



Unveiling the Jazz Age: A Critical Review of The Great Gatsby

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Abstract

This review article examines F. Scott Fitzgerald's "The Great Gatsby" as a critical insight into the American Dream during the Jazz Age. Employing a systematic approach, the review initially summarized each of the novel's nine chapters, tracing the unfolding plot and character arcs. Building upon this foundation, it conducts a literary analysis that probed into the novel's thematic richness, emphasizing Fitzgerald's pointed critique of materialism and the deceptive allure of the American Dream. The secondary data for this study was obtained from academically published, peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and reputable websites that analyze the aforementioned novel from different perspectives to support and critique this literary work. This analysis highlights Jay Gatsby's obsessive pursuit of wealth and social standing as a means to reclaim a past love, illustrating the dream's ultimately unattainable nature. Symbolic elements like the green light and the Valley of Ashes were explored to demonstrate their role in conveying the novel's central themes of aspiration and moral decay. Furthermore, the review interprets characters such as Tom and Daisy Buchanan, and Nick Carraway, as representative figures reflecting the social stratification and ethical ambiguities prevalent in 1920s American society. Ultimately, the review concludes that "The Great Gatsby" endured as a significant work of literature, providing a poignant social critique and a timeless reflection on the human condition, cautioning against the dangers of romanticizing the past and the superficiality inherent in a materialistic worldview. Hence, for implication, this study provides a nuanced understanding of The Great Gatsby as a literary reflection of the Jazz Age, offering valuable insights into the socio-cultural critique of the American Dream and its inherent moral contradictions, thereby enriching contemporary literary discourse on the interplay between aspiration and ethical decay.

Keywords: American dream, jazz age, love, materialism, moral decay, the great Gatsby

1. Introduction

The novel; "The Great Gatsby" authored by F. Scott Fitzgerald (1925) is a cornerstone of American literature, renowned for its vivid depiction of the Jazz Age¹ (Mirza, 2014; Agarwal, 2017) and its critique of the American Dream (Hodo, 2017). This classic novel was set in the summer of 1922 which explores the idealism's themes (Vella, 2014) and decadence together with resistance to change (Mohammadi, 2020), excessive social upheavals, created within the portrait of the Roaring Twenties (Google Books, 2019) that has established it as the leading and prestigious novel of the 20th century. Inside this seminal work, the whole novel is narrated by Nick Carraway, a Yale graduate and World War I veteran (Alanazi, 2022) who becomes entangled in the world of a mysterious millionaire; Jay Gatsby with a quixotic passion for the beautiful Daisy Buchanan (Borah, 2024).

This book is a marvelous endeavor in literary writing and popular as elegantly written masterpiece. Many scholars have analyzed this novel from various perspectives and its story remains one of the best in the genre of literature (Adhikari, 2021). Regarding to this, two movies have also released on this novel and continues to be among the favored to till date. Similarly, we can found that the popular movie directors; Jack Clayton (1974) and Baz Luhrmann (2013) have created the movie in different timeframe based on this novel (Vella, 2014). Likewise, this landmark work of fiction has included in the course book of various Universities and other educational institutions in the world (Eble, 1974) which proves it as a hauntingly beautiful work of literature and also helps to enhance the literary knowledge of English literature majors' students.

Thus, correlating as a qualitative research method, in this book review, I have included the basic introduction for description, presented chapter summary, and conducted the analysis in accordance with literary writing along with the conclusion, aiming that helping to understand the whole novel simply by new readers and literary enthusiasts although, it has been published nearly the timespan of a century before. Thereupon, the significance of this study lies in its comprehensive examination of The Great Gatsby, offering an in-depth literary critique that enhances the understanding of the American Dream and its socio-cultural implications during the Jazz Age, while contributing to the ongoing scholarly discourse on materialism, moral decay, and the complexities of aspiration in modern society.

1.1 Chapter Summary

The novel is constructed into nine chapters including the different characters. Due to an exquisitely crafted storyline, this novel is widely regarded as a masterpiece of literary craftsmanship, showcasing Fitzgerald's exceptional ability to weave a poignant and compelling narrative (Citra, 2017). Hence, this section provides the description of story synopsis and chapter interpretation.

Chapter 1: The novel begins with Nick Carraway recounting his background, explaining that he hails from a wealthy Midwestern family and has moved to West Egg, Long

¹ The Jazz Age, encompassing the 1920s, represents a pivotal period of cultural, social, and economic transformation in America. Defined by jazz music's emergence, economic growth, and a departure from conventional norms, it embodied a society advancing toward modernity, consumer culture, and creative expression. F. Scott Fitzgerald encapsulated its dualities, portraying an era of optimism, extravagance, and societal change.

Island (Bartleby, 2024), to learn about the bond business. He rents a modest house next to Gatsby's opulent mansion. Nick is invited to dinner by his cousin, Daisy Buchanan, and her husband, Tom, who live in the more fashionable East Egg. At their home, Nick meets Jordan Baker, a professional golfer and a friend of Daisy's. The chapter ends with Nick returning home and seeing Gatsby for the first time, standing alone on his lawn (eNotes Publishing, 2024) and staring across the bay at the green light at the end of Daisy's dock. This chapter portrays the initial plot for the novel, where some of the major characters got unveiled.

