



The Great Gatsby: An American Image of Modernism

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ABSTRACT: ‘The Great Gatsby’ published in 1925 is F. Scott Fitzgerald’s a very successful novel that represents an American Image of Modernism. The present article focuses on F. Scott Fitzgerald endeavours to convey the predominant mood in America of 1920s. The article focuses on how he portrays the hysterical atmosphere, the political corruption and the social problems of the Americans. The article draws out the devices and tactics that are called the aspects of modernism used by F. Scott Fitzgerald. The article studies the major aspects of Modernism as they were incorporated by F. Scott Fitzgerald. Some of these issues have to do with the death of religion resulted from an immense devotion to materialism and pursuit of happiness and comfort; the corruption, loss and the death of spirit as the driving force behind the failure of American Dream. The major themes of the novel are money and its effects on people's lifestyle and how it leads to corruption, American Dream and its failure, gender roles and spiritual hollowness.

KEYWORDS: Modernism, hysterical atmosphere, political corruption, social problems.

Modernist literature was largely an entity of fiction writing which was popular approximately between the 1910s and the 1960s. Modernist literature came into vogue due to the presentation of realism of increasing industrialization and globalization and their consequences on the human life. Scientific advancement, new technology and the violent events of both World Wars put the people of the world amid the uncertainty of the human existence.

Writers skilfully responded to this question by turning toward Modernist views. Modernist fiction spoke of the inner self and perception. The writers perceived decline of the Western civilization, instead of progress. The modernist writers saw the bleak reality of the modern civilisation leading to human alienation. They saw cold machinery and increased capitalism, which alienated the individual and led to loneliness.

To represent the reality of the age, most modernist fiction writers too made advancement towards experimenting innovative techniques in writing literature and many often broke the traditional notions regarding literature. For example, the traditional literature followed the notion of a beginning, a middle and an end. On the contrary, the Modernist work was often more of a stream of consciousness. Realism, Impressionism, symbolism, satire, irony and comparisons were often employed to point out ills of the time. For the first-time modernist reader, this can all add up to feel the story without strict beginning, middle and end and reaching nowhere.

A short list of some of the famous writers of Modernism comprises of Virginia Woolf, D.H. Lawrence, Joseph Conrad, T.S. Eliot, William Faulkner, John Steinbeck, E.E. Cummings, James Joyce, Sylvia Plath, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Samuel Beckett, William Butler Yeats, Ezra Pound, Ernest Hemingway and Gertrude Stein. These writers produced innumerable ground-breaking works that are still renowned as enormous and significant, even after the close of the century. They are still regarded as epitome of the age and are still having wider applications and implications. World War I is often seen as a starting point of Modernism and the period of the Great Depression (1918-1939) and World War II complement to further realise the disillusionment of Western Civilization. The innovative techniques employed by the writers to perceive the disillusionment were realism, symbolism, multiple perspectives of narration, suggestiveness, non-linear time span, multiple locales, experimenting language, etc. *The Great Gatsby* is one of the greatest novels in this respect.

There is every reason to believe that for many readers and the critics all over the world that *The Great Gatsby* is the great American icon of modernism. F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald still seem to fascinate the reading public due to their distinctive Americanness and *The Great Gatsby* continues to be F. Scott Fitzgerald's most widely read work for the objective. *The Great Gatsby* had literary qualities welcoming new ideas in writing; its structure, theme and style were well-matched to the passion for analysis leading to establish *The Great Gatsby* as the great American novel. Describing the novel in short, Charles B. Shain, says,

“Gatsby's mingled dream of love and money, and the iron strength of his romantic will, make up the essence of the fable, but the art of its telling is full of astonishing tricks. To make the rise and fall of a gentleman gangster an image for the modern history of the Emersonian spirit of America was an audacious thing to attempt, but Fitzgerald got away with it.”¹

