



Scanning Symbolism , Illusion And Reality In F. Scott Fitzgerald's 'The Great Gatsby'

DR. MADHURI GOSWAMI

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, DEPT. OF ENGLISH, GOVT. PG COLLEGE, CHOMU, RAJASTHAN, INDIA

ABSTRACT: Every character in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* is disillusioned with reality so they create illusions that fit their desires. Tom believes that he is a protector of the white race and social standards. Daisy lives in world where her actions never have consequences. Gatsby believes that, like him, Daisy never moved on from their time together in the past and will leave her husband for him. Nick moved to the East, believing the world would present a better life of social equality than the West. Every character in *The Great Gatsby* has created an illusion for themselves that they diligently corrupt their view of reality to achieve.

KEYWORDS- scanning, F. Scott Fitzgerald's, *Gatsby*, symbolism

I. INTRODUCTION

Tom has convinced himself that he is the protector of the white race and of social grace and order. He believes, based on the literary work of Goddard, that it's up to the whites, the dominant race, to be keen or the other races will completely control everything, which will cause the collapse of civilization (Fitzgerald 123). Tom, although through his reference to literature does well to establish his credibility, still builds this concept based on his racist opinions, granted in the 1920's, racism was a social normality, but that doesn't mean believing one's self wasn't discriminatory made the idea reality. This is a minor illusion, but still aides in the illustration of how easily one's opinions shape their "reality". [1,2,3]

In F. Scott Fitzgerald's book, "*The Great Gatsby*," the concept of illusion versus reality is a leading cause of the failures and issues that most of the characters face. Their emotions and mentalities ran high in the book leading them into a whirlwind of illusion rather than reality. Their inability to grasp what was not real and what was is ultimately the reason for their downfalls. Jay Gatsby, otherwise known as James Gatz is a prime example of illusion that is seen as reality. Jay tells Nick that he is from the Midwest and he comes from a wealthy family, but they are all dead now and he came into an enormous amount of money. "I'll tell you God's truth. I am the son of some wealthy people in the Middle West." (Fitzgerald 65) He says he lived as a young rajah and traveled the world doing many different adventurous things that you would be able to do if you had as much money as he did. We soon find out that this is all a lie and Jay Gatsby is actually James Gatz from an awfully poor family in North Dakota. He made his money by bootlegging after Dan Cody's mistress made sure he didn't get the 25,000 he was supposed to.

II. DISCUSSION

The intention of this essay is to consider the representation of illusion and reality throughout F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby* (1925). It shall focus on characters and their perception of the illusions and realities that they represent, such as Nick Carraway's illusion of what he perceives Gatsby to be and what in reality, he is. It shall look at Daisy Fay-Buchanan and her perception of what reality is also contrasting these themes with Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The yellow wallpaper* (1892).

Faithful to the end of the Platonic concept he created, Jay Gatsby personifies the existential lengths a person that deems himself a lesser is prepared to go to in order to fully submerge oneself inside an illusion of an aspiration. James Gatz fabricates his version of how, if manifested, a man would represent the American dream;[4,5,6]

The truth was that Jay Gatsby [...] sprang from his platonic conception of himself [...] the service of a vast, vulgar and meretricious beauty [...] he invented just the sort of Jay Gatsby that a seventeen-year-old boy would be likely to invent, and to this conception, he was faithful to the end (Fitzgerald, 2015, p.82).

This most Platonic statement exposed to the reader via the eyes of narrator Nick Carraway not only exonerates Gatz's creation of himself but here the reader becomes aware of the truth as Carraway describes Gatsby as 'vast, vulgar and meretricious' (p.82). Given this, Carraway exposes the harsh reality that Gatsby has dreamed himself into existence: Furthermore, Carraway empathises with Gatsby's creation as he feels that being faithful to a lie is better than being



faithful to things like Tom and Daisy Buchanan who ‘smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness’ (p.142).

Set in the Jazz-Age 1920s a period marked by both prosperity and optimism, this epoch exposed the height of the American dream, equally changing the definition of the American dream. With the end of WW1 having recently been reached, America experienced an economic boom and great expansion. Coining the term jazz-age paved the way for Fitzgerald to retrospectively refer to a period in which American people embarked upon what he called ‘the gaudiest spree in history’ (Encyclopedia.com, 2019). The main themes throughout Fitzgerald’s novel include decadence, idealism and the concept of the American dream having to deal with the resistance to social change. It embodies the American spirit of their will to constantly reinvent oneself, yet equally, it unveils the extent of the American dream’s destructive power.

