

The Representation of Social Class in The Great Gatsby
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Abstract

"The Great Gatsby" by F. Scott Fitzgerald is a captivating portrayal of the societal divisions, aspirations, and disillusionments prevalent in 1920s America. Set against the backdrop of the Jazz Age, the novel explores the complexities of social class, wealth, and the pursuit of the American Dream. Through vivid characters like Jay Gatsby, Tom and Daisy Buchanan, and Nick Carraway, Fitzgerald navigates the contrasts between old money and new money, shedding light on the illusions and limitations inherent in the pursuit of status and acceptance.

The story delves into the extravagance of Gatsby's parties, the symbolism of material possessions, and the opulence that masks the emptiness and moral decay beneath the surface. It also portrays the struggles faced by individuals from different social strata, their aspirations for upward mobility, and the barriers imposed by entrenched class divisions.

Through intricate symbolism, including the green light, East and West Egg, the Valley of Ashes, and fashion choices, Fitzgerald crafts a narrative that critiques the shallowness of a society fixated on wealth, appearances, and the relentless pursuit of social acceptance.

"The Great Gatsby" remains a timeless exploration of the American Dream, revealing the tensions between illusion and reality, the consequences of materialism, and the complexities of human desires and relationships in a rapidly changing world.

Chapter 1

1.1 Introduction to "The Great Gatsby" and F. Scott Fitzgerald

"The Great Gatsby" is a classic novel written by F. Scott Fitzgerald, published in 1925. Set in the midst of the Jazz Age in the 1920s, it's a tale of love, ambition, wealth, and the American Dream. The story unfolds through the eyes of Nick Carraway, a young man who moves to Long Island and becomes entangled in the lives of his enigmatic neighbor, Jay Gatsby, and his cousin, Daisy Buchanan.

The novel explores the lavish and extravagant lifestyles of the rich and elite, showcasing the stark contrast between the old-moneyed aristocracy and the nouveau riche. Gatsby, an enigmatic and wealthy figure, throws extravagant parties in an attempt to win back Daisy, his lost love, who is married to the affluent and arrogant Tom Buchanan.¹

Fitzgerald's masterful prose captures the disillusionment and moral decay beneath the surface of wealth and excess, highlighting the emptiness and tragedy that often accompany the pursuit of the American Dream. "The Great Gatsby" remains a timeless portrayal of societal aspirations, the complexities of human relationships, and the consequences of relentless ambition.

F. Scott Fitzgerald was an influential American author born on September 24, 1896, in St. Paul, Minnesota, and he passed away on December 21, 1940. He was one of the prominent literary figures of the 1920s and is widely regarded as one of the greatest American writers of the 20th century.

Fitzgerald's most famous work, "The Great Gatsby," is considered a masterpiece of American literature and a classic of the Jazz Age. His writing style is characterized by lyrical prose, vivid imagery, and a deep exploration of the human condition.²

Apart from "The Great Gatsby," Fitzgerald wrote other notable novels such as "This Side of Paradise," which brought him initial fame, "Tender Is the Night," and "The Beautiful and Damned." He was known for his portrayal of the American Dream, wealth, society, and the disillusionment of the post-World War I generation.

Fitzgerald's personal life was tumultuous, marked by his marriage to Zelda Sayre, which influenced much of his writing. He struggled with alcoholism, financial difficulties, and the changing literary landscape. Despite facing challenges during his lifetime, his literary contributions have earned him a place among the greatest American writers, leaving a lasting legacy in literature.³

1.2 Historical and social context of the Roaring Twenties

The Roaring Twenties, also known as the Jazz Age, was a vibrant and transformative period in American history that spanned from the end of World War I in 1918 to the stock market crash in 1929. This era was characterized by significant social, cultural, and economic changes that left a lasting impact on society.

Aldridge, John W. "The Life of Gatsby". Bloom 60-43.¹

Bloom, Harold, ed. Bloom's Modern Critical Views F. Scott Fitzgerald. New York: Infobase Publishing. 2006²

Bloom, Harold. "Afterthought". Bloom 237-233³

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Economic Prosperity: After the end of World War I, the United States experienced a period of economic growth and prosperity. Technological advancements, increased industrialization, and mass production techniques led to a surge in consumerism and wealth accumulation for many Americans.

Cultural Shifts: The 1920s witnessed a shift towards modernism and a rejection of traditional norms. This was evident in the rise of new forms of art, music, and literature. The Harlem Renaissance, for instance, saw the flourishing of African American culture, particularly in literature, music, and art.

