets, collected and published in 1609.

*John from the Past:* Mr. Green! Mr. Green! What’s a sonnet?

*John from the Present:* Good question me from the past. In fact, such a good question that your seventh grade English teacher answered it for you, but apparently, you've forgotten. A sonnet is a poetic form...
CrashCourse does not just apply Shakespearean texts to their viewers; they look through the screen and almost read viewers’ thoughts. This use of first-level reception connects the text to the reader’s experience. Of course, it is an essential part of teaching to start with the basics and work your way up to more difficult aspects of a subject, but the audience of this video is John from the Past: viewers once knew the definition of the sonnet but no longer remember it. Sonnets are not as popular as boy bands of the 90s anymore, and the format is not a familiar part of day-to-day life. CrashCourse is using good teaching practices by working to create “a really close personal bond” between the people teaching and the people being taught along with first-level reception to engage students in learning about Shakespearean sonnets. They then apply those technical aspects of sonnets not as an exercise in futility, but as part of their larger goal to help viewers pass the test of life. Now knowing the sonnet is made up of fourteen lines doesn’t change viewers’ perspectives on the world but knowing that “Shakespeare manages to cram a lot of [complicated and nuanced] emotion into his highly structured form” and communicate that emotion across huge swaths of time, space, and cultural difference invites the public into the humanities instead of having them bow down to it—or flee from it.

After covering the basics of the sonnets’ structure and Shakespeare’s historical literary context, CrashCourse goes on to examine another example of the scholarly interplay between the

songs are written in iambs, like a lot of times when we speak, we accidentally speak in them. But when I'm trying to remember the sound of iambic pentameter, I just remember John Keats's last will and testament, which was one line of iambic pentameter: 'My chest of books divide among my friends.'" CrashCourse, “Shakespeare’s Sonnets: Crash Course Literature 304,” Posted July 27, 2016, Complexly, YouTube video, 12:26 www.youtube.com/watch?v=bDpW1sHrBaU, 0:20-1:35.


A good portion of the sonnets that are considered the most traditionally romantic were not written for a lady-friend of Shakespeare’s but instead, are said to have written to “a mysterious young man.” CrashCourse details this in its discussion of Sonnet 18 by first bringing up this point (first level of reception) and then by applying it to something the viewer might have experienced in pop culture, the movie *Shakespeare in Love* (meta-reception):

Relatively few of the sonnets have gendered pronouns which has caused a lot of bother over the last 400 years. But there’s fairly widespread agreement these days that in these sonnets there is a relationship between two men that is passionate and possibly even erotic. And this bothered a lot of early editors so much that some went to all the trouble to change the pronouns from male to female. So does this mean that Shakespeare was gay? I don’t know. I wasn't alive in the 17th century. I also think it’s dangerous to read biography into poetry. Also in 16th and 17th century England passionate friendships between men were common and they didn’t necessarily involve sex. That said, I still think it's worth noting and understanding that all of the most romantic and loving of the sonnets are those addressed to the young man...Now if you've seen *Shakespeare in Love*, you know that Shakespeare wrote this for Gwyneth Paltrow. Nope, he didn’t. In "*Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer's Day?*" the thee in question is that mysterious young man.  

This point and emphasis may seem unsurprising to academics who are well versed in the scholarship associated with Shakespeare’s sonnets but may shock students or the general public watching the videos. Popular culture examples like *Shakespeare in Love* reinforced this misunderstanding of the past by creating a fictional story around Shakespeare’s life and work that worked within the English/American culture’s heteronormative standards instead of the more nuanced truth. CrashCourse, instead of taking the easier road of normativity, focuses on the scholarly consensus. At the same time, CrashCourse draws attention to the non-simplified version of history. This particular video is focused more on secondary school and first-year university students, so it seems significant that CrashCourse doesn’t leave out the complexities,
focusing on giving academically sound content directly discussed within academia\textsuperscript{87} instead of holding up the heteronormative standard. In using first-level reception and meta-reception, CrashCourse draws their readers into the juxtaposition between scholarship and pop-culture-driven knowledge. In doing so, CrashCourse dispenses intriguing and nuanced information viewers wouldn’t have encountered in their casual readings or interactions with the work. In other words, they are doing exactly what public humanities projects are supposed to do: bring traditional, reputable scholarship into the general public’s knowledge base. Shakespeare’s poetry has been inspiring the language of love in western English-speaking literary and popular culture for several hundred years. Understanding the context surrounding the sonnets allows viewers to see that the heteronormative standards treated as gospel in popular traditions about Shakespeare’s work are a false façade obscuring a more complicated and enigmatic past.