It was published in 1925. This small novel has rightly been welcomed as the most seamless American novel of the 20th century. One of the most romantic of modern love stories, set in the bootleg liquor-fuelled roaring twenties, it's also a very dark tale that depicts the contrast between the slick, cynical East and the provincial Midwest. Alongside this it is also a sharp satire on the rags-to-riches myth of American dream. With its exquisitely refined prose, it is unveiling nightmare lurking at the core of the American Dream. Millionaire Jay Gatsby who performs as host of the fabulous, legendary, is a mystery, an enigma and a symbol of American dream. Where did he come from? How did he earn his money? Was he a spy? Was it true that, as some believed, he had killed a man? These are the questions to the readers. Only his neighbour, the book's likeable narrator, Nick Carraway, is privy to some of Gatsby's secrets and even he remains unsure. As the perfectly fashioned plot unfolds, enticing glimpses of Gatsby's past are revealed, showing a man whose dramatic rise to wealth and power is fuelled by his obsessive love for the beautiful Daisy Buchanan. Daisy is Nick's cousin, a young married woman with a voice full of money, as Fitzgerald says, who is caught between her still luminous old flame and her husband

Tom, a wealthy, oppressive womaniser. Inevitably, the narrative races towards a shocking and tragic conclusion.

With seamless easiness, Fitzgerald captures America and specifically New York of the 1920s, when life was lived at a faster pace. Fitzgerald created the masterpiece when he was just twenty-eight, continues to live on, as mesmerising now as it was when it first appeared, a unique and dazzling jewel and one that Maxwell Perkins thought 'an extraordinary book, suggestive of all sorts of thoughts and moods'.² Perkins added one comment, which has struck everyone who has read the novel and which surely must account for its endless and concentrated power:

“It seems in reading a much shorter book than it is, but it carries the mind through a series of experiences that one would think would require a book of three times its length.”³

As an attempt of any artist in a given society, F. Scott Fitzgerald endeavours via the most of his creative works to convey the predominant mood in America of 1920s. He portrays the hysterical atmosphere, the political corruption and the social problems to enrich his writing, but as a man of good breeding inherited from father he accomplishes everything skilfully. This good upbringing pushes him to defy and mock at the immorality of the golden age. To realise such a great purpose and to break with the realistic novel, F. Scott Fitzgerald used some device and tactics that are called the aspects of Modernism.

Thus, the present article studies the major aspects of Modernism as they were incorporated by F. Scott Fitzgerald. Some of these issues have to do with the death of religion resulted from an immense devotion to materialism and pursuit of happiness and comfort; the corruption, loss and the death of spirit as the driving force behind the failure of American Dream. The major themes of the novel are money and its effects on people's lifestyle and how it leads to corruption, American Dream and its failure, gender roles and spiritual hollowness.

Claiming greatness of theme for *The Great Gatsby* it can be justified on the ground that it animates not only the American past and present but which also has the power of myth to convey meaning independent of time, place and the particulars of the narrative. Various critics like Robert Ornstein, Edwin Fussel, Marius Bewley and John Bicknell have paid significant attention to different aspects of the novel. Robert Ornstein claims that the critics emphasized the novel's dramatization “of the betrayal of the native American dream in a corrupt society.”⁴ Ornstein writes:

“I would agree that in *Gatsby* Fitzgerald did create a myth with the imaginative sweep of America's historical adventure across an untamed continent. But his fable of East and West is little concerned with twentieth-century materialism and moral anarchy, for its theme is the unending quest of the romantic dream, which is forever betrayed in fact and yet redeemed in men's minds Yet once, Fitzgerald suggests, there had been opportunity commensurate with aspiration, an unexplored and unexploited frontier where great fortunes had been made or at least romantically stolen. And out of the shifting of opportunities from the West to Wall Street, he

creates an American fable which redeems as well as explains romantic failure.”⁵

The novel is bitter attack on American Dream as a central theme that F. Scott Fitzgerald aims to convey. The novel comes to cast light historically on the failure of that dream in terms of economic, religious, political and social aspects. If the American Dream considers Man as the centre of the world in that he has the rights of life, the novel states the opposite to it; the rich feel discomfort with them who do not belong to their class and are ahead in violating the rules. For example, Tom carelessly killed Myrtle in a road accident and escapes without being punished legally. In addition to that he massacred Jay Gatsby by the end of the novel.

