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AMBITION AND THE AFTERMATH: THE AMERICAN DREAM IN
FITZGERALD'S *THE GREAT GATSBY*

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ABSTRACT

The period immediately following World War One is regarded as time of extraordinary socio-cultural unrest in the history of the United States. This shows itself in form of great material prosperity on one side while immense inner crisis on the personal front. The famed American Dream- a phrase standing for a general quest to achieve wealth and richness seemed to unravel itself. Fitzgerald's seminal work *The Great Gatsby* is a telling account of this dream as delineated through life of the work's protagonist. The article, carrying out a close reading of the work, attempts to demonstrate how the blind run after wealth and power and love ultimately leads to reprehensible internal vacuity and consuming moral and spiritual crisis which prove to be fatal for the modern man.

Keywords : American Dream, the nineteen twenties, World War One, Gatsby.

Introduction

The nineteen twenties in the annals of the American history are times of unprecedented contradictions. The socio-cultural milieu was rife with intense dissatisfaction with the political establishment and its drive to conformity. A whole new generation of writers began to surface now known as the lost generation writers. Fitzgerald is an acclaimed writer of this generation of writers which includes other luminaries like Hemingway, Faulkner, Lewis among others. These authors protest against the outside conditioning and imposing influence.

" In the United States, a perfect storm of circumstances created an environment that seemed almost alien to those returning from Europe. Prohibition had become the law of the land, yet organized crime and the political machine appeared to walk in lock step. Conservative values dictated the status quo, censoring artistic productions and regulating personal conduct. Artists, especially the avant-garde, had few opportunities to bring their work to a large audience. The laws regarding decency in artistic works were strictly enforced. Anything considered lewd, immoral or un-American would quickly be removed from libraries. The overall climate meant that young artists pushing the limits of their craft were locked out of the establishment" (Brody, 2012, 8) . The writers questioned the past socio-cultural order . " American soldiers returning from the battlefields of Europe found a home front that in some ways had changed drastically and in others stayed the

same. Prohibition, more properly known as the Volstead Act, banned the production and sale of alcohol. The “Noble Experiment” felt like a slap in the face for those returning from the trauma of trench warfare. The puritanical, conservative value system of America was stifling after the soldiers’ experience in Europe. At the same time, corruption at all levels of government was commonplace. Young men who had fought for an uncertain cause felt equally uncertain about their place in modern America. An exodus was, therefore, underway, led by artists and intellectuals, in search of less restrictive intellectual climates” (Brody, 2012, 3).

Further, “ the stresses and strains brought about within this period by the loss of belief in religion, the rise of our dependence on science and technology, the expansion of markets and the commodification brought about by capitalism, the growth of mass culture and its influence, the invasion of bureaucracy into private life, and changing beliefs about relationships between the sexes. All of these developments had significant effects on the arts” (Butler, 2010, 1-2). “ As writers, they naturally focused their fire on the verbal conceits of the older generation. They insisted over and over again that the war experience— and by extension all modern human experience— could not be contained in the stilted shibboleths and pieties of the traditional culture. This was the field of energy— its poles being two separate cultures, even two distinct systems of speech— across which arced the most kinetic prose of the postwar writers” (Kennedy, 2004, 225).

These writers shunned the traditional modes of artistic narration in order to bring about the realistic treatment of the predicament of the modern man. “ Modernism in art contributed to the new and challenging literary styles that were emerging in Paris and throughout Europe. The elegant Victorian narratives that almost exclusively dealt with the middle and upper classes were seen as relics of a frivolous past. The new generation of writers believed that the elaborate language so typical of 19th century literature was a decadence. Young writers such as Ernest Hemingway and Sherwood Anderson envisioned a new narrative style and self-consciously distanced themselves from the former literary elites. Little known talents like James Joyce, working in obscurity as a teacher in Italy, soon found an audience for their creations” (Brody, 2012, 15-16).

“The early tendency of modernist art was to present subjective experience, and to stress its importance, as never before. The major artists of the period, who had inherited from the late 19th century an emphasis on the role of imagery, symbolism, dreams, and the unconscious, tended always to favor the individual’s self-realization, and what is more, through imaginative, intuitive, and, as we shall see, ‘epiphanic’ ways of coming at the truth, which were often in contention with more rational or public modes of argument. And this consideration applies to all the arts: it is as applicable to the introspections of Debussy’s *Pelleas*, and *Klytaemnestra’s* dream aria in Richard Strauss’s *Elektra*, as it is to the poetry of Apollinaire and Eliot; to expressionist expression of feeling in the poetry of Gottfried Benn and Schoenberg’s *Erwartung* and *Pierrot Lunaire*; to the fauvists following Van Gogh in their expression of mood by abandoning local color; to the clearly subjective point of view of cubism, and Kandinsky’s visionary abstractions” ((Butler, 2010, 51)