Chapter 2: Nick describes the desolate area known as the Valley of Ashes, situated between West Egg and New York City. He and Tom visit a garage owned by George Wilson and his wife, Myrtle, Tom's mistress. They proceed to the city and spend an afternoon in an apartment where Tom keeps for his affair. The chapter depicts the moral decay of the elite, exemplified by Tom's violent behavior towards Myrtle.

Chapter 3: Nick receives an invitation to one of Gatsby's extravagant parties (Course Hero, 2024). He attends and, amid the revelry, finally meets Gatsby, who is surprisingly young and reserved, in contrast to the wild rumors circulating about him. Nick learns that Gatsby served in the same military division during the war (Novelguide.com, 2024). This chapter highlights the hedonism of the era and introduces Gatsby's enigmatic character.

Chapter 4: Gatsby takes Nick to New York City and shares a convoluted history of his past, attempting to establish his credibility. They have lunch with Meyer Wolfsheim, a notorious gambler, hinting at Gatsby's dubious connections. Later, Jordan Baker reveals to Nick that Gatsby and Daisy were once in love, and Gatsby hopes to rekindle their romance. This revelation sets the stage for the novel's central conflict.

Chapter 5: Gatsby and Daisy finally reunite at Nick's house, leading to an emotional encounter. Gatsby shows Daisy his mansion, flaunting his wealth in an attempt to impress her. Their reunion rekindles old feelings, and it becomes clear that Gatsby's love for Daisy (CliffsNotes, 2024) is the driving force behind his accumulation of wealth.

Chapter 6: A flashback provides insight into Gatsby's early life, detailing his humble beginnings as James Gatz and his transformation into Jay Gatsby. The chapter underscores Gatsby's idealism and his relentless pursuit of a self-created identity. Tom and Daisy attend one of Gatsby's parties (eNotes, 2024), but the event ends uncomfortably, with Tom's disdain for Gatsby becoming evident.

Chapter 7: Gatsby ceases his parties, and the love triangle between Gatsby, Daisy, and Tom reaches its climax. On a sweltering day, they all travel to the city, where tensions explode. Tom confronts Gatsby, exposing his criminal activities and shattering his illusion. Daisy, overwhelmed, retreats with Tom, and on the way home, Daisy accidentally kills Myrtle while driving Gatsby's car. Gatsby decides to take the blame to protect Daisy.

Chapter 8: The narrative delves into Gatsby's past and his unwavering dedication to Daisy. Nick tries to persuade Gatsby to leave Long Island, fearing for his safety. Meanwhile, George Wilson, distraught over Myrtle's death and believing Gatsby to be her lover, kills Gatsby before taking his own life. The chapter reflects on the futility of Gatsby's dreams and the harsh realities of his existence.

Chapter 9: Nick arranges Gatsby's funeral, which is sparsely attended, exposing the superficiality of Gatsby's social circle. Nick becomes disillusioned with the East Coast, seeing it as a place of moral decay. He ends his relationship with Jordan and returns to the Midwest

(Reason and Meaning, 2015). The novel concludes with Nick contemplating the American Dream (Cain, 2020) and Gatsby's futile pursuit of an idealized past.

Furthermore, the respective chapters of *The Great Gatsby* provide critical insights into the themes of aspiration, disillusionment and moral decay inherently associated with the pursuit of the American Dream within the Jazz Age. So critically, concluding this, aforementioned each chapter provides the literal information which is presented in the upcoming paragraph.

In Chapter 1, Nick Carraway introduces the central conflict, juxtaposing his modest background with the opulence of East and West Egg, symbolizing the social stratification that defines the novel. The green light across the bay foreshadows Gatsby's unattainable aspirations. Chapter 2 further critiques societal moral decay, exemplified by Tom's extramarital affair and the Valley of Ashes, a symbol of corruption. In Chapter 3, Gatsby's extravagant parties highlight the era's hedonistic excess and his desperate desire for recognition. Chapter 4 deepens the mystery of Gatsby, revealing his fabricated past and his obsession with rekindling his romance with Daisy. The emotional reunion in Chapter 5 exposes the destructive force of Gatsby's idealized love for Daisy. Chapter 6 offers a critical look at Gatsby's self-invention and relentless pursuit of an unattainable identity. In Chapter 7, the conflict culminates as Tom exposes Gatsby's criminal associations, and Daisy's role in Myrtle's death sets the stage for tragedy. Chapter 8 depicts Gatsby's tragic end, underscoring the futility of his dreams. Finally, Chapter 9 serves as a sobering critique of the superficiality of Gatsby's social circle and the moral disillusionment while, Nick experiences, encapsulating the failure of the American Dream.

Moreover, throughout these chapters, Fitzgerald critiques the American Dream, showing how its promises of success and fulfillment are ultimately illusory and fraught with moral ambiguity.