Against the political system of democracy stands the corruption and the bribery. Jay Gatsby has achieved his wealth through bootlegging and crime. He did not earn money ideally but it is dirty money earned through illegal affairs and crime. Ironically, the society in which the novel takes place is centred on materialism; a situation that contrasted one of the American Dream tenets: the equilibrium between the materialism and spiritualism. The latter is entirely obscured by the power of the capital.

Economic affluence or money tends to be one of the key themes of the modernist literature. It is also prevailing in the present novel. Carles B. Shain writes

“From his (Gatsby’s) own American life he knew that with his generation the midwesterner had become the typical American and had returned from the old frontier to the East with a new set of dreams - about money.”⁶

Right after the end of the First World War, America started to witness extraordinary financial boost which soon had a great impact on the lifestyle and customs of the American people. This enormous devotion to affluence is obviously represented by Buchanan family. The latter is known for its huge amount of wealth embodied in the grand palace they reside. It is very noteworthy to mention that this great tendency towards wealth cannot go without affecting the moral and the social values. Tom and Daisy Buchanan, Jordan Baker, Dan Cody and Meyer Wolfsheim are examples of people who have been corrupted by their wealth. Daisy, born and married to wealth, has no values and no purpose in life. She finds her existence to be very boring as she floats from one social scene to the next, usually she is dressed in white with accents of gold and silver, symbolic of wealth even her voices sounds like money. In spite of the wealth she verbally wonders what she will do with the next day, the next thirty days and the next thirty years; unfortunately, she does not have any idea of the future. Even her daughter, Pammy, does not impart any meaning to Daisy's life, for she views the child only as a toy or a plaything. Because of her boredom, she has an affair with Gatsby when she is eighteen, for she is attracted by his good appearances. After her marriage to Tom, she has another affair with Gatsby to get rid of her tediousness. She does not respect the feelings of others or even human life. When she hits and kills Myrtle Wilson she does even stop. When Gatsby is shot, she does not even telephone or send flowers.

The search for wealth ultimately leads to the death of spiritualism. Modernist literature finds the absence of the spiritual values among the characters. In other words, the excessive dedication to physical comfort leads to a great obscurity of principles. For example, the life of the rich, represented by Tom and Daisy, lack in good morals and has no room for religion and spirituality in their lives. Tom uses his financial power to kill Mary Myrtle and escape the sentence; he is cheating on his wife by having an affair with Myrtle.

Moreover, the death of spiritualism manifests itself in a great number of symbols including the valley of ashes and The Eyes of Eckleburg. The two images exemplify America's declining morality during the 'Jazz Age' era. The idea of poor spiritualism is additionally demonstrated in the way Fitzgerald groups his characters in the novel. The characters can be categorised into two groups; this categorization based on the division between the West and the East. Nick and Jay Gatsby who represent people from the West Egg who are still attached to Victorian ethical principles like romanticism, human respect, honesty, divinity, idealism, ambition, community, faith and other spiritual values. Therefore, Nick enjoys a pure vision towards life and finds lifestyles of other people incongruous and harmful. On the contrary to this kind of characters come the second type embodied in Tom and Daisy. Contrasting to Nick, they are in the East Egg and believe in accumulating wealth to fulfil their dreams. For Tom, his big mansion along with the huge amount of property is the only way with which he desires to win Daisy's love. Owing to this wealth, Daisy preferred to let Jay Gatsby down as he was basically poor. This fact pushed Jay Gatsby to compulsorily work with the view to being rich enough to win Daisy back. This vulgar pursuit of materialism to win love is what makes these people blind and cannot see the reality through their eyes.

