

The American dream in "The Great Gatsby" by F. S. Fitzgerald

Ivana Nakić Lučić¹

Abstract

The paper is about the theory of the American dream that can be observed through several characters: Jay Gatsby, George Wilson and Myrtle Wilson. Jay Gatsby illustrates the very essence of the American dream according to which an individual can succeed in society regardless of his own origin and history. In the world of cheap, consumable ideals, rapaciousness and hypocrisy, Gatsby is a dreamer, idealist, carried by illusions, he appears to be grotesque and absurd surrounded by greedy people. In a symbolic sense, Gatsby shows Fitzgerald's consciousness of the irreconcilability of money and beauty, ideal goals and corrupted methods, dreams about personal happiness and the awareness of their fragility. Money is for Fitzgerald the source of immense physical beauty, on the one hand, and evil, on the other, so the two can not exist without being mutually dependent. The story about the incurable idealist and impostor Gatsby who created and bolstered the myth about his origin himself, becomes in this way a parable about the unhappy ending of the great American dream.

Keywords: American dream, Gatsby, money, *The Great Gatsby*, success, happiness, American society

1. The writers of the "Lost Generation"

Francis Scott Fitzgerald (1896. - 1940.), is an American writer whose works were instigated by the so-called "jazz age" as he called it himself.

He belongs to the generation of writers who were active after World War I, the so-called "lost generation" that appeared directly as a post-war phenomenon, since they didn't have roots in the pre-war culture.

¹ MSc, Department of Electrical Engineering and Computing, Department of Aquaculture, English, University of Dubrovnik, Ćira Carića 4, Dubrovnik, 20 000, Croatia. Phone: 0038520445856
E-mail: ivana.nakic@unidu.hr

In addition to Fitzgerald, the most important representatives of this generation are E. Hemingway and E.E. Cummings. Their works are characterised by the loss of the ideal of democracy that, in its substance, stands for the age-long meaning of America as a "promised land", the land that has been defined by wealth, aggressiveness, persistence, chaos and the possibility of getting rich. The characters represent an absolute moral degradation of society and unscrupulousness on the one hand and the rise of materialism on the other.

The war affected America more than Europe (the period which was in history marked by protests and prohibition), it opened a space for shady dealings and getting rich quickly by individuals whose moral and intellectual characteristics weren't entirely accepted by the society. The writers found it impossible to live in the world they had returned to. Hopes of the young Americans were shaken by the war even more because of the fact that it wasn't their war.

Young men felt a call to go to war by their noble, idealistic motives, but also by a wish for adventure that has been so deeply rooted in the spirit of America.

Bašić says that "at that time, America was the embodiment of boredom and provincialism for young people, but at the same time it left an open space for unobstructed money making through prohibition" (338).

The writers realized that gods of tradition were dead, all wars had finished, and the faith in people had been shaken.

Fitzgerald's works symbolize an epoch in American history and a new generation that was rapidly emancipated after the war and which started to reveal beauties forbidden until then. His works paint the picture that America had of itself as a civilization that had been dreaming of a great, glittering future, which was broken by the blows caused by its own naivety and the lack of ability to maintain the illusion of glory.

Radeljković claims, "Fitzgerald liked money, for him money was the means by which he could attain the romantic, alluring life of rich people, witty and beautiful women" (52).

As an author he satisfied literary appetites of the golden youth, and at the same time he was susceptible to the threat of commercialism.

1.1 The Great Gatsby and the "jazz age"

His novel *The Great Gatsby* reflects the characteristics of works written in the "jazz age" representing the imaginary portraits of young, glamorous representatives of the rich class living their American dream based on money, success, happiness; their lives cannot be touched by the hand of sorrow or tragedy. As suggested further, "Only at first sight it appears to be short and simple fiction founded on a hardly established artistic balance of huge and in the end, irreconciled contradictions" (*Leksikon svjetske književnosti*, 695).

The author achieved such a contradiction by introducing internal narrator, Nick Carraway, whose observations are detached from the other characters' thinking so he reflects objectively, and at the same time his reflection represents the author's own thoughts, which helps us see that he favored the individuals who truly believed in the possibility of success through their own efforts. We can see that in Chapter 8 in which Gatsby dies: "They're a rotten crowd,' I shouted across the lawn. 'You're worth the whole damn bunch put together'" (Fitzgerald 160).

In the literary-historical period preceding *The Great Gatsby*, the authors put the emphasis on the firmly and completely shaped composition that made it possible to follow the story without difficulties, the author's objective attitude was implicit and literary genres never blended.

1.2 The modernity of The Great Gatsby

The modernity of *The Great Gatsby* can be noticed in deeply ironical changes of tragic and humorous, romantic and cynical, objective and completely subjective narrative techniques that are balanced to perfectionism.

Contrary to a realistic novel, "*The Great Gatsby*" is built on dramatic elements, structurally it is divided into nine chapters without a solid temporal connection and the author uses the retrospection technique, as well.