The past trend to take up romantic content for treatment was given up. There was strong desire to delineate the real issues of the modern man. Optimum effort was made to bring out the inner struggle of modern man. The Jazz Age was an age of wealth, extravagance and ambition which were the defining features of the affluent nineteen twenties in country’s history. This could be attributed to the period’s economic prosperity and great dynamism and exuberance in the artistic, social and cultural realms well- reflected in the major and big cities of the country. Fitzgerald, as an artist, confronted an internal conflict in between his artistic aspirations and material wants. This was further abetted by his spouse. Zelda was constantly pushing to the writer for financial success, “ It was Zelda, domineering and destructive throughout their marriage, who pushed her husband to write vapid stories for money and abandon his purely literary ambitions. To be fair, Fitzgerald himself had an unhealthy fixation of material luxury and upper-class respectability” (Brody, 2012, 44).

This intense personal struggle finds realistic treatment in his seminal masterpiece *The Great Gatsby*. Through the depiction of his life by means of the novel’s protagonist, Fitzgerald meticulously treats the famed American dream- a general rush after wealth and power during his times. The American dream stands for the essence of the United States where there is intense social consciousness to freedom, democracy and equality.

The concept can be interpreted as a general belief that anyone, irrespective of creed, gender, sex and other parameter, can achieve material success with his perseverance. Any person hailing from the lowest to the upper most rung of the society can avail the fruit of his hard work which manifests itself in form of massing of wealth and uplift in social status resulting in increased social recognition. The nineteen twenties were a period which offered a highly facilitating ground for this rush towards prosperity as there was extraordinary economic boom in the years immediately following World War One. The culture of consumerism was ancillary to this social trend to a run after money. People were given to hedonistic tendency which idolized materialism.

The American dream was a two-sided thing. There could be seen the corrosive effect it was having on the psyche and interior of the people of the times. This can be extrapolated in an evident decadence reflected through dissipation of moral and spiritual values. The inner moral and spiritual corruption resulted in intense crisis at the personal level. There could be seen an inability to cope with the material success as more money multiplied carnal tastes of the modern man who adored and worshipped indulgences of the transient world around him teeming with pathetically reprehensible contradictions consuming the soul of the modern man and threatening his existence. This led to constant mental unrest and consequent failure to have a happy love life.

The Great Gatsby

The novel is considered one of the masterpieces of the American literary canon. It is a classic tale of wealth, power, love and tragic aftermath. Through the protagonist's and lives of other characters, Fitzgerald is able to advance his examination and analysis of the famed concept deeply entrenched in the psyche of people of his times. Gatsby is after beautiful Daisy Buchanan who is married to Tom. "...She was in the middle thirties, and faintly stout, but she carried her surplus flesh sensuously as some women can. Her face, above a spotted dress of dark blue crepe-de-chine, contained no facet or gleam of beauty, but there was an immediately perceptible vitality about her." (Fitzgerald, 1925, chap.2).

Gatsby is man of wealth which he flaunts without being shy. He is given to culture of carousing. "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 week-ends 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" (Fitzgerald, 1925, chap . 3). "By seven o'clock the orchestra has arrived, no thin five-piece affair, but a whole pit-ful of oboes and trombones and saxophones and viols and cornets and piccolos, and low and high drums. The last swimmers have come in from the beach now and are dressing up-stairs; the cars from New York are parked five deep in the drive, and already the halls and salons and verandas are gaudy with primary colors, and hair shorn in strange new ways, and shawls beyond the dreams of Castile. The bar is in full swing, and floating rounds of cocktails permeate the garden outside, until the air is alive with chatter and laughter, and casual innuendo and introductions forgotten on the spot, and enthusiastic meetings between women who never knew each other's names" (Fitzgerald, 1925, chap . 3).

Gatsby is man of ambition and apparently has unquenchable lust for social recognition and celebration. The novel's protagonist through his partying attempts to entrench himself in the upper echelons of the society so as to be closer to his love chimera Daisy who is apparently unhappily married to Tom. Gatsby stands for modern man wallowing into his wealth and social success. "He smiled understandingly — much more than understandingly. It was one of those rare smiles with a quality of eternal reassurance in it, that you may come across four or five times in life. It faced — or seemed to face — the whole external world for an instant, and then concentrated on you with an irresistible prejudice in your favor. It understood you just so far as you wanted to be understood, believed in you as you would like to believe in yourself, and assured you that

it had precisely the impression of you that, at your best, you hoped to convey. Precisely at that point it vanished — and I was looking at an elegant young rough-neck, a year or two over thirty, whose elaborate formality of speech just missed being absurd. Sometime before he introduced himself I'd got a strong impression that he was picking his words with care" (Fitzgerald, 1925, chap.3)