The Buchanans are very rich ‘his family were enormously wealthy ... his freedom with money was a matter for reproach ... he’d brought down a string of polo ponies from lake forest ... they drifted here and there unrestful wherever people played polo and were rich together’ (p.14). Although he is the fabrication of his imagination, Gatsby has had to work far harder to be able to obtain the dream that he manifests, unlike Tom who has inherited his mass fortunes. Gatsby’s falsely obtained ‘Bootlegger’ and ‘common swindler’ (Saunders, 2016) illusion of being rich far exceeds the reality of Daisy and Tom, the irony is that Gatsby’s false pretence of wealth, alongside the bootleg coalition with Meyer Wolfsheim, far overshadows the Buchanan’s actual wealth. According to Donaldson, Gatsby is nonetheless worth any number of Buchanans (Donaldson, 2009, p.98).

Echoes of Fitzgerald’s personal life can be seen in *The Great Gatsby*: Much like Fitzgerald was desperate to secure his fortunes in order to secure the hand of Zelda Sayre, Gatsby is desperate for wealth and possessions, utilising these in an attempt to woo the lady he loves, for he sees the only way to truly win her heart is by excess and grand consumption. *The Great Gatsby* evidences an era of stark division in American society; riotous parties, mansions, money and consumption for the sake of consumption. Conveyed to the reader as Carraway describes attendees and their careless behaviour at Gatsby’s parties; ‘introductions forgotten on the spot’ and ‘conducted themselves according to the rules of behaviour associated with amusement parks’ (p.40). Furthermore, The aftereffect of the party represents a sense of miserable destruction carelessly perpetrated by the guests. Fitzgerald’s effective use of polysyndeton thoroughly conveys just how little Gatsby’s guests consider or even recognise him, and serves as a juxtaposition to the damage that the guests lay in their wake:[7,8,9]

‘At least once a fortnight a corps of caterers came down with several hundred feet of canvas ... on buffet tables, garnished with glistening hors-d’oeuvre, spiced baked hams crowded against salads of harlequin designs and pastry pigs and turkeys bewitched to a dark gold’ (p.39).

For Daisy, reality has failed her. Like the flowers bearing white petals and gold pistils, and her surname Fay meaning ‘fairy’ she personifies physical beauty and represents an outwardly pure appearance. However terminally pretty she may be, the real Daisy Fay is driven by money, status, a sense of self-entitlement and selfishness. Described by her own cousin Nick Carraway as a careless person who ‘let other people clean up the mess’ (p.143). Daisy Fay is trapped inside an illusion of what she perceives to be a reality. Daisy is a counterpart of Gatsby’s demise and what prayed on him: she is a speck of the ‘foul dust that floated in the wake of his dreams’ (p.12). Her refusal to see past Tom Buchanan’s ‘freedom with money’ (p.14) and to accept that according to Carraway; Tom would ‘drift on forever seeking’ (p.15) speaks volumes. The Buchanans care not for any other besides themselves, in reality, the pair are far more compatible than Daisy and Gatsby could ever have been, ‘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’ (p.143).

For Daisy, even her own child is a reconsideration: when describing the possession that in truth she should cherish most, Daisy portrays how trapped she is in her illusions and acceptance of fate by describing her daughter in stating that ‘I hope she’ll be a fool - that’s the best thing a girl can be in this world, a beautiful little fool’ (p.23).

III. RESULTS

In *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald emphasizes the impact that reality has on an individual by examining the life of Jay Gatsby. This twentieth-century piece of literature holistically portrays the Jazz Age and accurately captures life in the 1920s. This decade was a time in which many individuals strove towards fulfilling the American Dream. The extravagant and lavish lifestyle which many people lived depicted their romantic desire for wealth. This constant greed and artificial

attitude consequentially produced fantastic misconceptions of reality. Jay Gatsby's life parallels the lives of those who lived during the 1920s because similarly to Gatsby, they too had no astonishing beginnings and created deceptions that were the only route to the American dream. The significance of understanding the difference between what is fantasy and what is reality is crucial, as Gatsby is the epitome of the result of dreams dictating a person's actions. Fitzgerald suggests that fantasy never matches reality and successfully proves this by comparing the fantasy that Gatsby creates to reality. Daisy Buchanan, in reality, is unable to live up the illusory Daisy that Gatsby has invented in his fantasy. After Daisy and Tom Buchanan leave another one of Gatsby's splendid parties, Fitzgerald gives the reader a glimpse into what Gatsby's expectations are. Fitzgerald claims that "he wanted nothing less of Daisy than that she should go to Tom and say: 'I never loved you.'" (109). Here it is revealed that Gatsby's one main desire is for Daisy to go willingly. Daisy's intention the whole time as she was never going to leave the life she knew for Gatsby. Daisy was never going to pick Gatsby over Tom although that is what Gatsby expected. In actuality, the outcomes were detrimental to Gatsby unlike the jovial outcomes in Gatsby's fantasy.[10,11,12]