The plot is split by the movie episode technique that is like a puzzle so that the reader finds out from every chapter a part of the riddle about Gatsby, and in the end he obtains complete idea about him. (Bašić 418)

The chapters are short, formally and stilistically carefully polished. The dramatic culmination is achieved in the middle of the novel, and the second part of the novel brings the solution in which the classic catharsis fails to appear. Fitzgerald destroys idealized dreams about quick success by killing Gatsby.

2. The American dream as the basis of *The Great Gatsby*

The basis of the novel is the theory of the American dream that can be observed through several characters: Jay Gatsby, George Wilson and Myrtle Wilson. Jay Gatsby illustrates the very essence of the American dream according to which an individual can succeed in society regardless of his own origin and history; the theory to be found at the end of the novel: "And as the moon rose higher the inessential houses began to melt away until gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes..." (Fitzgerald 187).

Fitzgerald emphasizes Gatsby's universality and the possibility of general identification with his character through alienation; throughout the novel he is the only one to be addressed by his surname, sentimentality is taken away from him and he is graphically described as a model for making success.

Gatsby is a character with mythical, legendary characteristics, the information about his past comes through speculations, and Gatsby himself doesn't reveal his origin, supporting the thesis that for making success the origin doesn't matter.

Gatsby's visual characterisation borders on travesty, he leaves an ironic impression in his pink suit next to the other representatives of the rich class clad in white, which reveals their slackness and lack of emotions.

Making him visually different, Fitzgerald even symbolically points out that newly acquired money and reputation haven't destroyed Gatsby's capability of empathy and feelings; but they have detached him from the representatives of his own class as even his servants are deriding him.

Apart from the visual alienation, Fitzgerald indicated by speech characterization as well, that the American dream couldn't be completely realized as poor people, during their economic rise weren't able to get rid of the language of the milieu they originated from. So Gatsby keeps using his prop-phrase "old sport" while addressing other people, which unconsciously reminds him constantly of the milieu he originated from.

The novel *The Great Gatsby* isn't completely based on the theory of naturalism and the way of thinking of literary theoretician N. Boileau; a character's psychological traits are analysed and it can be concluded that the character's actions are incited by the milieu he belongs to and the time in which his actions take place, and not exclusively by his genetic heritage.

In the novel, the theory of naturalism is indicated by the motive of a suitable occasion – it is important to grab the occasion and achieve the goal regardless of the possible consequences.

In Chapter 4 Gatsby presents the success of Meyer Wolfshiem, the gambler involved in setting up sports' results: "He just saw the opportunity. Why isn't he in jail? They can't get him, old sport. He's a smart man" (Fitzgerald 80).

Gatsby's antithesis is Tom Buchanan, the representative of the *vieau riche* who inherit their money. Their characters are diametrically opposed. Although Gatsby is intellectually a more superior character, Fitzgerald stresses that intelligence is of least importance in the golden American society to which Gatsby aspires. The author clearly portrays the representatives of the *vieau riche* as rasists and chauvinists who read simple literature or don't read at all.

While Tom goes into a monologue about the domination of the white race in Chapter 1, Fitzgerald actually symbolically anticipates the decay of the idealised rich society by the working class and irony is more emphasized because Tom is saying it: "Civilization's going to pieces...It's up to us, who are the dominant race, to watch out or these other races will have control of things" (Fitzgerald 19).

The link between Gatsby and Tom is Daisy, a young and beautiful representative of the *vieau riche*, who in her youth allowed herself an adventure with poor Gatsby, but after five years realized what position assured her social acceptability so she rejects love, tenderness and Gatsby's affection and stays with the cold, uncouth and vulgar Tom.

Daisy reflects Fitzgerald's conviction that women are not allowed to compete in the male world which can be inferred from her relationship with her daughter. Superficially drawn as a shallow woman, completely dependent on her man, she in the end proves to be a real representative of the rich class. Her crucial sentence is in Chapter 1 pointing to the essence of society towards which all those engaged in the American dream aspire – idle days: "What'll we plan?... What do people plan?" (Fitzgerald 18).

In the end, the character of Gatsby supports the theory that an individual who makes his way up to the top alone is predetermined to fail. Gatsby couldn't realize the American dream of happiness because money and success weren't his goals, but only the means by which he tried to regain Daisy's love. He can't find his place in the American sun and become a part of the golden elite as he isn't able to give up love which makes him human.

On the other hand, Tom and Daisy are typical representatives of the elitist, capitalist society in its full blossom, which is built on the principle of hierarchy and the precise defining of each representative's position in society. They sacrifice their own empathy and become puppets led by a mass of idle, calculating individuals.

Having realised that he had been fooling himself in believing that rich Daisy could finally love him, he decided to sacrifice his own life to save her. Through Gatsby's conduct, Fitzgerald concludes that the American society, led by empty-headed individuals, is built on unscrupulous, cold-blooded actions in which there is no place for age-long, traditional values like empathy, love and the basic feelings - feeling guilty and belief in doing the right thing.

Gatsby and Daisy were symbolically connected by the light between their houses - the memory of the old love which only Gatsby tried to revive, and at the moment when he couldn't see it anymore, he became aware of his defeat.