**First-level and Meta-reception in “‘Like Pale Gold’ & ‘Was Gatsby Great?’”**

The use of both reception and meta-reception occur in CrashCourse Gatsby 1 and CrashCourse Gatsby 2 even more prolifically than the two videos previously discussed. This increase may be because *The Great Gatsby* is not as historically removed from the viewers as *Oedipus* and Shakespeare. *Gatsby* is also a novel, a more recognizable literary genre for the public watching CrashCourse videos that does not require as much introduction or defining of terms. Instead, the videos focus more on keeping the viewers engaged in reading thoughtfully and critically and uses their various reception-based teaching methods to do so. Instead of starting off by singing the praises of the text to make it seem relevant to the viewer, CrashCourse takes a different direction to make it relatable. First and foremost, CrashCourse does not allow viewers to get away with dismissing *Gatsby* out of hand just because they think they (will) hate

\textsuperscript{87} See note 78.
it. Instead, CrashCourse makes sure to confront viewers with their embodiment of someone who had to read *The Great Gatsby* in high school, “me [John Green] from the past.” Often, our preexisting ideas concerning a text can do more to our reading of a text than anything else, including reading the text itself. As discussed, reception theory is founded on the principal that each reader brings a different set of past experiences to their reading of any given text. As seen in CrashCourse Oedipus and CrashCourse Sonnets, CrashCourse understands this principle and knows that the only way to get the people who “hate” a text to actually pay attention is to not only comment on *The Great Gatsby* (first-level reception) but to comment on their viewers’ reaction to *The Great Gatsby* (meta-reception).

*John from the Past:* Mr. Green, I hate everything about this stupid collection of first world problems passing for a novel, but my hatred of that Willa Cather-ing loser Daisy Buchanan burns with the fire of a thousand suns!

*John from the Present:* Ugh, me from the past, here’s the thing: you’re not supposed to like Daisy Buchanan, at least not in the uncomplicated way that you like, say, cupcakes.

We’ve already discussed how ideal public humanities projects should focus on fostering connection and discussion with and among the public, to preach the virtues of the humanities instead of devaluing the public’s views. Present John’s response to what is a very typical response to *The Great Gatsby* is not a dismissal of the viewers feelings or point of view. Instead, CrashCourse is confronting the sentiment that “*Gatsby* sucks because the characters suck” head on, asking the public to ask of themselves the questions they are asking of the book: “Why

---


89 CrashCourse’s host, John Green, explains in the introductory video to CrashCourse Literature that he “will be inserting names of [his] favorite writers when [he] would otherwise insert curse words. We invented grammar because without prepositions, we couldn’t describe what it’s like to fly through a cloud, or jump over a puddle, or Faulkner beneath the stars.” CrashCourse, “How and Why We Read: Crash Course English Literature #1,” Complexly, November 15, 2012, video, 1:02-1:23, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MSYw502dJNY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MSYw502dJNY).

should I care?” For me, this might be one of the most powerful examples of CrashCourse using meta-reception to make viewers see a text, and themselves, differently than they did before. John from the Past’s first response to the text is as viceral as it is naïve and is CrashCourse’s first level of reception. Now, John from the Present’s reply is not focused on John from the Past’s ignorance, but focuses on what he got right and how it should apply directly to how John from the Past, and the video viewer, sees their world (meta-reception). Whether or not the characters are likeable or not or whether or not the novel is a “stupid collection of first-world problems” should never be an excuse for readers to not learn anything from the text. John from the Present continues teaching his past self:

I don't know where you [John from the Past] got the idea that the quality of a novel should be judged by the likeability of its characters, but let me submit to you that Daisy Buchanan doesn't have to be likeable to be interesting. Furthermore, most of what makes her unlikeable—her sense of entitlement, her limited empathy, her inability to make difficult choices—are the very same things that make you unlikeable! That’s the pleasure and challenge of reading great novels, you get to see yourself as others see you, and you get to see others as they see themselves.91

Both the viewers and John from the Past are vindicated by John from the Present about their views on the characters in *The Great Gatsby*. The characters might be terrible, and sometimes it’s uncomfortable to read about terrible people, not because they’re terrible, but because they remind us a little too much of ourselves. In this small example, the public interacting with the humanities is shown in its true, nuanced form. It is perhaps difficult but also part of a scholarly conversation taking place outside the classroom.

If public humanities projects are meant to facilitate thought-provoking interest and research outside the academy, understanding why literary tools are employed by authors and how they are taken in by readers is essential. From the very beginning, CrashCourse Literature set out

---

its pedagogical approach in “How and Why We Read” as a way to understand the world and individuals more completely as a conversation between the author and the reader:

Writing, or at least good writing, is an outgrowth of that urge to use language to communicate complex ideas and experiences between people... *reading is always an act of empathy*. It's always an imagining of what it's like to be someone else... [Authors make certain literary choices] (at least, if they're doing it on purpose) so the story can have a bigger and better life in your mind.  

This exercise in meta-reception underscores that reading thoughtfully and critically is about seeing the characters you read as persons like you, who make choices that sometimes make them difficult to love or even understand. The choices and consequences those characters face are very real in that they “are the very same things that make [us] unlikeable.” This exchange between past and present John is not about evangelizing the humanities as valuable in themselves, but valuable because of how the reader reads them. Making assumptions about a text is one thing, but viewers are reading as “an act of empathy”: a way to see into and through the points of view of even “unlikeable” people. This definition of reading allows CrashCourse Literature to show that those classic texts that you had to read in English class can get you more than just a passing grade in a class, but allow you “to see yourself as others see you, and you get to see others as they see themselves.”

