

The Great Gatsby and the contemporary American society

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Abstract:

The aim of this paper is to study the contemporary American society as embodied in *The Great Gatsby*. *The Great Gatsby* is without doubt one of the most famous novels of the twentieth century and is generally considered to be the masterpiece of its author, Francis Scott Fitzgerald. It is a recollection of events that took place in the summer of 1922.

According to Ken Bush, “The United States of America is not only the geographical location of the novel; it is, to a large extent, also its subject matter- its people, its social institutions, its culture, its history, its identity” (5). Fitzgerald depicted graphically the values of the society in which he lived in his novel. In parts, *The Great Gatsby* is a satire on American society of the 1920s.

Full Paper:

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This paper assumes that the novel realistically portrays the American society of the 1920s. The 1920s is portrayed as an era of decayed social and moral values, evidenced in its overarching cynicism, greed and empty pursuit of pleasure. With the rise in the stock market after the World War I, there was an increase in the national wealth. People started earning and spending at unparalleled rate. Any person belonging to any background could make a fortune. This resulted in dissatisfaction among the aristocratic families who hated the newly rich people. For instance, Tom Buchanans considers Gatsby to be a “big bootlegger”:

“Who is this Gatsby anyhow?” demanded Tom suddenly. “Some big bootlegger?”

“Where’d you hear that?” I inquired.

“I didn’t hear it. I imagined it. A lot of these newly rich people are just big bootleggers, you know.” (102)

The characters of Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* are positioned symbolizing the social trends of American society of 1920s. The novelist cleverly uses geography to make a distinction between the ‘new money’ and ‘old money’. In East Egg resided the established aristocracy whereas in West Egg we find the self-made rich. Tom Buchanans was “a national figure in a way, one of those men who reach such an acute limited excellence at twenty- one that everything afterwards savours of anti-climax. His family were enormously wealthy- even in college his freedom with money was a matter for reproach- but now he’d left Chicago and come east in a fashion that rather took your

breath away: for instance he'd brought down a string of polo ponies from Lake Forest. It was hard to realize that a man in my own generation was wealthy enough to do that" (15).

Relationships, in the American society during the 1920s, were fluctuating. People were easily attracted towards the ones who had social status and wealth. In order to establish new relations, they were ready to abandon their old relations. For instance, the narrator and Gatsby lived in West Egg. Gatsby's love for Daisy was incomplete as his status was not of the rank of Daisy. He resorted to crime to make enough money in order to impress her. Gatsby bought a house at West Egg from where he can see the "green light" on Daisy's dock from his own yard. But Daisy, after a short period of reunion with Gatsby, returns to her husband, Tom Buchanan. Myrtle Wilson, sensual wife of a garage man, develops a relationship with Tom Buchanan. Myrtle was a married woman from a low social class, who lives in the valley of ashes, an industrial wasteland outside of New York City. Her husband was not wealthy. For her, relationship with Tom Buchanan was a means to climb the social ladder. But for Tom she was only a material possession like his other belongings.

True love is missing in each and every relationship of the novel. In the American society of 1920s love became a means to acquire either social status or wealth or popularity or physical pleasure.

There is also a description of valley of ashes presided over by the ubiquitous Dr. T. J. Eckleburg. This wasteland lies between West Egg and New York City -"a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens, where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and finally, with a transcendent effort, of men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air. . . . The valley of ashes is bounded on one side by a small foul river, and when the drawbridge is up to let barges through, the passengers on waiting trains can stare at the dismal scene for as long as half an hour" (29). People from the lowest strata of the society resided in the valley of ashes. According to Roger L. Pearson, "There are strong overtones of T. S. Eliot's *Waste Land* here, and right-fully so, for the world of Gatsby is a spiritual wasteland-materialistic and mortal, and by its very nature doomed to ashes The valley of ashes is the result of Jay Gatsby's testament, the dust of a corrupted and perverted American dream; and like its biblical counterpart, it has its association with the worshiping of a false god, Mammon, incarnate in his son, Gatsby." (641).