He realizes that his rapture about the belief that the past can be changed doesn't have any sense. In the stormy and bloody outcome Gatsby loses Daisy and dies by the jealous husband's bullet. Tom and Daisy's corrupted, rich world destroys Gatsby and continues to persist as if nothing had happened.

George Wilson represents a different model of believing in the American dream. He is a member of the American working class whose existence has been reduced to bare survival, emphasized by the exterior of the valley of ashes so that Fitzgerald even geographically divides the scenes of the story putting stress on the naturalist theory that even geographic moment can not be crucial for success.

George is positioned between the *vieux* and *nouveau riche*, he is a part of the American society that should keep the moral balance between the two extremities and he dreams of leaving the unpromising valley of ashes and going to sunny California.

He is a caricature, physically completely in contrast with the vision of the American rich class embodied by Tom. The condition of the middle class of the American society is reflected in doctor Eckleburg's eyes, vacant and dim like the hopes of people wishing to change something.

Wilson doesn't understand the absurdity of his own ambitions that are inevitably condemned to fail in the capitalistic society, assuming more and more the characteristics of animalism – food chain in which all values are totally turned upside down. Ethically and morally more deformed individuals are the ones who survive instead of those who are physically more superior.

The only possibility of escape is money, and in his case money is the goal. His dream of mutual happiness becomes a nightmare when he, because of his love for Myrtle, in a hopeless attempt of revenging her death and confronting immoral rich people, kills Gatsby, not knowing that he kills one of the representatives of his own class who had the same dreams. Completely deranged, he commits suicide by the pool - the symbol of rich and famous people, which makes his death grotesque. Like Gatsby, George also decided to protect the woman he loved to the very end, without taking into consideration the consequences. In the end he remains deserted, with the destroyed dream of better life, like Gatsby he lost the light that had guided him through life.

Myrtle is the embodiment of physical attraction that is opposed to Daisy's intellectual attraction. Although Daisy, at first sight, acts like a stupid woman pretending to be naive when her husband's mistress is mentioned, she knows how to keep him. Myrtle is visually completely opposite to Daisy who is represented as a status symbol while lolling in her white dress on a couch with Jordan instead of being a wife and mother with the responsibilities that this title brings with itself. Myrtle's dream of happiness is based on the money that Tom has; becoming his mistress she wants to break away from the valley of ashes, selling her own body and husband in order to be available to the insensitive Tom. Myrtle is the symbol of the subdued working class that has been bearing the huge machinery of a group of rich people on its back.

... and in a moment the thickish figure of a woman blocked out the light... She was in the middle thirties, and faintly stout, but she carried her flesh sensuously... 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 as if the nerves of her body were continually smouldering. (Fitzgerald 31)

Fitzgerald built Myrtle's character as the symbol of the working class that is condemned to bare survival, without real possibilities of quick progress. Every attempt of making progress is deterred in advance, in Chapter 2 Tom suddenly slaps Myrtle when she merely mentions Daisy's name, as the anticipation of the fate awaiting her if she dares to persist in her intention, her American dream.

The author emphasizes the tragic quality of Myrtle's character; she dies under the wheels of the car driven by Daisy, her body is deformed and mangled which stresses the impossibility of making true the dream she aspired to.

3. Conclusion

The novel *The Great Gatsby* appeared in American literature in the period when the writers of the "lost generation" were active; thus, the themes of novels are deeply pessimistic taking into consideration the condition of society in America and beyond at the time.

In the world of cheap, consumable ideals, rapaciousness and hypocrisy, Gatsby is a dreamer, idealist, carried by illusions, he appears to be grotesque and absurd surrounded by greedy people. The idea of the American dream is stretched between the golden past and future or, better to say, it is actually captured forever in the hopelessness of the present time. Gatsby's "lack" of intelligence when compared with Tom and Daisy brings him to his tragic death; not only physical, but also spiritual – the one which happened to the America of the time.

In a symbolic sense, Gatsby shows Fitzgerald's consciousness of the irreconcilability of money and beauty, ideal goals and corrupted methods, dreams about personal happiness and the awareness of their fragility.

Historically, the novel is the reflection of the consciousness of the final decay of elitist social and ideological 19th-century standards and the establishment of a modern age that abounds in promises and threat – democracy brings freedom, but also new slavery, riots and uncertainty.

The "jazz age" during which Fitzgerald was active and in which his characters existed is more a reflection of the condition of the spirit than of social reality. Fitzgerald put the real and deceptive splendor of that world in a dramatic and tragic confrontation within formally and morally balanced frames of the novel *The Great Gatsby* which was inspired by symbolism.

Money is for Fitzgerald the source of immense physical beauty, on the one hand, and evil, on the other, so the two can not exist without being mutually dependent. The story about the incurable idealist and impostor Gatsby who created and bolstered the myth about his origin himself, becomes in this way a parable about the unhappy ending of the great American dream.

However, the author leaves the reader with a kind of green light giving him hope for the possibility of making dreams true in the last sentence of the novel: "It eluded us then, but that's no matter -to-morrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther... And one fine morning..." (Fitzgerald 188).

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