Fitzgerald suggests that fantasy never matches reality by looking at the consequences of Gatsby's confusing dreams and reality. Gatsby creates a high illusionary Daisy, therefore, these expectations of Daisy cannot be met. This can also be seen by noticing how as Gatsby approaches the end of this journey of acquiring Daisy, the journey becomes pointless, and the outcomes in his fantasy differ from those in reality. Countless individuals today make this same mistake of confusing dreams and reality, and looking to Jay Gatsby as an example, this mistake may harm them in the future.

I. Setting and Social Context

"The Great Gatsby" is primarily set in the summer of 1922, during the Prohibition era, a time of lavish parties, excess, and bootlegging. The opulent community of West Egg and East Egg in Long Island, New York, serves as the backdrop for the story. West Egg is home to the newly rich, while East Egg houses the "old money" aristocrats who have inherited their wealth. Across the bay lies the Valley of Ashes, a desolate and bleak wasteland, symbolizing the moral decay and social disparity of the era.

The novel encapsulates the spirit of the Roaring Twenties, a time of cultural change, rebellion, and shifting social norms. Fitzgerald presents a scathing critique of the superficiality and hedonism prevalent among the wealthy class, exposing the dark underbelly of the so-called "American Dream" during this era of material prosperity.

II. The Characters and their Complexities

"The Great Gatsby" boasts a cast of memorable and complex characters, each representing different aspects of the American Dream and human nature.

Jay Gatsby — The enigmatic millionaire, Gatsby, is the central figure of the novel. His quest to win back the love of his life, Daisy Buchanan, drives the narrative. Gatsby's life is shrouded in mystery, and his elaborate parties are a facade to attract Daisy's attention. Despite his immense wealth, he remains an outsider in the world of the old money aristocrats.[13,14,15]

Daisy Buchanan — The epitome of wealth, beauty, and charm, Daisy is Gatsby's romantic obsession. Her materialistic desires and lack of moral depth make her a symbol of the hollow pursuit of the American Dream.

Tom Buchanan — Daisy's wealthy and arrogant husband, Tom represents the established upper class. He is unfaithful, domineering, and embodies the careless and selfish nature of the old money elite.



Nick Carraway — The narrator and a modest observer, Nick provides a balanced perspective on the lives of those around him. He is both fascinated and repelled by the extravagance and moral decay of the people he encounters.

Jordan Baker — A professional golfer and Daisy's close friend, Jordan is a symbol of the emancipated "new woman" of the 1920s. She is cynical, dishonest, and reflects the moral ambiguity of the Jazz Age.

III. Illusion vs. Reality

Central to "The Great Gatsby" is the dichotomy between illusion and reality. Gatsby's entire existence is built on an illusion, a carefully constructed persona designed to win Daisy's affection. His lavish parties, extravagant mansion, and tales of an illustrious past are all part of this elaborate facade. Despite his wealth and success, Gatsby is still yearning for something he can never truly attain — the past.

Fitzgerald also uses the symbolism of the green light at the end of Daisy's dock to represent Gatsby's unreachable dreams. The green light embodies his desire for a future with Daisy, and yet it remains distant and unattainable, much like the elusive American Dream itself.[16,17,18]

The characters in the novel are all entangled in their own illusions and delusions. Daisy, for instance, is wrapped up in the illusion of wealth and status, unable to see beyond her materialistic desires. Tom's illusion lies in his belief that he can retain his position of power and control without consequences. Even Nick is not immune to these illusions, as he idealizes the extravagant lifestyle of the rich, only to be disillusioned by their moral emptiness.

IV. The American Dream: An Elusive Mirage

"The Great Gatsby" serves as a critique of the American Dream, challenging the idea that success and wealth lead to happiness and fulfillment. The characters' pursuit of the American Dream ultimately leaves them disillusioned and unsatisfied.

Gatsby's dream of rekindling his romance with Daisy is emblematic of the American Dream's promise of self-improvement and reinvention. He represents the self-made man who, through hard work and determination, rises from poverty to wealth. However, Gatsby's desire to repeat the past and recapture the innocence of his youth proves impossible, highlighting the futility of clinging to a dream that cannot be realized.