CrashCourse goes on in their second *Gatsby* video to continue bringing the reader to the text by bringing the text to the reader. Even if there is a callout of sorts in justifying writing stories about terrible, unlikeable people in CrashCourse Gatsby 1, CrashCourse Gatsby 2 gives the textual basis for why a story about terrible people can be as enduring and beautiful as *Gatsby* is, another example of meta-reception.

As many a high schooler has pointed out, the characters in *The Great Gatsby* aren’t terribly likeable, and the story just isn’t moving or compelling if you’re reading about a

---

bunch of people you hate, some of whom get what's coming to them and some of whom don’t. Fitzgerald handles this problem by heightening the language and giving it pace. I mean, you can basically tap your foot to *The Great Gatsby* from the very first sentence: “In my younger and more vulnerable years, my father gave me some advice I've been turning over in my mind ever since.” It’s got a beat and I can dance to it. And the descriptions are jarringly, magnificently beautiful, too: Daisy's voice sounds “full of money”; the fading glow on Jordan Baker's face is “like children leaving a pleasant street at dusk,”…the descriptions here are lush and beautiful. So the language of the novel elevates Gatsby’s triumphs and tragedies to the stuff of real epics, which gives Gatsby a kind of unironic greatness.  

First, CrashCourse brings the viewers’ attention to their own perceptions on *Gatsby* and how they could affect their point of view on the work. Only then does CrashCourse discuss the literary history of how authors use language to enhance the text even if its characters are less than likeable. In this case, and many other of the examples I’ve discussed, CrashCourse’s emphasis on bringing the text to the reader first (first-level reception), and then following up with an interpretation of the reader’s response to the text (meta-reception) allows literary scholarship and viewer engagement to work together, bringing scholastic value and overall enjoyability to the videos.

As an academic exercise, this example shows CrashCourse balancing scholarship with viewer engagement to allow the text to affect the viewer. In this example, CrashCourse does what might be the most difficult and the most rewarding thing to do when teaching the humanities: taking disdain and running with it. Kathleen Fitzpatrick quotes another academic’s plea to academia, that there must be “a momentary staving off of the impulse to assume that someone else’s scholarship is fashioned out of ignorance or apathy or ill will or that the

---


94 Fitzpatrick quotes Lisa Rohdy whose work included finding connections between improvisational comedies and academic work. This gesture is apt as CrashCourse Literature is the collision point between literary scholarship and YouTube videos. Dismissing educational opportunities from anywhere, be it improvisational comedies or YouTube videos misses the point of public humanities altogether.
conversation was initiated in bad faith.”95 CrashCourse is an organization focused on online and video-based learning that could do great work to expand the intellectual conversation to a larger public that could become “potential colleagues” to the academy. This immensely important transition from reactionary and defensive to collaborative and generous allows public humanities projects’ to bridge the gap between the classics and the public. We’ve already discussed how CrashCourse imagined the reaction of many viewers who, once upon a time, were high-school students who thought they knew everything about The Great Gatsby and how terrible it and all the characters were. CrashCourse works these ideas into the first sections of their videos to make CrashCourse Gatsby 1 and CrashCourse Gatsby 2 more engaging, meeting the viewers where they are instead of where the educational establishment thinks they should be.

As the videos go on, we get to CrashCourse’s take on arguably one of the worst, most unlikable, characters in the novel: Tom. Again, CrashCourse brings sound analysis in a new vernacular designed to be honest and engaging while using first-level reception and meta-reception. First, we have their first-level reception note about Tom in CrashCourse Gatsby 1.

Tom is the very definition of “having it all,” but his self-righteous and selfish carelessness makes him worse than a person known to the public as defined by their riches and little else: Paris Hilton. CrashCourse explains, “So whenever Nick is hanging out with the mega-rich Tom, the parties are always awful and everybody always wants the kind of status and wealth that Tom Buchanan has, which is hilarious because of course Tom is a horrible ass hat who makes Paris Hilton look, like, charming and grounded.”96 Paris Hilton is a prime example of a person whose life and personality runs completely against the grain for the majority of the people who read The Great Gatsby.

95 Kathleen Fitzpatrick, Generous Thinking: A Radical Approach to Saving the University (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), 34-35. (emphasis in original)
Great Gatsby. Being the granddaughter of an enormously rich hotelier, she appeared on television shows like A Simple Life where she attempted to live a similar life to those with much less money without relying on her enormous wealth and privilege.97 This pop-culture first-level reception connection is not meant, necessarily, to make viewers like Tom as a character (they do describe him as an asshat in the same sentence), but instead to get viewers to connect with and understand their own underlying reasons for disliking him through meta-reception. CrashCourse builds on the same point later in CrashCourse Gatsby 1 by saying, “Tom is a former football player and a life-long asshat who Nick describes as ‘one of those men who achieves such an acute, limited excellence at twenty-one that everything afterwards savors of anti-climax.’ Listen, if you're under 21, it might be difficult to apprehend the depth of that burn, but trust me, it’s a burn.”98 CrashCourse taking an active interest in their viewers reception of the characters in The Great Gatsby allows for real connection between academia and the public. It does not sound like a traditional academic paper because if you’re going to connect to the public, you need to use the language that is recognizable and understandable to the public. There is a known emotional reaction to the character of Tom because he is awful in every possible way. Saying Tom is a “horrible asshat that makes Paris Hilton look charming and grounded” and backing that up by citing examples from the text and quoting how the narrator describes him —“one of those men who achieves such an acute, limited excellence at twenty-one that everything afterwards savors