The Great Gatsby, a masterpiece by F. Scott Fitzgerald, is artistically a grand success. The celebration of literary art cannot be disconnected from the achievement of the novel: it is in the form of its narrator Nick Carraway, a great incarnation by the author. By using this narrator, Fitzgerald gains more than objectivity and concentration of effect. Nick, as a character and observer, describes more than the witnesses. He describes the action and the results of telling about it.

Regarding the point of view in *The Great Gatsby*, it would be appropriate to mention that there are two ways for an author to narrate a story: the first-person story or novel in which the protagonist tells his story, or the third person story in which the author tells the story from many possible perspectives. For example, there is the omniscient third-person novel or story in which the writer is God-like and knows what is going on in the character's mind: what they think of and what they feel and what is happening in the world of the story under narration. On the other hand, there is a limited third-person point of view in which the narrator knows only the thoughts and feelings of a single character while other characters are presented only externally. Third person limited grants a writer more freedom than first person, but less than third person omniscient.

F. Scott Fitzgerald does not choose to narrate the story in the first person on the ground that the hero Gatsby dies at the end of the novel. Also, does tell the story through the omniscient point of view in order that Gatsby would much more understandable and sympathetic. In response to that and in order to come up with some artistic effects, F. Scott Fitzgerald chooses Nick Carraway to narrate the story. Nick Carraway is chosen to be different from Gatsby in the sense that he is a detached unromantic witness, who objectively confirms the reality about Gatsby as Nick himself puts it right at the outset of the novel

“I’m inclined to reserve all judgements.”⁷

The point of view in the novel can be called the partially-involved narrator in the main action. The motive for choosing the third person perspective might be an inclination to position such a novel of modern culture and civilisation to some extent away from the author. Furthermore, the preference of Nick Carraway can be understood as F. Scott Fitzgerald's effort to create an environment of realism in which the story reproduces the life style dominant in the Jazz Age empirically. Thus the best way to achieve this effect is through the employment of a matured, conservative narrator who is descended from the Midwest. F. Scott Fitzgerald accomplished to give trustworthiness and authority to his story through the proper choice of point of view.

In addition, another aspect characterising the point of view in *The Great Gatsby* is that the understanding of the story involves the interference of the reader; events as they happened in Gatsby's life and the order in which they are put throughout the book make the story a bit puzzling basically as the story is told in fragments instead of chronological order; a fact that has made of the reader a creator as valuable as the author himself. This quality is called modern in the sense that the story is not traditionally told in chronological order and further the reader plays the role of creator. Fitzgerald's choice of Nick Carraway as a character as well as the narrator of the novel is more than an attempt to be original and to attain a sense of authenticity and genuineness. Practically someone like Jay Gatsby would more understandable and sympathetic provided he is presented through the eyes of a character. The reader like the narrator Nick is unknowingly a part with Nick in the search for the truth about Gatsby. In other words, the author so logically brings the reader nearer to the action that one would experience the incidents as if he were Nick; both the reader and the narrator are trying with another's company to recognize the rationale behind how he came to be what he is: to learn about the large parties arranged by Gatsby, to learn about his upbringing, to learn about how he acquired that enormous amount of wealth and many more.

Next creative outcome that is accomplished through the use of Nick Carraway, has to do with the concept of realism and reliability of the story. Narrating from Nick's perspective, F. Scott Fitzgerald effectively succeeded to make the novel more realistic. The effect of feeling that the story is real can be clearly and solidly seen in the parties held by Jay Gatsby. Nick Carraway maintains the names of the people who regularly remain present at the parties as Nick puts it in the following passage:

“Once I wrote down on the empty spaces of a time-table the names of those who came to Gatsby's house that summer. It is an old table now, disintegrating at its folds and headed 'This schedule in effect July 5th 1922'.”⁸

By using the words in the passage like 'names', 'that summer', 'July 5th, 1922' the author makes the readers believe that these people do truly attend these parties and gives an imprint that the readers are viewing with real-life situation accordingly.

