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Youth, Gatsby, and the Modernist Era

In “The Great Gatsby” it seems as though everyone in Long Island is, and will always be, young, rich, and reckless. However, while wealth and poor decision-making are eternal, youth is ever fleeting. During the early twentieth century youth and beauty were so tightly intertwined that the ephemeral nature of youth was very inconvenient at best and devastating at its worst. To be old was to be tired and lifeless. This idea is seen throughout “The Great Gatsby” and is at the heart of the advertisement selected from Scribner’s Magazine. The value of youth and of beauty is enormous, and for women especially.

This mattress advertisement shows how the qualities of youth were portrayed at the time, and even used as a selling point. The title of the advertisement reads, “Young at sixty – sound sleep preserves health and beauty”. An obsession with perpetuating youth existed long before the modernist period, but it is clear that these ideas were heavily reinforced with the introduction of marketing and consumerism. The implications are the following: without youth you will be unhealthy and unbeautiful.

Being beautiful, and thus youthful, is of utmost important in Fitzgerald’s novel. Daisy hopes that her daughter will grow up to be a “beautiful little fool”. Being beautiful makes a woman more valuable in this society, and being a fool makes her ignorant to society’s vanity. The advertisement also makes sure to emphasize how women especially will benefit by prolonging their beauty when it describes the average admirer of the mattress as “generally a woman.” She is described as being grateful for her “young appearance,” a clear illustration of the

value placed on youth, and its association with beauty. The mattress advertisement also appeals to women by placing a drawing of a young woman front and center.

Though there is an emphasis on a woman's youth, the trait is universally valued for men and women both. In the seventh chapter of "The Great Gatsby", Nick suddenly realizes that it is his thirtieth birthday. The age of thirty is regarded as this milestone marking the transition from youth into adulthood. This occurs during a very tense argument between Tom Buchanan and Gatsby, one of the most dramatic points in the novel. Fitzgerald writes, "Thirty – the promise of a decade of loneliness, a thinning list of single men to know, a thinning briefcase of enthusiasm, thinning hair." Aging is depicted as quite a terrible thing; one will have fewer friends, less joy, and fewer hairs on their head. Turning thirty suddenly makes all of the arguing and fighting seem fickle. Nothing could be more tragic than losing one's youth. In the following sentences Nick describes Jordan as a reassurance against the "formidable stroke of thirty," implying that with the company of a beautiful woman, a man is able to be of value at any age. This shows a delineation between the importance of youth and beauty for men and women. While men can gain social capital through the presence of a young beautiful woman, women cannot do the same as they age. This puts women above a particular age in quite a dilemma. After realizing he has turned thirty, the tone of Nick's narration changes as well, saying that they "drove on toward death through the cooling twilight."

The particular phraseology of that final statement highlights the dichotomy presented by society: be youthful and beautiful or be dead. Old age is seen as lifelessness. The advertisement markets the woman's "good health" as one of the benefits to their youth-preserving mattresses, making the case that with age comes declining health, and inevitably, death. This is paralleled in "The Great Gatsby" through Gatsby's attempts to recreate the past, and his ultimate demise. Gatsby attempts to reignite the flame of his teenage years, pursuing Daisy after years and years

of being apart. In trying to recreate the romance of his youth, Gatsby ultimately dies, showing that youth is not something that can be artificially recreated. This is where “The Great Gatsby” and the mattress advertisement differ somewhat. While Fitzgerald reasonably assumes that the death of one’s youth is definite, the mattress advertisement capitalizes off of the idea that a person can be forever young. For a woman, or even a man, to be young and beautiful is crucial to success in the modernist period, but nonetheless it proves to be an impossible dream, one of many.



Young at sixty

sound sleep preserves health and beauty

Every so often we receive a letter from someone who has slept on the same Ostermoor Mattress night after night for twenty-five years or more.

Invariably the writer, generally a woman, attributes her good health and young appearance to sound, restful sleep. And so our claims for the Ostermoor Mattress are being verified continually.

This mattress, with its billowy layers of wonderful elasticity, has just the right firmness to support

the spine in a straight, natural position. And yet the mattress is soft enough to yield to the weight of the body. It's neither too hard nor too soft.

And the elasticity of an Ostermoor is permanent. Guaranteed not to mat, pack, get hard or lumpy. It's non-absorbent, dust-, moth-, and vermin-proof.

Sold by reliable dealers everywhere. If your dealer cannot supply you, write us. Our 144-page book and samples of coverings are free. Write for them.

Ostermoor

Mattress

"Built-Not Stuffed"



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Canadian Agency: Alaska Bedding of Montreal, Ltd., Montreal