97 It is difficult to find the balance of which pop-culture references are helpful to making a point discussed within a video and which references will last in the public imagination. One reason I put this explanation of Paris Hilton’s backstory is that Hilton does not occupy the same pop-culture space she in 2012 when CrashCourse Gatsby 1 was posted. Posting a video to YouTube is a blessing and a curse in that it cannot be changed or updated later without deleting the original one entirely. Whereas a teacher or professor in a classroom would, theoretically, be able to make the changes to lesson material to keep whatever pop culture references there are, up to date and relevant to the student. Then again, it may not be as relevant to current young students and need further explanation, but other older viewers could understand the reference and its implications.

of anti-climax”—brings the book to the reader instead of bringing the reader to the book. That is not a dismissal of the power of the book, the writing, or the author, but an endorsement and real comprehension of what the book does to the reader. Describing Tom as an “asshat” and then putting Tom in a hat that looks like a donkey works astoundingly well in conveying the sentiment Nick was trying to get across when he describes Tom’s “acute, limited excellence.”

CrashCourse Literature’s work with *The Great Gatsby* comes to an end as they spend the latter part of both CrashCourse Gatsby 1 and Crash Course Gatsby 2 discussing ideas that are well known to any scholar on *Gatsby*: symbolism and the American dream. There are symbols from *The Great Gatsby* that are so ubiquitous in the American/western culture that CrashCourse itself used “the green light” to discuss the Kardashians and the tragic family in CrashCourse Oedipus. Additionally, the American dream is an apt topic of discussion, one CrashCourse tackles at the beginning of CrashCourse Gatsby 1:

> So the two books most often cited as the “Great American novel” are *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and this slender beast, *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald. The US is a country founded on the principles of freedom and equality; *Huck Finn* is a novel about slavery and radical inequality. We’re also a nation that believes in the American Dream. We pride ourselves on our lack of aristocracy and the equality of opportunity, but *Gatsby* is a novel about our de facto aristocracy and the limits of American Opportunity.

CrashCourse subtly incorporates some of the most well-known literary scholarship surrounding *The Great Gatsby* as well as the most established cultural ideas associated with *Gatsby* from the very beginning of their videos. This distillation of scholarship puts the text in a relatable

---

99 In their digital animations of Tom and other characters used throughout the video, Tom is often seen wearing a literal “asshat.” The digital animations themselves and what they add to the texts of the videos would also be a worthwhile project to research.


102 Within an English language tradition.
literary and historical context, which is essential since CrashCourse integrates the viewer into the text of their video and then dives even deeper with the viewers’ responses to the text in mind (meta-reception). CrashCourse Literature’s combination of first-level and meta-reception creates a public humanities project that is both based in scholarship and culturally relevant. Consequently, CrashCourse brings up the blatant and troubling disconnect between the perceived cultural value of texts and their actual content means that viewers of CrashCourse videos, again, may come to the videos with a misconstrued idea of what the book is trying to accomplish. If the readers expectations for a book are not met, they can be dissuaded from wanting to interact with other texts of the canon further. CrashCourse knows and acknowledges this above. But if CrashCourse is doing the public humanities work of reading texts carefully and critically, it follows that the readings and analysis it creates may work against the idea and ideal of the canon as much as it works for it. The idea that certain texts are ‘supposed to be good because they are canon’ comes across similarly to when your aunt told you, “Brussel sprouts are good for you.” That might be true, but telling me that doesn’t necessarily mean I want to read them (or eat them!) any more than I did before.103 Jauss explicates what the act of close reading (or the similar but more institutionally expansive “generous thinking” as termed by Fitzpatrick) can do for readers who have participated in a cultural heritage without having thoughtfully read the texts of the canon that create that heritage. Until we read the texts of the canon and analyze them within and without our personal horizon of expectations, as CrashCourse does, we miss how those texts work within the culture they have helped build. Jauss elaborates:

The experience of reading can liberate one from adaptations, prejudices, and predicaments of a lived praxis in that it compels one to a new perception of things. The horizon of expectations of literature distinguished itself before the horizon of expectations of historical lived praxis in that it not only preserves actual experiences, but

103 I have since grown-up and know now that if you don’t steam the brussels sprouts, but, cut them in half, cover them with olive oil, salt, and pepper, and roast them at 400 F for 35 minutes, I could eat a whole plate of them.
also anticipates unrealized possibility, broadens the limited space of social behavior for
new desires, claims, and goals, and thereby opens paths of future experience.  