Another important thing to be noted about the novel is that it will be found out that Nick Carraway never tells the reader about something he does not know about or events he did not attend. If it happened that he did not attend an event, he gets the information from other characters. For example, Nick learns from Jordan Baker that Gatsby once dated Daisy Buchanan in Louisville. He also learns about the death of Myrtle Wilson from the Greek Michaelis.

The technique of telling has also a noteworthy part in the narration of the novel. Instead of giving the readers the details of events happened during three days, Nick Carraway abridges them in one single sentence. For example, in the following passage, Nick sums up the events of three weeks in one sentence:

"Reading over what I have written so far I see I have given the impression that the events of three nights several weeks apart were all that absorbed me. On the contrary they were merely casual events in a crowded summer and, until much later they absorbed me infinitely less than my personal affairs."⁹

Innovative narrative techniques make *The Great Gatsby* an artistic work with grand success. An important thing to be noted regarding the narrative is that Nick Carraway the sole source of information for the reader, in other words, he is both the ears and the eyes of the readers. But when he is unable to provide the details, he relies on others. In this way, the novelist provides the best trustworthy narrative by other narrators in a situation which is not accessible for the narrator. In *The Great Gatsby*, the narrative process includes Dan Cody, Meyer Wolfshiem, Jordan Baker and Gatsby's father. For example, in the following passage, Jordan Baker narrates about her friend Daisy, saying:

“One October day in nineteen-seventeen (said Jordan Baker afternoon, siring up very straight on a straight chair in the tea-garden the Plaza Hotel) I was walking along from one place to another half on the sidewalks and half on the lawns. ... etc. I was flattered that she wanted to speak to me, because of all the older girls I admired her most She asked me if was going to the Red Cross and make bandages. I was. Well, then, would I tell them that she couldn't come that day? The officer looked at Daisy while she was speaking, in a way that every young girl wants to be looked at sometime, and because it seemed romantic to me I have remembered the incident ever since. His name was Jay Gatsby and I didn't lay eyes on him again for over four years—even after I'd met him on Long Island didn't realize it was the same man.”¹⁰

Why was Jordan Baker chosen to tell the story of Gatsby's first love affair and not through Nick can be answered that Nick Carraway was not present there at the time

the event happened. Thus, logically he cannot tell it to the reader and even if it is done, its reliability would be in doubt. Baker then, deems to be the second degree narrator. This innovative technique in narration is called 'metadiegesis'. Within the same context, other characters are cast in the role of second hand narrators including Dan Cody, Meyer Wolfschciem and Gatsby's father Henry Gatz. This technique helps serve the authenticity of the narration. Beside the second-hand narrator, F. Scott Fitzgerald employs what critics call in narratology pseudo-diegetic narrative. The use of this type of narrative is found in the following extract:

“She was the first 'nice' girl he had ever known. In various unrevealed capacities he had come in contact with such people but always with indiscernible barbed wire between. He found her excitingly desirable.”¹¹

Gatsby calls Daisy as a 'nice' girl. It will be difficult to easily identify whose voice it is, Nick's or Gatsby's? The difficulty is in the use of direct speech and free use of indirect speech. Nick, here, absorbs the voice of Gatsby into his own. In other words, he performs the role of the second level narrator. It's worth underlying that these technique; are lost to conventional novels in narrative.

Symbolism is another important element that has made of this novel a success. The principal symbols are the valley of ashes, the eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg and the green light. Literally and as it is clearly stated by the author himself, the eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg are left by an oculist who made that enormous picture with the view to earning much money and fascinate more customers.