Gatsby is deeply enamored with Daisy who is embodiment of Hellenic beauty for him. His passion for her is undying which can be gauged from the fact he is at unease to believe that their love affair is a past thing as Daisy is now married to Tom. Despite these standing realities the love for his past flame is still there. "I think he half expected her to wander into one of his parties, some night," went on Jordan, "but she never did. Then he began asking people casually if they knew her, and I was the first one he found. It was that night he sent for me at his dance, and you should have heard the elaborate way he worked up to it. Of course, I immediately suggested a luncheon in New York — and I thought he'd go mad" (Fitzgerald, 1925, chap.4). The meeting with his love is very dear to Gatsby. "He hadn't once ceased looking at Daisy, and I think he revalued everything in his house according to the measure of response it drew from her well-loved eyes. Sometimes, too, he stared around at his possessions in a dazed way, as though in her actual and astounding presence none of it was any longer real. Once he nearly toppled down a flight of stairs.....He had passed visibly through two states and was entering upon a third. After his embarrassment and his unreasoning joy he was consumed with wonder at her presence. He had been full of the idea so long, dreamed it right through to the end, waited with his teeth set, so to speak, at an inconceivable pitch of intensity. Now, in the reaction, he was running down like an overwound clock" (Fitzgerald, 1925, chap.5).

For Gatsby his consumption with Daisy is everything to him. It vindicates his lasting aspiration for Daisy which cannot be weathered by the corrosive and ravaging effects of time. " As I went over to say good-bye I saw that the expression of bewilderment had come back into Gatsby's face, as though a faint doubt had occurred to him as to the quality of his present happiness. Almost five years! There must have been moments even that afternoon when Daisy tumbled short of his dreams — not through her own fault, but because of the colossal vitality of his illusion. It had gone beyond her, beyond everything. He had thrown himself into it with a creative passion, adding to it all the time, decking it out with every bright feather that drifted his way. No amount of fire or freshness can challenge what a man will store up in his ghostly heart" (Fitzgerald, 1925, chap.5). "He talked a lot about the past, and I gathered that he wanted to recover something, some idea of himself perhaps, that had gone into loving Daisy. His life had been confused and disordered since then, but if he could once return to a certain starting place and go over it all slowly, he could find out what that thing was. One autumn night, five years before, they had been walking down the street when the leaves were falling, and they came to a place where there were no trees and the sidewalk was white with moonlight. They stopped here and turned toward each other. Now it was a cool night with that mysterious excitement in it which comes at the two changes of the year.. His heart beat faster and faster as Daisy's white face came up to his own. He knew that when he kissed this girl, and forever wed his unutterable visions to her perishable breath, his mind would never romp again like the mind of God. So he waited, listening for a moment longer to the tuning-fork that had been struck upon a star. Then he kissed her. At his lips' touch she blossomed for him like a flower and the incarnation was complete" (Fitzgerald, 1925, chap.6).

His captivation with his past flame proves to be undoing for him as it results in unforeseen consequences for him. He becomes subject of calumny in the world around him as it becomes increasingly clear that he has been sliding into an objectionable extra-marital affair. "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" (Fitzgerald, 1925, chap.7).

Gatsby's yearning for Daisy is so strong that it remains unchanged under all these unfavorable circumstances and cannot be enfeebled even by the grisly episode of fatal accident resulting in the tragic death of Myrtle Wilson. Her culpability in the accident seems to bring him all the closer to Daisy. The thought of losing her shudders him. "He wouldn't consider it. He couldn't possibly leave Daisy until he knew what she was going to do. He was clutching at some last hope and I couldn't bear to shake him free. 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... It excited him, too, that many men had already loved Daisy — it increased her value in his eyes. He felt their presence all about the house, pervading the air with the shades and echoes of still vibrant emotions” (Fitzgerald, 1925, chap. 8).

This overwhelming pre-occupation was fraught with fatal consequences, Gatsby himself could not have fore-sensed. “ I have an idea that Gatsby himself didn’t believe it would come, and perhaps he no longer cared. If that was true he must have felt that he had lost the old warm world, paid a high price for living too long with a single dream. He must have looked up at an unfamiliar sky through frightening leaves and shivered as he found what a grotesque thing a rose is and how raw the sunlight was upon the scarcely created grass. A new world, material without being real, where poor ghosts, breathing dreams like air, drifted fortuitously about . . . like that ashen, fantastic figure gliding toward him through the amorphous trees” (Fitzgerald, 1925, chap. 8).