This reordering of the horizon of expectations and expanding knowledge of cultural and literary
context with a text is exactly what CrashCourse succeeds in doing. In CrashCourse’s view, part
of reading a text carefully is not about setting out one standard dogma of a text but to address the
received and directional aspects of the text, its textual elements, and its relationship to its readers.
CrashCourse does this in their explanations of the depth and complexity of Gatsby’s most
prominent symbols and connects it to the novel’s overall condemnation of the ‘American
Dream.’ Green says:

So the most famous color symbol in The Great Gatsby is the green light at the end of
Daisy’s dock that Gatsby is always looking out at from across the bay. Gatsby just wants
to reach across the bay and get to that Green Light, and, if he can, he believes he will
have the girl and the life that has driven his wild ambition.

Nick calls that Green Light at one point “an enchanted object,” and that's what
symbols really are in both literature and real life. So yes, the green light is a symbol in
Gatsby, but this isn’t only stuff that happens in novels. We all have enchanted objects in
our lives. On the night that I got engaged, I drank champagne with the woman who is
now my wife and I still have the cork from that champagne bottle—I’m lying. I couldn't
afford corky champagne. It was twist off champagne, but I still have the bottle cap.

Here we see a classic example of CrashCourse’s meta-reception at work in connecting the text of
the book to a reader’s experience by showing an example of “an enchanted object” in John
Green’s life. This discussion allows the viewers of the video to do exactly what Jauss describes
above: to “anticipate unrealized possibility” in what a symbol or enchanted object looks like, not
only in novels but within their own lives.

The most difficult part of this process for both the creators of the CrashCourse content
and their viewers, is not so much changing the perceptions and horizon of expectations of

104 Hans Robert Jauss, Toward an Aesthetic of Reception, trans. Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis: University of
Minnesota Press, 1982) 41.
105 CrashCourse, “Like Pale Gold - The Great Gatsby Part I: Crash Course English Literature #4,” Posted December
viewers but changing the perceptions of overarching societal and cultural ideas. If the academy really wants to get people to listen, they must bring their knowledge and skills to the lifelong-reading public in a way that is both intellectually rigorous and meaningful to the public they are reaching out to.\footnote{Kathleen Fitzpatrick deals with this directly in \textit{Generous Thinking} when discussing how the academic establishment must expand their own ideas of what reading is supposed to do in order for the public to want to interact with it at all. “What readers love about reading, and the impact that it can have on their lives, is relatively clear: reading of a wide range of types of texts has the power to open us to other perspectives, to other experiences, to other lives, to create a connection between our private cells and the public sphere. Reading can help encourage the development, however preliminary, of the kind of intersubjective understanding necessary to the creation and sustenance of difficult structures of community. Contemporary literary criticism, like the forms of reading that take place in many fields across University campuses, has much to offer to that process --not least, deepening identification and sympathy into more complex, more ethically engaged forms of empathy and generosity --but only if that criticism can engage the same communities of readers: the students who might be drawn to our fields; the lifelong readers who might help support our institutions and the work we do within them.” Kathleen Fitzpatrick, \textit{Generous Thinking: A Radical Approach to Saving the University} (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), 131.} CrashCourse acknowledges the readers/viewers by speaking to them within their historical moment and cultural context (first-level reception) while, at the same time, focusing on connecting their understanding of literary devices to their personally held social ideas and ideals (meta-reception). This approach allows the public to engage with these humanities texts, not just check them off the reading list. The first sentence of CrashCourse Gatsby 1, undertakes this engagement head on by framing \textit{Gatsby} as “the great American novel.” At the same time, CrashCourse questions how and why the ideals of the American dream do not match up with the United States’ “de facto aristocracy and the limits of American opportunity.”\footnote{CrashCourse, “Like Pale Gold - The Great Gatsby Part I: Crash Course English Literature #4,” Posted December 13, 2012, Complexly, YouTube video, 0:28-0:31, \url{www.youtube.com/watch?v=xw9Au9OoN88}.} CrashCourse, just like the novel, makes its skepticism known from the very outset of CrashCourse Gatsby 1. The equation of the American dream is that \textit{anyone} can make it in the United States \textit{if} they work hard and \textit{then} they will \textit{receive} all the influence, power, and validation money can buy. CrashCourse disintegrates this overly simplified idea by breaking down the characters of Gatsby and Nick and their disconnect from that dream:
From the first chapter, we know three things about our narrator, Nick Carraway. By the way, get it? Care away? It’s not that sophisticated. He could have done better.

1. Nick grew up in the Midwest then moved to New York’s West Egg, and then something happened that made him move back to the Midwest.

Also, 2. he is prone to the use of highfalutin language, as when he introduces Jay Gatsby by saying, “Gatsby turned out alright in the end; it was what preyed on Gatsby, what foul dust floated in the wake of his dreams that temporarily closed out my interest in the abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men.” That dream, by the way, with all of its foul dust, is the American dream.

Finally, 3. Nick is rich, and he got rich not by working, but by having a rich ancestor who paid someone off to serve in the Civil War on his behalf, which allowed Nick's ancestor to spend the Civil War making money. So how’s that for equal opportunity?

