

## TREATMENT OF THE AMERICAN DREAM IN THE GREAT GATSBY

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Abstract: This paper attempts to read Fitzgerald's epoch-making novel *The Great Gatsby* as a cultural discourse of super-charged times. The post First World War was a time of great social, economic, and cultural upheaval across the globe. The U.S. was not left untouched. This novel is a living and throbbing document of its time. *Gatsby's* rise and fall is only the upper turf of the story. The factors leading to his becoming what he became and the later course of events that ultimately destroy him make up for the subterranean part of the story. This paper tries to look into the economic aspect of the story alongside the emotional and social aspects as well.

Keywords: American Dream, Materialism, Pilgrims, Love, Wealth, New World, East, West, Tradition

The American Dream is a part of the cultural mythology of America. It is historically linked with Columbus' discovery of America and the subsequent settlement of the European adventurers, first in the Eastern parts of the present U.S.A. and later extending westward. The spirit behind the dream, therefore, is one of adventure and discovery. In literature and philosophy and even in practical life, this myth has taken the shape of exploring life's possibilities to the full.

The American Dream, therefore, includes both, the pursuit of material prosperity and spiritual fulfillment. At the popular level this has come to mean that the inner vision of possibilities of life cannot be achieved without the opportunity offered by wealth. Fitzgerald's greatness lies in the fact that his fictional representation of the American Dream takes into account not only the power of the myth in the minds of the characters but also the inevitable hiatus persisting between

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the material and the spiritual. The tension so generated gives an exceptional richness of meaning to many of Fitzgerald's novels and short stories. There is a remark in the short story 'The Rich Boy' - "The very rich are different from you and me". Lionel Trilling wrote that "for this remark alone Fitzgerald is in Balzac's bosom, in the heaven of all novelists."

In *The Great Gatsby*, Nick comes East (New England comprises of Massachusetts, Philadelphia, Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, New York and New Jersey. English settlers first settled here) and soon gets to know the very rich. When he dines with his cousin Daisy and her husband Tom, he soon perceives the emptiness behind the wealth. The Buchanans don't have to work. They can rest lazily on their vast earnings from oil interests. But though Daisy says she is "paralyzed" with happiness, she confesses to Nick that she has learnt to accept the existence of Tom's mistress while keeping up appearances in a world of polish and good manners.

Nick's comments on the moneyed world throughout the novel are full of irony or open disgust tinged with an awestruck reverence. In Tom, especially, Fitzgerald creates the kind of character which later came to be called the Fascist-type. Behind his cruelty and carelessness, however, Nick is able to perceive a child's ignorance. Through such people, Fitzgerald exposes how riches alone cannot fulfill the American Dream. People like Tom and Daisy not only smash up "things and creatures", many of the businessmen attending Gatsby's parties do not know happiness even for themselves. Nick's short comments on some of Gatsby's guests "listed upon the empty spaces of an old time-table" are indications of the moral emptiness, the sheer inability to dream.

On the opposite side of this is Gatsby, the son of a poor Minnesota farmer, who had fallen in love with Daisy when he was in a training camp in Louisville. He sets out after the War to become as rich and gentlemanly as Tom so that he'll be worthy to ask Daisy to leave Tom and marry him. He begins to imitate the ways of the wealthy people though the origins of his own wealth are suspected to be illegal. Violence bred him. Tom calls Gatsby "a swindler", but Nick knows that behind the social polish of the Buchanans there is a moral emptiness, a level of dishonesty which Gatsby does not have. He rather possesses a "romantic readiness", "an extraordinary gift for hope" which is associated with the American dream, with the adventurous spirit which lay behind the discovery of America. When the Dutch sailors saw for the first time the fresh green breast of the New World, their hearts filled with wonder. For the last time in

history man was experiencing such a wonder because there was nothing more on the earth to discover.