2. Analysis

The fundamental literary critique on this novel examines essential elements of the text through a logical and critical approach to reveal key aspects of the novelist's message and artistic execution. This portion presents and elaborates the basic evaluation of the text's structure, themes, and literary techniques to understand the author's intent and the work's significance.

"*The Great Gatsby*" is a profound exploration of the American Dream's complexities and presents a critical examination of the moral degeneration within 1920s American society, offering a sophisticated critique of the materialistic ethos and the illusory nature highlighting its situation. Consequently, the American Dream refers to providing the equal opportunity, freedom, mobility, professional journey with availability of work and peacefully fulfilling the goals of every aspirants regardless of gender, race and class for all American people without any bias.

Conversely, Fitzgerald's portrayal of the character, Gatsby as a self-made man, driven by an unrelenting pursuit of wealth and status (Wulick, 2017) to win back Daisy, serves as a critique of the American Dream's materialistic values which is also related with the contemporary increasing status of modernism and capitalism (Patel, 2019) across the proletariat and bourgeoisie of the Jazz Age and this stage has unmatched the ultimate reality of American vision. The central figure, Jay Gatsby, embodies the archetype of the achiever whose

wealth and ostentatious lifestyle are driven by a desperate desire to recapture a lost romantic ideal with Daisy Buchanan. This pursuit exemplifies the emptiness of material success when it is not grounded in authentic human connection. Likewise, Gatsby's economic circumstances related with socio-cultural prosperity, though immense, fails to bring him true happiness (Jacobson, 2024), social acceptance and prestige ultimately leading to his tragic downfall (Alaabed, 2021).

Furthermore, Fitzgerald employs a variety of literary devices to enhance the novel's themes. The recurring symbol of green light at the end of Daisy's dock (Team Literopedia, 2023) symbolizes Gatsby's unreachable dreams and the broader American ideal of progress, culture and aspiration. It also serves as a poignant metaphor for unattainable aspirations, encapsulating the human conditions, ceaseless striving toward unobtainable ideals. The Valley of Ashes represents the moral and social decay (Jacobson, 2024) hidden beneath the surface of the glamorous East and West Egg societies. Similarly, it functions as a stark emblem of the loss of moral values that lies beneath the veneer of affluence, illustrating the ethical compromises embedded in the pursuit of wealth.

Moreover, the characters in the novel are emblematic of the various facets of 1920s American society. Tom Buchanan epitomizes the arrogance and moral bankruptcy of the old-money class. The character work demonstrated through Tom and Daisy Buchanan further illuminate the deep social divisions and moral ambiguities of the time, their actions revealing the inherent contradictions of the elite class. Daisy, though ostensibly the object of Gatsby's desire, is revealed to be shallow and self-centered, embodying the emptiness of the American aristocracy (Perez, 2019). Similarly, Nick Carraway, the novel's narrator, serves as a moral compass, his Midwestern values contrasting with the decadence around him.

Additionally, Fitzgerald's writing style, characterized by its lyrical prose and evocative imagery, adds a layer of poignancy to the narrative. His use of symbolism, such as the eyes (Team Literopedia, 2023) of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg on the billboard overlooking the Valley of Ashes (LitCharts, 2024), reinforces the themes of observation and judgment, suggesting a moral reckoning for the characters' actions (Brucoli, 1985; Tredell, 1999; Prigozy, 2001).

Therefore, the novel's structure, with its non-linear timeline and use of flashbacks, allows readers to gradually uncover Gatsby's past and the reasons behind his obsessive love for Daisy (Li & Zheng, 2015). Through these thematic explorations, Fitzgerald underscores the complexities of aspiration, identity, and the ethical cost of success, cementing *The Great Gatsby* as a timeless work that continues to offer profound insights into the intersection of individual ambition and societal values. So, this narrative technique creates a sense of mystery and suspense, drawing readers into Gatsby's world while also revealing the inevitability of his fate.

3. Conclusion

"*The Great Gatsby*" is a timeless masterpiece that offers a critical lens on the American Dream (Team Literopedia, 2023) and stands as a quintessential critique of the societal changes of the 1920s offering a nuanced exploration of the moral and societal disintegration that illustrated the Jazz Age. Fitzgerald's intricate characterizations, symbolic motifs, and masterful prose coalesce to create a chronicle narrative that is both a social critique and a poignant love story. Novelists' masterful use of symbolism and narrative structure further strength and affirms the

novel's place as a significant and timeless commentary on the human condition. Through the character of Jay Gatsby, the narrative lays bare the futility of pursuing wealth and status as a means to resurrect an idealized past, revealing the emptiness inherent in such aspirations. Likewise, displaying Gatsby's tragic pursuit of an unattainable ideal, the novel underscores the perils of living in the past and the futility of chasing an illusion. The novel's symbolic motifs, such as the green light and the Valley of Ashes, serve as potent metaphors for unattainable desires and the ethical decay that permeates the pursuit of material success. Ultimately, this novel remains a powerful reflection on the human condition, cautionary reflection on the illusory nature of the American Dream emphasizing the dangers of an unchecked quest for self-identity through external markers of success and the enduring quest (Steinbeck, 2024) for meaning in a world driven by materialism (Regmi, 2024) and superficiality.

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