**As financial recovery continues, the past offers a way to move forward**

By Dani Meyer

As Detroit becomes eligible for bankruptcy in the largest public bankruptcy in the United States, Americans are sharply reminded of the recent economic collapse and its continuing widespread effects. Despite projections that the economy is doing better, there is still a long way to go before returning to financial stability.

When looking for a way to move forward, sometimes the best thing that can be done is to look backward. They say history repeats itself, and such similarities exist now with the so-called Great Recession still continuing to impact the world, calling up images of the Great Depression from which it mimics its name. As we continue to find a way out of the predicament we find ourselves in, perhaps we can call on history to help.

If looking at history, the most logical place to start is with the Great Depression. However, just looking at the history doesn’t help to understand it, and that is where literature steps in. Literature is how people wrestle with the issues a nation is facing, offering the best guide for truly understanding what was happening at a given point in time. By looking more closely at literature, we can more clearly see and understand parallels between the past and the present and learn from them.

F. Scott Fitzgerald doesn’t seem like the most likely place to go when it comes to recovering from the Great Depression. Known for his famous novel *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald is more closely associated with the glittering world of the Roaring Twenties. Naturally, Fitzgerald continued to write following the Crash of 1929, addressing in many of his stories the exact same issues we are facing today.

Fitzgerald does this best in his short story “Babylon Revisited.” “Babylon Revisited” follows the story of Charlie Wales, a man who made it big during the twenties but lost everything in the Crash of 1929. More than just his money, Charlie also lost his family, causing his wife to die after locking her outside in the snow because in his drunken state he didn’t think it was real snow. As a result, he also lost custody of his daughter after checking himself into a sanitarium in an effort to turn his life around. As the story opens, Charlie is back in Paris, trying to regain custody of his daughter. However, just when it seems that he is about to succeed, his old life comes crashing back, resulting in his failure to regain custody of his daughter and leaving Charlie alone in Paris with little hope for the future.

When looked at more closely, what emerges is a story between the consumption and production ethics. Introduced by famous literary critic Malcolm Cowley, these two ethics help show not just the financial struggle but the moral struggle facing Americans after the Crash of 1929. Before World War I, most people lived the life of the production ethic, working hard and saving money. Yet after World War I, the consumption ethic began to emerge, encouraging people to buy and spend their money excessively. Eventually this consumption ethic came to be associated with the corruption of American values. People made so much money and spent it on so many immaterial things that they slowly came to lose contact with reality, resulting in what Troy University English Professor Kurt Curnutt calls “loss of tangible measures of value.”

“Babylon Revisited” does an impressive job of highlighting these two ethics through its characters. Marion, Charlie’s sister-in-law who has custody of his daughter, acts as the embodiment of the production ethic. She and her husband didn’t see the same success as Charlie during the boom years, instead working hard but barely making anything and saving what little they had. Marion expresses disgust at the lifestyle of the consumption ethic, observing to Charlie that “When you were throwing away money we were living along watching every ten francs.”

Marion is completely at odds with Charlie’s friends Duncan and Lorraine, two people from Charlie’s past who act as the consumption ethic in “Babylon Revisited.” Despite losing everything in the Crash, the two are not yet ready to let go of the drunken revelries of the past and so are back in Paris to grasp what remains of their former lifestyle.

Charlie alone in the story is unique in having experienced both of these ethics. He worked hard and saved money before the boom, then spent it wildly and excessively during the twenties before losing everything and working hard again to regain his fortune. When revisiting Paris, Charlie is appalled at his former lifestyle and expresses a desire to “trust in character again as the eternally valuable element.”

But reading this story as the correction of the wild lifestyle of the twenties doesn’t do it justice. Despite his desire to move forward, Charlie still feels the pull of the consumption ethic. When Charlie takes his daughter out to lunch, he insists on buying her “anything you like,” despite her objections that she has no need for another toy and that he shouldn’t be spending money needlessly. But Charlie associates happiness with spending and Honoria is overruled.

As a reflection of contemporary American society, “Babylon Revisited” does not seem to offer a way to move ahead, with Charlie ending the story unsuccessful and alone back at the bar in the Ritz. However, it may not be trying to. Suggesting an easy way forward detracts from the seriousness and complexity of being caught between the two ethics by dismissing it as an easy fix, which it clearly isn’t. Instead, “Babylon Revisited” shows how difficult it is for people in this situation to try and reconcile the two lifestyles after the consumption ethic becomes unsustainable following the boom. That is not to say, however, that the story doesn’t offer any ideas for moving forward.