Similarly, the Buchanans' life of luxury and opulence appears ideal from the outside, but it masks a deep sense of emptiness and moral decay. Their pursuit of pleasure and wealth leaves them spiritually bankrupt, exemplifying the emptiness of the materialistic version of the American Dream.

V. Symbolism and Themes

"The Great Gatsby" abounds with rich symbolism that enhances its thematic depth. The green light, as previously mentioned, symbolizes Gatsby's dreams and the unattainable nature of the American Dream. The eyes of Doctor T.J. Eckleburg on a billboard in the Valley of Ashes represent the all-seeing eyes of God and serve as a constant reminder of moral decay and spiritual emptiness.



The Valley of Ashes itself symbolizes the corruption and disparity that underlies the superficial glamour of the upper class. It is a place of forgotten dreams and shattered hopes, contrasting sharply with the opulence of the East and West Egg.

Themes of love, wealth, and social class are interwoven throughout the narrative, exploring the intricacies of human relationships and the consequences of pursuing materialistic desires.

IV. CONCLUSION

“The Great Gatsby” by F. Scott Fitzgerald, published in 1925, is a timeless American classic that has captivated readers for generations. Set in the vibrant and roaring 1920s, the novel unveils the lives of the wealthy elite in Long Island, New York, offering a scintillating portrait of the Jazz Age. Through a compelling narrative, Fitzgerald delves into themes of illusion, wealth, and the elusive American Dream, exposing the fragility of human desires and aspirations. This essay examines the multifaceted layers of the novel, exploring the characters, symbolism, and social commentary, while appreciating its profound impact on American literature.

“The Great Gatsby” by F. Scott Fitzgerald remains a powerful and enduring masterpiece that continues to resonate with readers worldwide. Through its vivid portrayal of the Jazz Age and its exploration of illusion, wealth, and the American Dream, the novel exposes the human condition and the frailty of aspirations. Its complex characters, rich symbolism, and social commentary make it a timeless work of literature that offers valuable insights into the human experience and the pursuit of happiness.[18]

In essence, “The Great Gatsby” stands as an enduring reminder that the pursuit of material wealth and the illusion of the American Dream can lead to tragic consequences, making it a cautionary tale for generations to come.[20]

REFERENCES

1. Donahue 2013a.
2. ^ Fitzgerald 1945, p. 16, "Echoes of the Jazz Age".
3. ^ a b c Fitzgerald 1945, p. 18, "Echoes of the Jazz Age".
4. ^ Fitzgerald 1945, p. 15, "Echoes of the Jazz Age": "Scarcely had the staid citizens of the republic caught their breaths when the wildest of all generations, the generation which had been adolescent during the confusion of the [Great] War, brusquely shouldered my contemporaries out of the way and danced into the limelight. This was the generation whose girls dramatized themselves as flappers."
5. ^ Donahue 2013a.
6. ^ a b Fitzgerald 1945, pp. 14–15, "Echoes of the Jazz Age": "Unchaperoned young people of the smaller cities had discovered the mobile privacy of that automobile given to young Bill at sixteen to make him 'self-reliant'. At first petting was a desperate adventure even under such favorable conditions, but presently confidences were exchanged and the old commandment broke down".
7. ^ a b c Brucoli 2000, pp. 53–54.
8. ^ Donahue 2013a; Gross 1998, p. 167.
9. ^ Fitzgerald 1945, p. 15, "Echoes of the Jazz Age".
10. ^ Fitzgerald 1945, pp. 13–22: Fitzgerald documented the Jazz Age and his life's relation to the era in his essay, "Echoes of the Jazz Age" which was published in the essay collection *The Crack-Up*.
11. ^ Mizener 1965, pp. 11, 129, 140.
12. ^ Mizener 1965, pp. 30–31.
13. ^ a b Smith 2003: Fitzgerald later confided to his daughter Frances Scott Fitzgerald that Ginevra King "was the first girl I ever loved" and that he "faithfully avoided seeing her" to "keep the illusion perfect".
14. ^ Mizener 1965, p. 50.
15. ^ West 2005, p. 35.
16. ^ Smith 2003: "That August Fitzgerald visited Ginevra in Lake Forest, Illinois. Afterward he wrote in his ledger foreboding words, spoken to him perhaps by Ginevra's father, 'Poor boys shouldn't think of marrying rich girls'".
17. ^ Mizener 1965, p. 70.
18. ^ a b Brucoli 2002, pp. 80, 82. Fitzgerald wished to be killed in battle, and he hoped that his novel would become a great success in the wake of his death.



19. ^ Mizener 1965, pp. 79–80.
20. ^ West 2005, p. 73; Bruccoli 2002, pp. 86, 91