



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 4. Issue.2., 2017 (April-June)



INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA

2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

CULTURE AND CAPITAL IN THE METROPOLIS: *THE GREAT GATSBY*

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an examination of F Scott Fitzgerald's 1925 novel *The Great Gatsby*. The paper attempts to look at New York as it emerges as an important metropolis in the early decades of the twentieth century, and how the changing urban scenario becomes a signifier of economic, political, and cultural changes of the time. By studying the trajectories and evolutions of the characters in the novel this paper explores how this new age urban space in the twentieth century precipitates new tragedies in the society. The tragedies of the characters are also tragedies of an entire generation whose predicament Fitzgerald captures with tremendous lucidity. This paper aims to read the novel as a cultural product of its time that allows the reader a glimpse of the early twentieth century New York as it transitions into a metropolis.

**Keywords:** Metropolis, New York, American dream, Jazz Age, modernism, leisure class.

Raymond Williams, in *Politics and Modernism*, writes, "For a number of social and historical reasons the metropolis of the second half of the nineteenth century and of the first half of the twentieth century moved into quite a new cultural dimension. It was now much more than the very large city, or even the capital city of an important nation. It was the place where new social and economic and cultural relations, beyond both city and nation in their older senses, were beginning to be formed... (181)" In *The Great Gatsby*, set in New York in the 1920s, the metropolis emerges in the truest sense of the term: concentration of wealth, immigrants in large numbers, important industrial centre (Chrysler building, Empire state, which would become symbols of a certain kind of development begin construction around this time). In my paper I'll be examining the cityscape as it emerges in the novel – the streets, buildings, actual centres within the city that the novel documents, along with the implications these locations assume socially and culturally. Second, I'll be examining the city in terms of the lived experiences of the characters of the novel; experiences that become particular to life in this metropolis.

Fitzgerald, in the novel, not only presents a graphic description of the city, but also reproduces New York, as it exists in the popular imagination. Geographical locations are also mapped out in terms of how they "feel" (Nick, for instance is rather taken with how places "feel"), emotions, class positions, and ideologies they signify. Some locations in the city are haunted by certain kinds of people, and spaces get associated with classes, tastes, and morals. For example, Fifth Avenue, an upscale neighbourhood in Manhattan, evokes a

feeling of the pastoral in Nick. Also, it is a kind of neighbourhood where the aristocratic Tom Buchanan is to be seen. Similarly, on hearing about Gatsby, Nick imagines that he (Gatsby) sprang out of the Lower East Side of New York – a locality that has traditionally housed immigrant and working class populations. A little later in the novel, Nick describing his work neighbourhood writes, "I knew the other clerks, young bond salesmen by their first names, and lunched with them in dark, crowded restaurants on little pig sausages, mashed potatoes and coffee." This is a distinctly working class neighbourhood, which is crowded, gloomy and a sense of limitedness prevails even in the meals being described.

In the same chapter, Nick says, "I began to like New York, the racy adventurous feel of it at night, and the satisfaction that the constant flicker of men and women and machines gives to the restless eye. I liked to walk up to the Fifth Avenue and pick out romantic women from the crowd and imagine that in a few minutes I was going to enter into their lives, and no one would ever know or disapprove (45)." This extract, in more than one way, illustrates the lived experience of the metropolis. For one, it points towards one of the defining features of the city - the increasing sense of isolation and alienation. Raymond Williams in the same essay explains how the sense of fragmentation and loneliness had much to do with immigration, which surged during this period of rapid industrial development. He writes that New York was to become the city of exiles/prime symbol of Exile. Literatures of this period, underscoring this isolation, often present the city as a blur of colours, human shapes and disembodied voices. For Nick too, the experience of New York is like that of an audio-visual montage, lacking cohesion and without a larger purpose.