And then there’s Gatsby, about whom we learn absolutely nothing in chapter 1, except for the aforementioned foul dust floating in the wake of his dreams and that he had an “extraordinary gift for hope.”

This extraordinary gift for hope is the essential fact of Gatsby and also many romantic leads from Romeo to Edward Cullen to Henry VIII, who might have given up on several of his wives but never gave up on the idea of love!

All of these people share a creepy belief that if they just get the thing they want—the thing being a female human being—then they’ll finally be happy. We have a word for this; it’s called objectification.108

Viewers may have a rather uncomplicated view of the what the American Dream is and who it applies until they read *Gatsby* at this level of engagement. That engagement is only possible because CrashCourse takes the time to discuss and dispute the ideal of the American dream (first level of reception) and continues on to confront their viewers’ response to that ideal American dream vs their response to *Gatsby* and its views of the “ideal” American dream (meta-reception). CrashCourse’s analyses are specifically focused on the horizon of expectation of their viewers, making the analyses effective and memorable. They spotlight everything from the name choices of characters (Nick Carraway), to the language of the text (“That dream, by the way, with all of its foul dust, is the American dream.”), to Nick’s “equal opportunity,” and more. No generalization concerning *Gatsby*’s characters and their connections to the mythologies

---

Americans have created for themselves is safe from CrashCourse’s analysis. CrashCourse brings up each point, and then they bring the text to the reader. Their analyses rely on pop-cultural and broader cultural characters (Henry VIII, Edward Cullen, and Romeo). This combined with more informal language (“All of these people share a creepy belief that if they just get the thing they want—the thing being a female human being…”) allows viewers to see the inherent issues in the idealized version of the American dream 

Gatsby is dismantling. CrashCourse allows the viewer to see the failing of the personal ambition of the American dream here with Gatsby’s entitlement disguised as “hope” paired with Nick’s substantial privilege disguised as “equal opportunity.”

All the 1920s themed costume parties held by celebrities, described as “Great Gatsby themed,” and splashed all over the media now seem a bit self-righteous in their own right.

CrashCourse goes on in CrashCourse Gatsby 1 and CrashCourse Gatsby 2 to discuss and “read” Gatsby “closely and carefully.” However, it bears saying that “reading closely” does not necessarily constitute reception, first-level or meta-reception. Connecting the readers to the texts and the texts to the readers can be done without employing meta-reception or interpreting a reader’s response to the text. Some of the most powerful discussions of the text come from CrashCourse staying within the realm of close reading and Fitzpatrick’s idea of “generous thinking.”

109 The reception-based tools that bring each text to each viewer and vice versa provide an excellent groundwork for CrashCourse to build on with other literary criticism tools more focused on the text than on the reader. CrashCourse takes the time to lay a foundation of validating readers’ experiences, along with accurate scholarly commentary, approachable

language, and constantly reevaluating the reader’s horizon of expectations. Nurturing interpretive connections means the next steps of literary analysis become welcome additions that increase understanding of a text instead of being a confusing diversion from meaningful engagement.

**CrashCourse Literature: A New Direction for Public Humanities**

CrashCourse is an example of new media working well within the realm of public humanities. Using dedicated researchers, trained teachers, and writers, CrashCourse works hard to be a credible, engaging, and free source of educational material. But it’s not only the material that is important; there is also a huge emphasis put on why this type of learning is important. As John Green begins to introduce the first CrashCourse series, World History, he is interrupted by John from the Past asking the earnest question hated by teachers the world over. Greens begins:

*John from the Present:* Hello, learned and astonishingly attractive pupils. My name is John Green and I want to welcome you to Crash Course World History. Over the next forty weeks together, we will learn how in a mere fifteen thousand years, humans went from hunting and gathering...

*John from the Past:* Mr. Green, Mr. Green! Is this gonna be on the test?\(^{110}\)

Ah yes, the eternally bothersome question brought to academics and teachers the world over: is this going to be on the test? There usually isn’t an answer that will satisfy both the student and the teacher. The student is begging for brevity and clarity under the assumption that knowledge gained in a classroom—particularly and especially in classes based on close readings of literature—should be focused on giving the students the ability to answer multiple choice questions correctly and then never expecting the students to think about those questions again. This mindset is misunderstanding the nature of studying literature and other subjects and is often reflected in how many professors respond, often with a sly, exasperated, “I guess you’ll have to wait and see.” This goes back to the disconnect that has occurred between students (as well as

---

\(^{110}\) CrashCourse, “The Agricultural Revolution: Crash Course World History #1,” Posted January 26, 2012, Complexly, YouTube video, 0:00-0:14, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yocja_N5s1I](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yocja_N5s1I).
the general, non-academic public) and the university. Fitzpatrick reminds us that “the university has been undermined by the withdrawal of public support for its functions, but that public support has been undermined by the university’s own betrayals of the public trust.”\textsuperscript{111} The public trusted that education should be a challenging but enlightening experience and not a constant chorus of ‘you just don’t understand great art.’ The public trusted that since the humanities are required for a general education credit, they should get at least some diversion and rewarding scholarly experiences out of studying the subject. That public trust has been tainted by the tradition of tests molded around regurgitating trivia to get an A and checking another requirement off the list. “Is this gonna be on the test?” is not a question condemning the person asking it, it is a condemnation of the educational system that constructed it.