The people who acquired wealth newly showed their wealth to others by throwing parties. Gatsby often threw parties; this is clear from the description given by the narrator:

There was music from my neighbor's house through the summer nights. In his blue gardens men and girls came and went like moths among the whisperings and the champagne and the stars. At high tide in the afternoon I watched his guests diving from the tower of his raft or taking the sun on the hot sand of his beach while his two motor boats slit the waters of the Sound, drawing aquaplanes over cataracts of foam. On weekends his Rolls- Royce became an omnibus, bearing parties to and from the city, between nine in the morning and long past midnight, while his station wagon scampered like a brisk yellow bug to meet all trains. And on Mondays eight servants including an extra gardener toiled all day with mops and scrubbing-brushes and hammers and garden shears, repairing the ravages of the night before. (43)

Moreover, the narrator noticed that people even came uninvited to Gatsby's party:

I believe that on the first night I went to Gatsby's house I was one of the few guests who had actually been invited. People were not invited- they went there. They got into automobiles which bore them out to Long Island and somehow they ended up at Gatsby's door. Once there they were introduced by somebody who knew Gatsby and after that they conducted themselves according to the rules of behavior associated with amusement parks. Sometimes they came and went without having met Gatsby at all, came for the party with a simplicity of heart that was its own ticket of admission. (45)

People from all strata of the society attended such parties. People came from East Egg and West Egg to Gatsby's party. From East Egg came Chester Beckers, the Leeches, Bunsen, the Hornbeams, the Willie Voltaires, Hubert Auerbach, Edgar Beavel and Clarence Endive. From West Egg came the Poles, the Mulreadys, Cecil Roebuck, Cecil Schoen and Gulick. Ferret, the de Jongs and Ernest Lilly came to gamble. "All these people came to Gatsby's house in the summer" (63).

Parties became a symbol of rise in the social status of a person. People threw parties to announce their upliftment in the social status. “People accepted Gatsby’s hospitality and paid him the subtle tribute of knowing nothing whatever about him” (61).

The society, as depicted in the novel, consists of mostly whites. As rightly pointed by Jeffrey Louis Decker, “Despite the novel's being set in metropolitan New York, African Americans almost never appear in Gatsby's world. Yet, from Garveyism to the fledgling Harlem Renaissance, New York was becoming the mecca of black American politics and culture. The near complete absence of blacks from the novel can be comprehended only if we factor in the ubiquitous power of racial segregation. The absence of African Americans alongside the novel's conspicuous appropriation of black culture is what makes it a definitive text of the so-called Jazz Age In Nick's eyes, Gatsby lives on the edge of two worlds, neither of which is black: the established white society of the Buchanans and the not-quite-white immigrant underworld of Meyer Wolfsheim” (56). African Americans appear at two crucial moments in the novel, both involving Gatsby's famed automobile: during Nick's memorable ride across the Queensbury Bridge and at the moment of the hit-and-run killing of Myrtle Wilson. The new immigrants play a significant role in both these instances.

For Jeffrey Louis Decker, “Racial segregation, by excluding African Americans from full participation in U.S. society, managed the challenge that blacks posed to white supremacy. When, during the Twenties, black empowerment threatened white privilege, nationalists readily abandoned their nativist attack on non-Nordic Europeans and reasserted the need for black/white separation through appeals to (among other things) intra-white brotherhood” (58). Tom Buchanans is annoyed with the contemporary social condition and declares:

“Self control!” repeated Tom Incrduulously. “I suppose the latest thing is to sit back and let Mr. Nobody from Nowhere make love to your wife. Well, if that’s the idea you can count me out. . . . Nowadays people begin by sneering at family life and family institutions and next they’ll throw everything overboard and have intermarriage between black and white. (121)

The society, as presented in *The Great Gatsby*, reveals the characteristics of the society that was prevalent in America in 1920s. The society comprised of old aristocrats and newly rich. The newly rich always wanted to display their new acquired wealth. Parties were common medium for such display. Although, the American society of the 1920s comprised of both Whites and African Americans, the writer cleverly excludes them from the main scene. The African Americans, however, appears at two crucial moments in the novel. Thus, the society presented in the novel can be considered as the true depiction of 1920s American society.

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