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## *The Great Gatsby as a Mirror of the Roaring Twenties*

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“Any change, even a change for the better, is always accompanied by drawbacks and discomforts” – Arnold Bennett.

### **Abstract**

American Literature was acquiring a remarkable momentum in the early decades of the twentieth century. As Mabel Dodge Luhan says, “it seems as though everywhere, in that year of 1913, barriers went down.....there were all sorts of new ways to communicate as well as new communications.” It was truly a phenomenal transition. Within a short span, America underwent a phase of stylistic expansion, involving aspects of art and life. The 1920s of America were a reaction to the end of World War I. The post World War I America was evolving into a great super power. It destroyed the old social conventions and new ones were developed. “The Roaring Twenties”, as it is referred to, was the age when the old American innocence yielded to the new sophistication. It reacted strongly to the rigid conservatism, and literature of this period reflected this social change. In the early twentieth century, literature in the United States has moved from a mainly defensive position to one of superpower magnitude and ease. The youth of the period rebelled against traditional way of life; the twenties became an era of “consumption and speculation”. This period became known as the “Jazz Age.”

**Key Words:** The Great Gatsby, the twenties, American youth

Sawhill remarks, “The surface characteristics of the Jazz Age, images such as bootleggers, gangsters, and flappers, as well as lifestyles characterized by “loose” living and the cultural evolution of “hot jazz”, were outward signs of a deeper cultural conflict going on in the country during the 1920s.” The conflict was between conservatism and cosmopolitanism. The following are some of the prominent traits of the Jazz Age of the Roaring Twenties: social stratification, thriving bootleggers, decayed social and moral values, and reckless jubilation, and opulent parties.

The writer most associated with the Jazz Age was F. Scott Fitzgerald, who helped define and describe, through his writing, what the cultural and social lifestyle of the Jazz Age was all about. Curnutt aptly points out: “Widely considered the literary spokesman of the “Jazz Age”.....part of the interest of his (Fitzgerald’s) work derives from the fact that the mad, gin-drinking, morally and spiritually bankrupt men and women he wrote about led lives that closely resembled his own.” Thus, Fitzgerald’s writings reflected a new era in American history, “the Jazz Age.” *The Great Gatsby* is an early twentieth century that follows a cast

of characters living in the imaginary town of West Egg on a prosperous island in the summer of 1922. The story primarily concerns the young and mysterious millionaire, Jay Gatsby and his quixotic passion for the beautiful former Daisy Buchanan. *The Great Gatsby* is considered to be Fitzgerald's masterpiece. The novel explores themes of social decadence, resistance to change, social upheaval, and excess, which were the prominent characteristics of the jazz Age. *The Great Gatsby* is widely considered to be a literary classic. The book is consistently ranked among the greatest works of American literature. In 1998, the Modern Library editorial board voted it the twentieth century's best American novel and the second best novel in the English language.

*The Great Gatsby*, published in 1925, is, in its remarkable compactness, a masterpiece of the moral imagination. It is seen as the quintessential novel of the Jazz Age. T. S. Eliot praises the novel as "the first step that American fiction has taken since Henry James." Fitzgerald has a high ideal of civilization and of what a civilized way of life could be yet often so tragically is not. *The Great Gatsby* is hailed as one of the foremost pieces of American fiction of its time. It is a novel of triumph and tragedy, noted for the remarkable way its author captures a cross-section of American society. Part of Fitzgerald's charm in it is, in fact, his ability to encapsulate the mood of a generation during a politically and socially crucial and chaotic period of American history. The novel offers a comprehensive and critical social history of America during the so-called "Roaring Twenties." It was a

period of remarkable prosperity and unlimited cultural freedom which often bordered on social anarchy. It was also a period of unprecedented criminal activity. Fitzgerald fills the novel with these backgrounds. The novel not only pictures the period but also warns the readers about cultural disintegration because of economic abundance. Thus, the novel is Fitzgerald's social criticism too. Hence Thompson Lamb praises *The Great Gatsby* as an interrogation of social values and an open-ended work.

*The Great Gatsby*, superficially, is a story of the thwarted love between Gatsby and Daisy. However, the core of the work does not position there. The novel explores the American culture from the early to mid 1920s. It is a story narrated by Nick Carraway, who was once Gatsby's neighbour. He tells the story sometime after 1922. When the story begins, Nick has just moved from the Midwest to West Egg, seeking his fortune as a bond salesman. After sometime, he travels across the Sound to the more fashionable East Egg to visit his cousin Daisy and her husband Tom Buchanan. There he meets golfer Jordan Baker.