CrashCourse, and CrashCourse Literature in particular, decides to take a more generous approach.\textsuperscript{112} Instead of deflecting the question, they directly attack the supposition that learning is simply the means of getting a good grade on a test. Green responds with an impassioned declaration of the value of the humanities and how more general knowledge-building practices allow students and viewers to see moments within their own lives that can benefit by knowing the answers for “the test.” The test is not filling in bubbles on a Scantron, passing the class, getting a degree, or getting a job. Instead, “the test” is the summation of your choices and life experiences.

John from the Past: Mr. Green, Mr. Green! Is this gonna be on the test?
John from the Present: Yeah, about the test. The test will measure whether you are an informed, engaged, and productive citizen of the world, and it will take place in schools and bars and hospitals and dorm rooms and in places of worship. You will be tested on first dates, in job interviews, while watching football, and while scrolling through your Twitter feed.

\textsuperscript{111} Kathleen Fitzpatrick, \textit{Generous Thinking: A Radical Approach to Saving the University} (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), (xi; emphasis added).
\textsuperscript{112} Other CrashCourse series, and there are many, deserve more analysis and research to see if those series work as well in creating a public humanities space.
The test will judge your ability to think about things other than celebrity marriages, whether you’ll be easily persuaded by empty political rhetoric, and whether you’ll be able to place your life and your community in a broader context. The test will last your entire life, and it will be comprised of the millions of decisions that, when taken together, make your life yours. And everything—everything—will be on it. I know, right? So pay attention.¹¹³

All at once, viewers are confronted with the fact that the things CrashCourse will try to teach them will contribute to their ability to understand the world around them, not just the trivia of dates, places, or the names of ‘great men.’ The video introduces CrashCourse’s careful balance of the often-problematic evangelism of the humanities with the hope that improving access to the humanities brings cultural and intellectual empowerment. Now, the idea that literature, critical thinking, and careful reading are inherently useful because they teach you how to be a well-rounded empathetic person is not a foreign idea to those in the educational system. But, instead of responding defensively and defiantly to an admittedly obnoxious question, CrashCourse changes that defensiveness into a message of hope and excitement.¹¹⁴

There are a few more limitations to the CrashCourse/YouTube model worth mentioning. Being relatively new to the educational scene, CrashCourse may not be seen as intellectually rigorous since they do not function within the current academic system with its system of checks and balances on academic materials, even if their content is scholastically sound. The most prominent and remarked on limitation of CrashCourse Literature¹¹⁵ might be the limitation of time in that 10-20 minutes is not enough time to give a full “crash course” on any particular subject or issue. I would argue that is true, but CrashCourse is meant to be a tool to use within a larger learning journey and not as a one-stop-shop for all your literary criticism needs. Audience

¹¹⁴ Kathleen Fitzpatrick, Generous Thinking: A Radical Approach to Saving the University (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), (21).
¹¹⁵ In my personal experience in discussing this project with academics.
engagement and watch time are also difficult to access and assess. Since CrashCourse keeps all of its subjects under one channel, it’s harder to parse out the differences, if any, between the audiences of the different course subjects. All of the benefits and limitations of CrashCourse Literature, and CrashCourse videos more generally, are worth further study as some relevant data might be able to be obtained from Complexly, however, the statistical analyses required to study them, particularly defining in more detail the public served by CrashCourse, are outside the thesis of this project.

Both the public and the academic can find ways to think critically and honestly about the lives we live, whether it’s studying the humanities or engaging with them for learning and pleasure. CrashCourse enlists the literary humanities alongside jokes and pop-culture references, validating the viewers previous experience with literature, and defining what might seem to be boring literary terms or ideas in concrete ways directly applicable to the viewer. These steps towards “generous thinking” work to ensure a more empathetic attitude—a pattern they continue in their other videos and which I have discussed previously. The video is engaging and inviting for the viewer who may have been put off by academics’ assertions of cultural significance (that often sound more like a cry for help). In this age of the internet, the humanities cannot be accessed by a more complete public without at least some focus on new media as a valid means of educating both students and the masses. If the university and the

---

116 Such as, if the student to outside viewer ratio changes based on the subject or if it is even possible to figure out the basic demographic data of those who watch CrashCourse videos.
117 More information on CrashCourse’s educational model and mantra is found in “How and Why we Read,” which was produced in at the end of 2012 right before they started their first literature-based videos as an introduction to what they were trying to accomplish with the videos.
academic institutions want to continue humanities research and discussion, they will find good tools in CrashCourse Literature, which is engaging precisely in the kind of intellectual work and dialogue the academic establishment needs in order to stay relevant and significant to the publics they serve. Since CrashCourse Literature sees the humanities, and fictional literature in particular, as exercises in empathy,\(^{121}\) it makes sense they would treat their approach to the text (first-level reception) and their viewers’ response to the text (meta-reception) with the same empathetic care. CrashCourse Literature approaches the text with the end goal of creating a mutually beneficial exchange between the reader and the text. Therefore, when CrashCourse gives the viewer the reasons why reading critically is important and why practicing “generous thinking” is beneficial to their lives, it might stick instead of going in one ear and out the other:

I’m asking you to read critically because, by understanding language, you will (1) have a fuller understanding of lives other than your own, which (2) will help you to be more empathetic, and thereby (3) help you to avoid getting dumped by [your girlfriend] in the first place, although more importantly, (4) reading critically and attentively can give you the linguistic tools to share your own story with more precision. And that will help people to understand your joy and your heartbreak, yes, but it will also be helpful in many other ways, like when you are trying to convince the company to move forwards with your fourth-quarter strategy, or whatever it is that people with real jobs do. Reading thoughtfully gives us better tools to explain corporate profits and broken hearts, and it also connects us to each other.\(^{122}\)

Whether they know it or not, the mission of CrashCourse is an amazingly similar mission to public humanities projects the world over. CrashCourse’s mission to use their videos not to go “symbol hunting” but to “read critically and thoughtfully” in such a way that it complicates and expands how the viewer sees the world. This mission hits all the essentials points of the public

\(^{121}\) CrashCourse, “How and Why We Read: Crash Course English Literature #1,” Posted November 15, 2012, Complexly, YouTube video, 6:59, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MSYw502dJNY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MSYw502dJNY).

\(^{122}\) CrashCourse, “How and Why We Read: Crash Course English Literature #1,” Posted November 15, 2012, Complexly, YouTube video, (4:55-5:50; emphasis added), [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MSYw502dJNY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MSYw502dJNY).
humanities I defined earlier: it values viewers’ receptions and brings the analysis and argument of academia onto their audience’s personal computer.

That act of interpreting a text by refracting and thinking critically about it (first-level reception) is not all the CrashCourse Literature videos are doing. Instead of just reading the texts of the canon—*Oedipus Rex*, Shakespeare’s sonnets, *The Great Gatsby*—the videos are also reading, reacting to, and validating the viewer’s interpretations of the texts themselves, an act of meta-reception. CrashCourse’s comments on the text revel in popular-culture references, references to current or familiar social, political, and cultural ideas, and other meta-reception methods while remaining firmly connected to the scholarly dialogue. These reception-based tools are among the tools the video viewers can use to not only understand the texts the teacher dissects more deeply (first-level reception), but for the viewers to have a chance to apply those stories to their lives in a very concrete way (meta-reception). CrashCourse knows that if readers of *Gatsby*, *Oedipus*, or Shakespeare’s sonnets are going to get more from a text than a passing grade on an AP literature test, they need to have the tools to participate in and change their horizon of expectations for that text. CrashCourse disrupts the viewers’ current horizon of expectations through personal, social, and cultural applications of the literary techniques, symbols, and ideas inherent within the text—like *Gatsby*’s green light and its ongoing power as a symbol of unrequited wanting. This disruption of that horizon of expectations is essential to engaging the viewers to be enthusiastic participants in this learning process and other public humanities projects.

The most intriguing part of CrashCourse Oedipus, CrashCourse Sonnets, CrashCourse Gatsby 1, and CrashCourse Gatsby 2 is that each video is a quintessential example of how reception-based tools can create a public humanities space where “the line between the practice
of life and the representation of life [is] dissolving...[and]we can watch [them] and reflect on [them] at the same time.”

Even if the tools being used are not quite the same as those used in a traditional classroom setting, they are used to great effect in the virtual public humanities classroom of CrashCourse Literature. CrashCourse is as much a classroom as it is a YouTube video with equal parts new media and public humanities project. Public humanities projects can and should exist outside of traditional academic structures. New media educational projects like CrashCourse can do more for the public by existing in a readily accessible place than all the books, papers, and university conferences only published and circulated within academia.

Writers will keep writing, painters will keep painting, but whether or not the public will continue caring about that art is an unsettling thought—A thought that ultimately requires the public to simply be a fact receptacle. Academia has so much to give—and so does the public.

Public humanities projects that use new media well allow public access to and connection with scholarly discussion and information. The goal of public humanities projects should be the same as the goal of CrashCourse, stated in its first video. The goal is to pass “the test.”

The test is how we choose to study and understand the humanities. Studying the humanities is to study the intricate and infinite ways humans have found to create. Understanding the humanities is to know how technical skill, emotion, and knowledge can combine to create beauty and power, to change lives and civilizations. And if a YouTube video can do it by calling Tom Buchanan an “asshat,” all the better.

---

124 CrashCourse has partnered with Arizona State University in some of its latest projects, a hopeful harbinger of things to come.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Gibbs, Robert, eds. “Publics for the Humanities?” Special issue, University of Toronto Quarterly 85, no.4 (Fall 2016), https://muse.jhu.edu/issue/35536.