“Standing behind him Michaelis saw with a shock he was looking at the eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg which had just emerged pale and enormous from the dissolving night, 'God sees everything 'repeated Wilson.”¹²

Profoundly, considering the historical background and close scrutiny of the above the symbol show that it was incarnated in the eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg has a symbolic aspect. The eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg, as one of the numerous symbols used to serve the death of spirits in American of 1920s, are recognised with the eyes of God as well as the death of God. F. Scott Fitzgerald uses the symbol of the eyes to represent God staring down and judging America as wasteland. For George Wilson, the connection between the eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg and the eyes of God thematically symbolic in the sense that is socially and culturally blind by the materialism to the extent that the eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg are viewed as the eyes of God: "God sees everything".

The Valley of ashes, as one of the crucial symbols in the novel, is located between West Egg and New York.

“About halfway between West Egg and New York the motor-road hastily joins the railroad and runs beside it for a quarter of a mile, so as to shrink away from a certain desolate area of land This is a valley of ashes - a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens where ashes rake 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.”¹³

It is described as ‘grey land and spasm of bleak dust, created by the dumping of industrial ashes’¹⁴. Symbolically, the valley of ashes stands for the moral and social degeneration that stemmed from the uninhibited quest of affluence, comfort and pleasure. It furthermore signifies the predicament of the poor. George Wilson, who lives among the dirty ashes and lose vitality accordingly, is the finest embodiment of the poor.

“The interior was unprosperous and bare; the only car visible was the dust-covered wreck of a Ford which crouched in a dim corner. It had occurred to me that this shadow of a garage must be a blind and that sumptuous and romantic apartments were concealed overhead when the proprietor (Wilson) himself appeared in the door of an office, wiping his hands on a piece of waste. He was a blonde, spiritless man, anaemic, and faintly handsome.”¹⁵

It is also stylistically worth saying that the location of the valley of ashes and the people living there have several characteristics in common. Unlike people who come from the east, the westerns are depicted as blind, spiritless and anaemic.

Another symbol is the green light which functions at many levels in the sense that it carries several meanings at every level of the story. During the course of the novel, the green light has various functions such as a sign of Gatsby's hopeful future, money, the green breast of the New World and spring time. The green light at the close of the novel, Daisy's Dock has a great symbolic aspect. In the eyes of Gatsby, the green light stands for his dream incarnated in Daisy. To attain her would be completing Gatsby's American Dream. In the first acquaintance with the green light in the novel, Gatsby is seen reaching out for it to the extent of worshipping it. Afterwards, it is found out that this green light is located at the end of Daisy's Dock. The green colour represents hopefulness, promise and renewal. Therefore, it would reasonably to claim that Gatsby's dream of a future with Daisy could be represented in the novel by this green light.

CONCLUSION: Thus, many aspects contribute to establish *The Great Gatsby* an American icon of modernism. So it will be a mistake to perceive that the novel's reputation relies only on the recognition that the novel is primarily concerned with the details of the Jazz Age which is also in turn a symbol of modernism. But the novel has American experience central to it. Fitzgerald sees the modern corruption in contrast to a lost rather than to an emergent ideal. Bicknell's overall critical intent is to explore whether *The Great Gatsby* is tragic or merely pessimistic. He ends by accepting Alfred Kazin's view that

"in a land of promise 'failure' will always be a classic theme.”¹⁶

He is willing to call the novel classic, while still arguing that its pessimistic conclusions about contemporary society fall short of embracing tragedy. But Marius Bewley's essay "Scott Fitzgerald's Criticism of America" finds more to praise in *The*

Great Gatsby, perhaps because he does not assume that tragedy is the definitive measure of a novel's worth. To conclude, it is worthy to quote him:

“Fitzgerald-at least in this one book-is in a line with the greatest masters of American prose. *The Great Gatsby* embodies a criticism of American experience-not of manners, but of a basic historic attitude to life-more radical than anything in James's own assessment of the deficiencies of his country. The theme of *Gatsby* is the withering of the American dream.”¹⁷

Though not possessing the extreme qualities of being a modernist writer, Fitzgerald is undoubtedly often categorized as a modernist. He was always aware of his responsiveness to the voices of serious literary and cultural criticism. This is because of his great desire to be one of the greatest writers.

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