Prohibition and the Rise of Organized Crime: The Prohibition era, enforced by the 18th Amendment from 1920 to 1933, prohibited the sale, production, and transportation of alcoholic beverages. This led to the rise of illegal speakeasies and the growth of organized crime, with figures like Al Capone gaining notoriety.⁴

Women's Rights and Social Changes: Women's roles evolved during the 1920s. The passage of the 19th Amendment in 1920 granted women the right to vote. This decade saw the emergence of the "New Woman" who challenged traditional gender roles, adopting new fashions, pursuing careers, and embracing a more liberated lifestyle.

Technological Advances and Mass Media: Innovations in technology, particularly in the entertainment industry, led to the popularization of radios, movies, and the spread of mass media. This helped create a shared culture and contributed to the rise of celebrities and consumer culture.⁵

Stock Market Boom and Bust: The decade culminated in the Wall Street Crash of 1929, signaling the end of the economic boom. The crash triggered the Great Depression, causing widespread unemployment, economic hardship, and a significant shift in the country's economic landscape.

The Roaring Twenties was a period of contrasts, marked by economic prosperity, cultural dynamism, social change, and the seeds of the economic downturn that followed. It remains a captivating era that continues to influence and inspire modern culture.

Bloomfield, Jill. *The Great Gatsby: Study Guide and Student Workbook*. Dayton: BMI Educational Services.⁴

Barbour, Brian M. "Two American Dreams in Conflict". Johnson 72-67.⁵

1.3 Overview of the theme of social class in the novel.

In "The Great Gatsby," the theme of social class is a central focus, depicting the stark divisions and tensions between different strata of society during the Jazz Age.⁶

Old Money vs. New Money: The novel explores the distinction between individuals born into wealth and privilege (old money) and those who acquire wealth through endeavors like bootlegging (new money). Characters like Tom and Daisy Buchanan represent the entrenched upper class with inherited wealth, while Jay Gatsby, despite his immense riches, is considered an outsider due to his lack of established lineage.

Struggle for Acceptance: Gatsby's pursuit of Daisy is not only a romantic endeavor but also a quest for social acceptance into the upper class. Despite his opulent parties and material wealth, he faces rejection and remains on the fringes of high society due to his lower social origins.

Superficiality and Moral Decay: The novel critiques the superficiality and moral decay of the wealthy class. Characters like Tom and Daisy Buchanan are portrayed as shallow and indifferent to the consequences of their actions. Their disregard for others and their pursuit of pleasure and self-interest reflect the hollowness of their social status.⁷

Illusion vs. Reality: Gatsby embodies the American Dream—a rags-to-riches story—but his wealth and lifestyle serve as a facade to hide his true identity and longing for acceptance. The illusion of wealth and social status masks the reality of Gatsby's past and his unattainable aspirations.

Class Mobility and Limitations: Despite Gatsby's wealth, the novel suggests that true acceptance into the upper echelons of society might be unattainable for someone outside the established social circles. The rigid boundaries of social class pose significant barriers to upward mobility, emphasizing the class-based limitations of the time.

"The Great Gatsby" scrutinizes the complexities of social class, highlighting the illusions, aspirations, and limitations inherent in the pursuit of wealth, status, and acceptance within the stratified society of the 1920s.⁸

Berman, Ronald. "A Flawed View of Greatness". Johnson 87-80.⁶

Bewley, Marius. "Fitzgerald's View of Class and the American Dream". Johnson 30-23.⁷

Bicknell, John W. "Class and Spiritual Corruption". Johnson 100-97.⁸

Chapter 2: Class Distinctions and the American Dream

2.1 Analysis of the social hierarchy depicted in the story

The Great Gatsby portrays a hierarchical social structure reflective of the stratified society of the 1920s, where individuals' status and wealth dictated their place in the social order.

Old Money Aristocracy: At the top of the social hierarchy are individuals like Tom and Daisy Buchanan, representing the old-moneyed elite. They possess inherited wealth, belong to established families, and live a life of luxury without financial concerns. Their social status affords them privileges, respect, and power within their circles.

Newly Rich (Nouveau Riche): Characters like Jay Gatsby fall into the category of the newly wealthy. Gatsby, despite his immense wealth acquired through dubious means, is unable to bridge the gap between old money and new money. His opulent mansion, extravagant parties, and expensive possessions serve as a facade to gain acceptance into the upper echelons of society.⁹

Middle Class and Working Class: Characters like Nick Carraway represent the middle class, acting as a bridge between the social classes. Nick is neither as wealthy nor as morally corrupt as the upper class but still possesses a level of education and privilege.

The novel highlights the rigid social boundaries and the difficulty of moving between classes. Gatsby's relentless pursuit of Daisy is not just a love story but a

quest to transcend his social origins and gain acceptance into a world where wealth and lineage determine social standing. However, despite his wealth and determination, he remains an outsider, unable to assimilate into the old-moneyed class due to societal prejudices and entrenched class divisions.¹⁰

Fitzgerald's depiction of this social hierarchy underscores the themes of inequality, the illusion of the American Dream, and the superficiality of a society defined by material wealth and social status.