Fitzgerald argues that most important in forming a new ethic is the creation of a strong moral foundation. “Babylon Revisited” emphasizes the importance of character, trustworthiness and purpose and seems to credit much of the collapse of the consumption ethic with a lack of that foundation. Moderation is also a key part of moving forward. The wild spending of the consumption ethic is no longer a valid possibility, but something like Charlie having a drink a day to control his alcoholism and keep it from getting “too big in my imagination” could be applied to consumption.

More important than these two recommendations, however, is the fact that “Babylon Revisited” helps stimulate readers to think about the situation they are in and find a way to move forward. Ignoring the problem and hoping it will go away is not a solution, and “Babylon Revisited” makes sure its readers know that.

The similarities between the thirties and today are shocking. We are currently experiencing financial difficulties and serious flaws in our economy fueled by an excessive amount of consumption. People were so eager to own their own homes and were convinced that they deserved the best that they took out loans they would never be able to afford in order to live in a nice house. This behavior was only encouraged by the banks, who took advantage of this desire in order to make more money for themselves. Eventually this system collapsed, and now we too must try to find a way to recover and move forward without completely forgetting the enjoyable rush of the consumption ethic. But five years later we still have not made much progress, warranting a look at some rather unconventional sources, such as “Babylon Revisited.”

The outline Fitzgerald provides in “Babylon Revisited” is one well worth considering. In order take advantage of his advice, Americans need to redefine what modern American values are and how they want to move forward, drawing on what was started with the Tea Party movement and Occupy Wall Street. These movements helps get America talking about what values are important and what kind of society it wants to live in moving forward, and that progress needs to continue.

Americans also need to let go of their fear of another financial collapse and start spending again to help boost the economy. What’s happening now is businesses and families are so afraid of being caught off-guard again by another financial collapse that they are saving more than they used to, putting America at the opposite end of the spectrum from where it were before the downturn. But this makes it difficult to turn the economy around. If Americans start spending and doing so in moderation, they can slowly start to build up the economy again and shake that fear of another financial crisis. And with the proper moral foundation to move forward with, it won’t risk triggering another economic collapse.

America has to acknowledge the past and the problems it created. They are real and we are still suffering the consequences. But that acknowledgement is an important step forward in recovering. And if we get stuck, we can continue to look to those who came before us for advice. The more knowledge we draw on, the more likely we are to find a solution that works.

**Reflection**

In some ways, this paper was much easier to write than the previous one because a lot of the content was already there. I already did the research and organized my paper, which for me is one of the hardest parts when starting a new assignment. So when I started this project I just had to condense my original paper and make the language more colloquial.

In other ways, though, it was more difficult. While I liked having content to draw on and reformat for this project, using an academic source made it difficult to change the writing style and tone for this paper. I noticed a lot in this assignment that I had to try not to carry over the academic language I utilized in the first project. I also had to cut a lot of my research, and it was difficult to judge how much detail was really needed in this new version. Overall, though, I feel like I was able to figure it out and am pretty happy with how those elements carried over.

What really proved challenging in this project was making it relevant to the reader. In an academic journal, the relevance is how you are adding to the existing scholarship, but in a news magazine you have to make it timely and appeal to a broader audience. The parallel between the Great Depression and the Great Recession was a really clear way to do this, but it still proved harder than I thought it would.

For one thing, I had to make it relevant now. I tried to do that by talking about Detroit, but I’m not sure that that’s enough. I feel like this topic is more of an overall state right now than something particularly newsworthy, so it was difficult to find an event to tie it to. In reality, I would probably hold this article until something relevant did come up before running it.

The other thing was trying to connect it to the present without sounding too preachy. In my original analysis, I identify different strategies Fitzgerald seems to be suggesting for moving forward in the 1930’s, and I wanted to apply them to the modern time period by showing exactly how they parallel. Like I said, though, sometimes I felt it got too preachy. I tried to address that by changing everything from we to Americans, because then it removed me from the situation and became more of an objective analysis than a personal call to action. If I were to continue revising this paper, I think that’s the part I would continue to work on.

Overall, I think it was a really interesting project to translate the same content from an academic journal to a popular magazine. It really helps highlight how different the two styles of writing are and how they help accomplish different things.