The second aspect of city life, which the above extract only hints at, which nonetheless, assumes significant proportions later in the text, is the presence of what Nick calls "machines" in the streets. By the twenties, the streets of the metropolis were increasingly occupied by automobiles, which were still a fairly new phenomenon on the street. As Peter D. Norton discusses in *Fighting Traffic: Dawn of Motor Age in the American City*, prior to the entry of the automobile, the street was a public space, primarily used by the common man. Children could play, and people could casually gather on the street. Starting from the 1920s, the automobile began to monopolize the street. Norton writes that the motor manufacturers fought for a kind of street that is primarily for the motor vehicle. This led to a reorganisation of space, and a new kind of city, which, owing to industrialisation and rise in income levels, was redesigned in favour of the motor vehicle. The twenties were a period of transition of the street – from being for the common man to exclusively for the automobile, and by extension, the elite. As a result, this period is also marked by a high rate of road accidents. The road accidents occurring in the novel are a prominent reality of the time.

Fitzgerald used the trope of accidents to certain moral purposes as well. Jaqueline Lance in an essay titled "The Great Gatsby: Driving to Destruction" writes that in the novel, people who are most careless behind the wheel are also the most careless in their personal relationships. Tom and Daisy, who are irresponsible drivers are also irresponsible and callous people in life.

Tom and Daisy's attitude towards people in their daily interactions draws attention to the condition of this post-war society: battling ennui, perpetually restless for action, constantly seeking mobility. When placed in the context of their general behavioural tendencies, the fact that they are likely to be involved in hit and run cases becomes apparent. Early in the novel Nick tells the reader that Tom "would drift on forever seeking, a little wistfully, for the dramatic turbulence of some irrecoverable football game (5)." In Daisy, similarly, one can detect tones of impetuous behaviour, born out of boredom. Roger Lewis, in his essay "Money, Love and Aspiration in The Great Gatsby" writes, "Withholding who exactly Gatsby is or where he comes from is a method of underscoring the rootlessness of post-war American society." This sense of boredom and rootlessness infects an entire generation as Fitzgerald elaborates in his essay "Echoes of the Jazz Age". In the essay he writes that this was a generation that was continually seeking action, nervous stimulation. "It was an age of miracles, it was an age of art, it was an age of excess, it was an age of satire... A whole race was going hedonistic, deciding on pleasure (3)." He paints a picture of an entire generation high on sex, drugs and parties.

The most important factor that aided this lifestyle of "excess" was probably the economic boom that came in the wake of the war, and continued unabated till the crash of 1929. Regarding the crash, Fitzgerald, in

the same essay wrote, "Somebody had blundered and the most expensive orgy in history was over... It was borrowed time anyhow – the whole upper tenth of a nation living with the insouciance of grand dukes and the casualness of chorus girls. Even when you were broke, you didn't worry about money because it was in such profusion around you (8)."

As mentioned earlier, this was a period of consolidation of industrial capital, giving rise to what is described as an economy of surplus. Surplus is produced in a capitalist system when a portion of labour that has gone into producing the final commodity, is unpaid for. The amount that should have ideally been paid as wage is appropriated by the owner of the means of production as well as the rentier class. The portion appropriated by rentier class like the aristocracy becomes unproductive surplus. This unproductive surplus leads to unproductive consumption. The boom in the economy, through which only a minor section of the population profited, was in large parts derived from surplus labour. Added to this was the war, which, with its various prohibitions, provided a boost to the underground economy of bootlegging, illegal trading etc. The 18<sup>th</sup> amendment of the US constitution banned the sale, manufacture and transportation of alcoholic beverage. The bootleggers benefited heavily and made millions from the prohibition. This becomes significant, as these economic conditions were directly responsible for producing and sponsoring the lifestyle that came to be characteristic of the age.