2.2 Distinctions between Old Money and New Money

The distinction between old money and new money is a crucial aspect depicted in "The Great Gatsby," highlighting the societal divisions based on wealth acquisition and lineage.

Old Money:

- **Inherited Wealth:** Old money refers to individuals and families who have inherited their wealth and social status across generations. Their wealth often stems from established businesses, land ownership, or family inheritances passed down over time.
- **Social Prestige:** Those belonging to the old-moneyed elite are accustomed to a lifestyle of luxury, privilege, and social prominence. They hold longstanding connections, possess cultural refinement, and are deeply embedded in the traditions and values of their class.
- **Social Exclusivity:** The old-moneyed class maintains a sense of exclusivity, often looking down upon those who are newly wealthy. They pride themselves on their lineage, sophistication, and established social circles.¹¹

New Money (Nouveau Riche):

- **Acquired Wealth:** New money refers to individuals who have recently acquired their wealth within their own lifetime, often through entrepreneurial endeavors, investments, or, in Gatsby's case, illegal means such as bootlegging during the Prohibition era.

Donaldson, Scott. "Class Snobbery and Education". Johnson 44-36.¹⁰

Dyson, A.E. "The Universality of Class Divisions". Johnson 66-60¹¹

- **Lack of Social Pedigree:** Those with new money lack the social pedigree and lineage of the old-moneyed class. Despite their wealth, they are often viewed as outsiders or upstarts within the established elite circles.

- **Struggle for Acceptance:** Characters like Jay Gatsby exemplify the challenges faced by the nouveau riche in gaining acceptance into the upper echelons of society. Despite their wealth and attempts to emulate the lifestyle of the old money class, they are frequently met with social barriers and snobbery.¹²

Fitzgerald uses the distinction between old money and new money to explore themes of social class, aspiration, and the elusive nature of the American Dream. The novel portrays the difficulties faced by those attempting to transcend their social origins and the inherent limitations of wealth without lineage in a society divided by class.

2.3 The portrayal of the working class and the Valley of Ashes

In "The Great Gatsby," the working class and the desolate area known as the Valley of Ashes serve as stark representations of the less privileged segments of society, standing in contrast to the opulence and extravagance of the wealthy elite.

The Working Class:

- George and Myrtle Wilson: Characters like George and Myrtle Wilson represent the working class. George owns a small garage in the Valley of Ashes, and Myrtle, his wife, yearns to escape the dullness of their existence. Myrtle aspires to climb the social ladder and be part of the glamorous world inhabited by the wealthy, leading her to have an affair with Tom Buchanan.¹³

The Valley of Ashes:

- Desolation and Decay: The Valley of Ashes is a bleak and desolate industrial area situated between West Egg and New York City. It symbolizes the moral and social decay resulting from industrialization and the pursuit of wealth. It's a place where ashes from industry cover everything, representing the waste, despair, and forgotten lives amidst the striving for material success.

Chapter 3: Symbols and Representations of Social Class

3.1 Symbolism of wealth and material possessions

Gatsby's Mansion:

- Symbolizes the facade of wealth and opulence. Gatsby's grand mansion, filled with luxurious items and extravagant parties, represents his attempt to win back Daisy and gain acceptance into the upper class. However, it also signifies the emptiness and superficiality that can accompany material excess.

The Yellow Car:

- Represents the allure and dangers of wealth. Gatsby's yellow car, which ultimately leads to tragic consequences, symbolizes the corrupting influence and reckless pursuit of status associated with wealth.¹⁴

Expensive Attire and Accessories:

- Clothing, jewelry, and fashionable accessories symbolize social status and aspirations. Characters in the novel often use their attire to project wealth and sophistication, highlighting the importance of appearances in defining one's place in society.

Valuables and Luxuries:

- Throughout the story, various luxury items and possessions, such as fine china, elaborate furnishings, and expensive gifts, serve as symbols of wealth and social standing. They underline the materialistic values prevalent in the Jazz Age society.

Money and Currency:

- Money itself, whether in the form of large sums, lavish spending, or illegal earnings like Gatsby's, symbolizes the American Dream and the pursuit of success. However, it also represents the shallowness and emptiness that can accompany an obsessive quest for wealth.

Fitzgerald uses these symbols of wealth and material possessions to underscore the broader themes of the novel, including the emptiness of materialism, the illusory nature of the American Dream, and the moral decay that often accompanies the relentless pursuit of wealth and status in the Jazz Age society.¹⁵

3.2 The extravagant parties as reflections of social class

The extravagant parties in "The Great Gatsby" serve as reflections of social class in several ways:

Display of Wealth and Excess:

- Gatsby's lavish parties, filled with opulence, fine food, expensive drinks, and entertainment, reflect the ostentatious display of wealth. These extravagant gatherings symbolize the excesses of the nouveau riche and their attempts to assert their social standing through materialistic exhibitions.