This reminds Nick of Gatsby: "I thought of Gatsby's wonder when he first picked out green light at the end of Daisy's dock." Gatsby's love for Daisy is an attempt to repeat the past. It becomes symbolic of America's dream to prove its dream. Gatsby's perpetual hope and ceaseless optimism is his 'the other'. The spiritual hope is based upon material prosperity. Gatsby has made money by disreputable means but has not been able to destroy his capacity to love and wonder. But still, he is at fault because he deliberately overestimates money. He associates power with it. He fails to understand that money can purchase him material possessions, not love. Thus, he remains a lover looking at love with awe. Never being on the other side. Gatsby does not realize that money, material possessions and pursuits are an end in themselves. They never can be means to ends. His notion of economics is, thus, punctured by the chemistry of heart. The fact that he cannot repeat the past is symbolic of America's dream to prove its dream. But Daisy and other rich people who lost the capacity to love and wonder, have distorted the American dream into crude materialism. It is this perception of his failure which brings Gatsby to his tragic end, not his physical death. Here, it may be deduced that money is the connective link in the novel. The dollar power! It poses a dream of prosperity, but for centuries America was a dream even for Americans!

Let us now attempt a hypothesis of the Streets and Avenues mentioned in the novel in a figurative manner.

West 50s (Avenues)

North



South

50<sup>th</sup> Street East  $\longrightarrow$  West (Posh, and crisscrossed the 30<sup>th</sup> and 40<sup>th</sup> Avenues)

Notably, the Avenues (opportunities/openings/dreams/expectations) move downwards. The 50<sup>th</sup> Street cuts across, or bifurcates the 30<sup>th</sup> and 40<sup>th</sup> Avenues. 50<sup>th</sup> Street being the symbol of the

power of money, may we assume that Fitzgerald, through them, tried to pose the matter of wealth winning over dreams since East is a place of business and West the industrial zone? The dream of an America that would rise above bank balances? The Long Island (fashion capital of the country) runs from West to East of New York. it is the story of the West after all, though he (Fitzgerald and Gatsby both) had been to the East (“inadaptable East”). East is equated with riches. Mention may be made here that American economy is controlled by the East. But just riches, not values. No old world values here. Houses here are known by street names and house numbers unlike in the mid-West where they are known by the family names. East has an unending reign of prosperity. River Ohio is the traditional ‘frontier’ between the East and the West.

It won't be out of place if we mention, in passing, the symbol of hope in the shape of ferry boats in the last chapter (“Ferry boats across the sound”). The boats bringing in dreamers from across the sound (a bay). It has been referred to elsewhere in Fitzgerald's essays and other novels. Again, the reference to the fresh green breast of the New World symbolizes the unexploited prosperity (unexplored too) as appeared to the Dutch settlers. It may also be seen as quest for woman and money. Gatsby's chase for money ends in disaster. The title *The Great Gatsby* and its core issue match to a convincing extent Dickens' *The Great Expectations*. Well, *Gatsby*, at least, has hope that makes him stand apart. Both stories conclude in the realization that great expectations are not ultimately great. Gatsby buys the house because across the water body he can see Daisy's dock and can see a green light which Nick says is “The shore of America once meant for the pilgrim forefathers.” Gatsby too has his own judgment of Daisy. It's money, according to Gatsby, that makes Daisy's voice different. Gatsby contemplates that man neither understood nor desired the circumstances he was in. The circumstances were thrust on him. It may sound like a defense of Gatsby but he did not know the futility of his task of looking into the obscure past. For the American, the quest never ends. Nick makes an irony of it. It's more than Gatsby's tragedy. It's about Nick's growth into maturity.

*The Great Gatsby* successfully blends popularism with cultural problems. Daisy is the never-blossoming girl (who also doesn't let others blossom) and Gatsby is the eternal dreamer. In fact Nick is interested in him because of his dreaming quality. A quality/faculty lost in the fortune-hunting spree. To Nick, Gatsby is the ‘greatest Romantic’ (thus, ‘Great’ Gatsby). Nick is

the narrator so doubts have been raised about his neutrality. There is no authorial narration in *The Great Gatsby*. The novel is written in First Person. So the assessments are Nick's own. He has been studied by many as a double-entity, a casual watcher, a jaundiced viewer etc., etc. Nevertheless, he is the most dependable character in the chaotic atmosphere of the novel despite his affiliations and shortcomings. While others make extreme studies of *Gatsby*, Nick strikes a balance. The last line is Fitzgerald's own comment on the American modern times: "-tomorrow we will run faster". But needlessly.