In the novel, Gatsby is one such beneficiary of the Liquor Prohibition act, who becomes a millionaire by bootlegging and other illegal trades. He hopes to "win" Daisy back from Tom Buchanan, whom she married for money. By acquiring more wealth than Tom, Gatsby believes he can get Daisy to come back to him. Roger Lewis, in the same essay writes that Gatsby embodies the same acquisitive, consuming spirit of the rest of the characters in the novel. The Daisy-Gatsby relationship has been read in different, contradicting ways by critics. Lewis, for instance, claims that their relationship has some amount of inviolability about it. It exists in a world of money and corruption, but is not of it. The period in which they loved each other preceded his fabulous wealth. The problem with such a reading is the unquestioning acceptance of the nature of their "love", about which the reader hears only from Gatsby. In an essay titled, "*The Great Gatsby: Glamour on the Turn*", Richard Godden argues that to see Gatsby as beyond the corrupt material world, as a tragic romantic hero is to lay too much importance on Nick's version of Gatsby. He writes that Daisy is his prize through which he can reclaim a particular stage in his own social transformation. Daisy, a leisure class woman will grant him a degree of working respectability. This latter reading appears more plausible because beneath all his romantic feelings for Daisy, there is an attempt to lure her back with his extravagant parties and newly acquired wealth. Gatsby's failure to win her back is also his failure to understand her. For Daisy clearly is the embodiment of that spirit of excess, restlessness, materiality that Fitzgerald is attacking in the novel. Unlike the romantic ideal of Gatsby's imagination, Daisy is thoroughly embedded in the economic and the material. Gatsby's naiveté regarding her, his belief that she'd come back to him simply if he makes more money than her husband is in fact imputing a crass materiality to her, as much as it is an inadequate assessment of her.

Daisy's consciousness and assessment of wealth is actually more nuanced than Gatsby could imagine. Daisy belongs to what Thorstein Veblen, in his book *Theory of the Leisure Class*, calls the leisure class. This is the class that doesn't need to use its time productively. For members of this class, time does not need to be used so as to translate into wage, profit etc. This class is already in possession of wealth through acquisition or inheritance. Wealth is now itself intrinsically honourable and confers honour on its possessor. He writes, "By further refinement wealth acquired passively by transmission from ancestors or other antecedents becomes more honorific than wealth acquired by the possessor's own effort (n.p)." (This is also Tom's excuse for derogating Gatsby. He says, "All these new money people are bootleggers"). While Daisy could continue her extravagant lifestyle even she were to be with Gatsby, she realises that to be Tom's wife in a loveless marriage is more "honourable" owing to Tom's higher social status. Gatsby is looked down upon because of his status of as "new money".

Veblen further explains, that for this class, time could be spent non-productively, but in ways that maintained its reputability as gentlemen of leisure. Conspicuous consumption of valuable goods becomes a means of maintaining the honour and repute of this class (n.p). Parties that we see all throughout the novel, in

this regard, are a perfect convergence of conspicuous consumption on the one hand, and non-productive time utilization on the other. Gatsby, though not originally from this class, quickly assumes the ways of this class. In his desire to acquire Daisy, and that through his mega-parties, one can sense his aspiration for upward mobility.

Ronald Berman, in *Modernity and Progress*, writes, "The metropolis becomes a marketplace of commodities, including things human. There is little in New York that doesn't spring from money (15)." Relationships, lifestyle are governed by market ethics of commodification, exchange and consumption. Daisy and Tom become key representatives of this culture of consumption and Gatsby is not far behind. For Daisy, people are interchangeable with the objects they own. On meeting Gatsby, she becomes immediately attached to his shirts and other possessions. ("They're such beautiful shirts.") The Tom-Myrtle relationship similarly is predicated upon each fulfilling some material need for the other. Myrtle uses his money and class to transform her own class position from blue collar to bourgeois (Berman). For Tom, Myrtle becomes a conspicuous consumption that boosts his status in the society to which he belongs.

While Nick, in his moralistic narrative would like the reader to believe that Gatsby represents a pre-industrial, pastoral innocence in his desire for Daisy, the actual events of the novel prove otherwise. Gatsby is as much a product of this material culture as the other characters.

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