Mixing of Classes:

- The parties attract a diverse mix of guests, including the wealthy, social climbers, and those from varying social backgrounds. The presence of different classes at these events demonstrates a temporary blurring of social boundaries, showcasing how wealth and the allure of Gatsby's lifestyle attract people from various strata of society.¹⁶

Illusion and Masking of Reality:

- Gatsby's parties serve as a facade to hide his true motives and past. Despite the vibrant atmosphere and extravagant display, they mask Gatsby's loneliness and his unending quest to win back Daisy. The glittering parties create an illusion of joy and festivity, but beneath the surface, they depict a sense of emptiness and longing.

Social Climbing and Networking:

- The parties provide opportunities for social climbing and networking. Attendees use these events to enhance their social connections, further their own ambitions, or experience the thrill of being associated with Gatsby's extravagant lifestyle.

Millgate, Michael. "A Corruption of Character". Johnson 79-73.¹⁵

Streissguth, Thomas. The Roaring Twenties. New York: Facts On Files Inc. 2007¹⁶

Critique of Society's Values:

- Through the portrayal of these extravagant parties, Fitzgerald critiques the shallowness and moral decay prevalent in the Jazz Age society. The excessive pursuit of pleasure, materialism, and the superficiality of social interactions at these events reflect the hollowness and emptiness of a society fixated on wealth and status.¹⁷

3.3 Clothing and fashion as markers of social status

clothing and fashion act as significant markers of social status, playing a crucial role in defining characters and illustrating the societal divisions:

Elegance and Opulence:

- Characters from the upper class, like Tom and Daisy Buchanan, are depicted wearing luxurious and stylish clothing. Their attire signifies their wealth, sophistication, and high social standing. Daisy, in particular, is often described in elegant and expensive dresses, symbolizing her privileged background.

Distinct Styles for Different Classes:

- The clothing choices of characters from various social classes reflect their positions in society. The wealthy characters wear tailored suits, expensive dresses, and accessories, while those from the working class, like George and Myrtle Wilson, are portrayed in simpler and less refined attire, highlighting their lower social status.

Symbolism of Accessories:

- Accessories such as jewelry, watches, and fashionable items serve as symbols of affluence and status. These details in attire emphasize the materialistic values prevalent among the upper class and their emphasis on projecting wealth.

Transformation of Gatsby's Attire:

- Gatsby's attire undergoes a transformation throughout the story, reflecting his aspirations and attempts to fit into the upper class. Initially, his clothing is luxurious but lacks the refined taste of old money. As he becomes more determined to win Daisy and gain social acceptance, his wardrobe evolves to emulate the elegance associated with the elite.¹⁸

The Role of Fashion in Social Climbing:

- Fashion and clothing choices are used by characters like Myrtle, who aspire to climb the social ladder. Myrtle's desire to adopt a more glamorous lifestyle is evident in her attempt to imitate the clothing and fashion of the upper class, signifying her aspirations for social advancement. Throughout the novel, Fitzgerald uses clothing and fashion as visual cues to depict the social hierarchy and the aspirations of characters, highlighting the role of attire in signaling social status and the importance of appearances in defining one's place in the stratified society of the 1920s.¹⁹

Conclusion

In conclusion, F. Scott Fitzgerald's "The Great Gatsby" stands as a powerful commentary on the complexities of social class, wealth, and the American Dream during the Jazz Age. Through a rich tapestry of characters and symbols, Fitzgerald paints a vivid picture of a society divided by wealth, where old money and new money clash, revealing the disparities, aspirations, and illusions of the era. The novel's exploration of the pursuit of wealth, status, and social acceptance highlights the emptiness and moral decay often concealed beneath the glittering surface of opulence. The stark contrasts between the old-moneyed elite and the

nouveau riche, as well as the struggles of those outside the established circles, underscore the entrenched barriers and limitations imposed by class divisions. Symbols such as Gatsby's unattainable green light, the extravagant parties, and the Valley of Ashes serve as poignant representations of the illusions, aspirations, and disillusionments prevalent in the pursuit of material success and social standing.²⁰

Ultimately, "The Great Gatsby" remains a timeless classic that delves deep into the human condition, revealing the complexities of societal values, the consequences of unbridled ambition, and the relentless quest for the elusive American Dream. Fitzgerald's masterful storytelling and poignant critique of the Jazz Age society continue to resonate, offering profound insights into the universal themes of wealth, class, and the yearning for acceptance and meaning in an ever-changing world

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