Nick is invited by Tom, one day, to meet his mistress, Myrtle Wilson, a middle-class woman. Mr Wilson runs a garage and gas station in the Valley of Ashes. Then, Nick turns his attention towards his mysterious neighbour, the protagonist of the novel, Gatsby. Gatsby used to give extravagant parties every weekend. Upon invitation, Nick attends one of such parties. It turns out that Nick and Gatsby become friends. Gatsby and Nick go to the city and there Nick meets Meyer Wolfsheim, one of

Gatsby's associates and his link to organized crime (bootlegging). Later, Nick, from Jordan, learns that Gatsby has been in love with Daisy for almost five years. Nick arranges the meeting of Gatsby and Daisy in his house at West Egg. Gatsby takes special delight in showing Daisy his meticulously decorated house and his impressive array of belongings. Daisy is enamoured by the wealth and prosperity of Gatsby.

Gatsby and Daisy's affair begins to grow and they see each other regularly. As fate would have it, Tom deftly notices what is going on, when Gatsby and Nick go to East Egg to have lunch with Buchanans. In a trip to the city, Gatsby and Daisy travel in Gatsby's car, while others travel in Buchanan's car. Tom begins to badger Gatsby, questioning him as his intentions with Daisy. Tom keeps harping on Gatsby until the truth comes out. In a gesture of authority, Tom orders Daisy and Gatsby to head home in Gatsby's car. Tom, Nick and Jordan follow. On their way back, Tom learns that Myrtle Wilson, his mistress, has been hit and killed by a passing car. Nick, from Gatsby, learns that Daisy was driving the car. On getting home, Gatsby tells Nick about how Daisy figured into his life. In the valley of ashes, Mr. Wilson, distraught over his wife's death, goes looking for the driver who killed Myrtle. Nick retraces Wilson's journey, which places him at Gatsby's house. Wilson murders Gatsby and then turns the gun on himself. Later, it is revealed that Tom is the impetus behind Gatsby's death. Deeply disgusted, Nick leaves West Egg.

One can notice that all the aspects of 1920s are very well brought out in *The Great*

*Gatsby*. The first and foremost group Fitzgerald attacks is the rich. In this novel, he presents two distinct types of wealthy people. First, there are people like the Buchannan and Jordan Baker who were born rich. Their families have had money for many generations; hence they are "old money". Second, there are "nouveau riches" like Gatsby. Hence they are "new money." The "new money" people were looked down upon by the "old money" group. The latter are judgemental and superficial, failing to look at the essence of the people around them. The people with newly acquired wealth are not necessarily much better. Gatsby's partygoers stand testimony to this group. They attend his parties, drink his liquor and eat his food, never once taking the time to even meet their host. When Gatsby dies, the people who throng his house at once fail to turn up for his burial, thus abandoning Gatsby. Their concerns are largely living for the moment, steeped in partying and drinking.

*The Great Gatsby* can be said to be an autobiographical novel. Many of the events described in the novel are reminiscent of Fitzgerald's early life. Like Fitzgerald, Nick Carraway is a thoughtful young man from Minnesota, educated at an Ivy League school (in Nick's case, Yale), who moves to New York after the war. Also similar to Fitzgerald is Jay Gatsby, a sensitive young man who idolizes wealth and luxury and who falls in love with a beautiful young woman while stationed at a military camp in the South. After having become a celebrity, Fitzgerald fell into a wild, reckless life-style of parties and decadence, while desperately trying to please Zelda by writing to earn



money. Similarly, Gatsby amasses a great deal of wealth at a relatively young age, and devotes himself to acquiring possessions and throwing parties that he believes will enable him to win Daisy's love. Like Nick in *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald found this new lifestyle seductive and exciting, and, like Gatsby, he had always idolized the very rich. Now he found himself in an era in which unrestrained materialism set the tone of society, particularly in the large cities of the East. Even so, like Nick, Fitzgerald saw through the glitter of the Jazz Age to the moral emptiness and hypocrisy beneath, and part of him longed for this absent moral center. In many ways, *The Great Gatsby* represents Fitzgerald's attempt to confront his conflicting feelings about the Jazz Age. Like Gatsby, Fitzgerald was driven by his love for a woman who symbolized everything he wanted, even as she led him toward everything he despised.