The discomfort, that his beloved Daisy was about to be embroiled in a criminal prosecution, for it was her whose negligence led to death of Myrtle Wilson, impels him to take the blame for the car accident. This results in infuriation on the part of Myrtle Wilson’s husband who, in a fit of rage to avenge the death of his wife, shoots Gatsby and later commits suicide .“After two years I remember the rest of that day, and that night and the next day, only as an endless drill of police and photographers and newspaper men in and out of Gatsby’s front door...Someone with a positive manner, perhaps a detective, used the expression “madman” as he bent over Wilson’s body that afternoon, and the adventitious authority of his voice set the key for the newspaper reports next morning” (Fitzgerald, 1925, chap 9).

The violent death of the protagonist also results in an unpleasant commotion in the social circles where Gatsby’s life and affair with Daisy are basis for unfounded talk of the town. “Most of those reports were a nightmare — grotesque, circumstantial, eager, and untrue. When Michaelis’s testimony at the inquest brought to light Wilson’s suspicions of his wife I thought the whole tale would shortly be served up in racy pasquinade — but Catherine, who might have said anything, didn’t say a word....the case might remain in its simplest form. And it rested there” (Fitzgerald, 1925, chap 9).

Along with the main tale of the protagonist and Daisy, Fitzgerald also weaves up the story of Myrtle Wilson and her yearning for Tom who seems to meet her cherished aspiration to live with a rich husband. Apparently this infatuation with Tom results in her gradual drifting from her husband Myrtle Wilson who appears to be failing her on the personal front. Myrtle Wilson can be extrapolated as the feminine substitute for Gatsby the novel’s protagonist. Her overtures and advances to Tom are equivalent to Gatsby’s conduct towards Daisy. Myrtle Wilson hankers after the realization of the wealth and power which stand for the American dream. She seems to go to any length to achieve this to the utter detriment to herself. This mad wish and run after wealth prove to be fatal for her and result in her accidental demise. There is clear parallelism in between her and Gatsby who is in the same way consumed with Daisy- the undying love of his life.

Fitzgerald very ingeniously betrays his critical examination and analysis of the American dream -the catchphrase of his times. Gatsby’s life is meticulously used as a vehicle to bring home his trenchant commentary on the famed dream. The author is warily disposed to the concept for it seems to entail grave repercussions for the individual. The material aspect of it seems to be undercut by the serious challenges it brings forth on the personal front which is beset by conspicuous inability to cope with the costs it entails towards its realization and their corrosive effect on the psyche of the modern man. Gatsby is able to hoard immense wealth and money but he seems to have failed on the personal front as is evident in his loss of Daisy to Tom. His attempts to win back her are also fruitless as Daisy is like chimera for him. This wild goose chase ultimately leads to a fateful aftermath resulting in his tragic death. This seems to advance his cautious approach to the so -called American dream.

Conclusion

The nineteen twenties are today commemorated as the roaring twenties- a period marred by intense socio-cultural tension. The upheaval, in the wake of the cataclysmic tragedy of the past decade -World War

One, rendered a whole new generation at a loss to make sense of the post war realities which came out to be in a highly contradictory nature of the period- economic boom and material wellbeing on one side while the intense crisis caused on the personal level. The modern man seemed to be apparently unable to cope with his material success. The tendency to be given to culture of carousing and indulgence, and have affairs, consumed the psyche of the modern man in sheer disregard for the moral and spiritual values on the inner front.

A whole new generation of writers now known as the lost generation American writers began to emerge. This group of authors attempted to realistically treat the problems of the modern man in clear break from their predecessors. Fitzgerald is one of the representative authors of this group of writers. He is regarded as an authoritative voice of his generation. His seminal work *The Great Gatsby* is a telling account of the Jazz Age- time of economic boom and consequent decadence.

Through the life of *Gatsby*, he is able to betray to his audience his scathing review of the American dream- a general belief that anyone with hard work can achieve material success. However, Fitzgerald cautiously approaches to the belief as it seems to entail heavy costs on the personal level. The loss of the love of his life Daisy to her husband Tom constantly is a stinging pain for Gatsby who attempts to get rid of it by winning back her. However, this proves to be fruitless and ultimately leads to his tragic death. For Fitzgerald, the tragic demise of protagonist of the novel, emboldens his cautious approach to the American dream. "After Gatsby's death the East was haunted for me like that, distorted beyond my eyes' power of correction. So when the blue smoke of brittle leaves was in the air and the wind blew the wet laundry stiff on the line I decided to come back home" (Fitzgerald, 1925, chap.9).

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