As the giddiness of the Roaring Twenties dissolved into the bleakness of the Great Depression, however, Zelda suffered a nervous breakdown and Fitzgerald battled alcoholism, which hampered his writing. He published *Tender Is the Night* in 1934, and sold short stories to *The Saturday Evening Post* to support his lavish lifestyle. In 1937, he left for Hollywood to write screenplays, and in 1940, while working on his novel *The Love of the Last Tycoon*, died of a heart attack at the age of forty-four.

The 1920s in America were characterized by an increasing freedom and reckless jubilation. Gatsby's parties are perfect testament to the growing debauchery of the upper class. "On weekends, his Rolls-Royce became an omnibus, bearing parties to and

from the city between nine in the morning and long past midnight....." (45). A corps of caterers is involved in arranging the party. Hors-d'oeuvre, spiced baked hams, pastry pigs and turkeys garnish the buffet tables. The bar is stocked with gins and liquors.

Jazz music took the United States with storm during the period. It influenced all aspects of society. The birth of jazz music is often accredited to African Americans, though it soon expanded to America's white middle class. No wonder, in the third chapter of the novel, Fitzgerald makes Gatsby include jazz music in his weekend parties: "By seven o'clock, the orchestra has arrived, no thin five-piece affair, but a whole pitiful of oboes and trombones and saxophones and viols and cornets and piccolos, and low and high drums" (46). Those who have gone to swim have come back. The music reaches a key higher. The room is filled with prodigality. All men and women start dancing to the tune.

In the Roaring Twenties, the youth wanted to set themselves free, especially young women. They shocked the old generation with their hair style and short clothes. The surfacing of flapper women also began to captivate society during the Jazz Age, a time in which many more opportunities became available for women. People are eager to break established boundaries. The 1920s, Fitzgerald suggests, was not just a time of challenging social boundaries. It was also a time of changing sexual and even spiritual boundaries. In 1918, Prohibition was introduced in America. This law banned the sale, transportation and manufacture of alcohol. However, there was a ready market for alcohol throughout the 1920's and the

gangsters provided it. In Chapter VI, when Tom gets to know Gatsby through Nick, he says, “A lot of these newly rich people are just big bootleggers, you know” (115). The higher the demand, the richer the bootleggers become. Fitzgerald portrays the newly rich as being vulgar, gaudy, flamboyant and lacking in social graces and taste. Gatsby, for example, lives in a monstrously huge mansion, wears a pink suit, drives a Rolls-Royce, and does not notice subtle social signals. He does not involve in organized crimes - gambling, bootlegging.

As Fitzgerald saw it, the American dream was originally about discovery, individualism, and the pursuit of happiness. In the 1920s depicted in the novel, easy money and relaxed social values have corrupted this dream, especially on the East Coast. Gatsby’s dream of loving Daisy is ruined by the difference in their respective social statuses. He resorts to crime to make enough money to impress her. Curnutt remarks, “Fitzgerald’s simultaneous adulation and admonition of the modern woman is most obvious in his two best-known female characters, Daisy Fay Buchanan in *The Great Gatsby* and Nicole Warren Diver in *Tender is the Night*”(74).

Daisy’s unabashed materialism does little to gain reader sympathy. Gatsby’s love for Daisy is so idealized that she neither

deserves nor possesses. Gatsby’s dream is ruined by the unworthiness of its object, just as the American dream in the 1920s is ruined by the unworthiness of its object—money and pleasure. Just like Americans, who long for the golden days (pre 1920s) , Gatsby longs to re-create a vanished past—his time in Louisville with Daisy—but is incapable of doing so. All his dreams are shattered. All Gatsby can do is to ‘Die’. In the final chapter of the novel, Nick can neither like nor forgive Tom: “They were careless people, Tom and Daisy – they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made....” (186).

What makes Fitzgerald’s novel such a favorite piece is the way he is able to analyse the society of which he was also a part. Through his characters, he not only captures a snapshot of middle and upper class American life in the 1920s, but also conveys a series of criticisms as well. Fitzgerald demonstrates the enterprising Jazz Ager in Gatsby, as one who has worked hard and profited from listening and responding to the demands of the society. Quite sadly, Gatsby is not able to capture his elusive dreams. According to Lionel Trilling, Gatsby, who is divided between power and dream, is a representative of America itself.

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