

How does F. Scott Fitzgerald explore the classism and norms in society by introducing the protagonist, Jay Gatsby and the antagonists' Daisy and Tom in his novel “The Great Gatsby”?

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## The society of the roaring 20s

F. Scott Fitzgerald has left the world with works which are considered introspective in many aspects for the period he was writing in and for the years to come. One of his greatest works is “The Great Gatsby” which is one of the best-known novels of the period of the so-called roaring 20s in the United States. The work of F. Scott Fitzgerald portrays a society in the postwar period, a time when the US witnessed unprecedented economic growth. In his work, he vividly described how the social system changed, displaying the society by writing about the life of different characters using some of his personal experiences. Another important concept which is introduced in the book by F. Scott Fitzgerald is the idea of the American Dream. The idea behind it is that every American citizen could have an equal chance of achieving success and prosperity through hard work and determination. The term remains until today and has been widely used since then. In his book, through the characters, he is giving a negative critique of how the American dream has failed the test in the real world.

The period analyzed in the book is considered a revolutionary time for many reasons; it was a decade of profound social changes not just in the developing economical sector but in the mass entertainment of that time. Evident liberal changes were seen in sexual mores, gender roles, hairstyles, and dress. That postwar period was seen through the perspective of liberalism, as might be expected after devastating and horrific world events left by World War I. The popular image of the 1920s is that it was a decade of prosperity and turbulent living, with excessive partying and drinking put at its foremost.

However, the American psyche is not describing the complete picture. While the elderly were enjoying and actively participating in consumption and speculation, the younger generation was going against the traditional stereotypes and taboos. It was during this period that deep cultural conflicts centred on ethnicity and social class were happening. The proposition side was part of urban and modern culture, while the opposition had more traditional and rural views. The concerns were connected to immigration,

race, alcohol, evolution, gender politics, and sexual morality. In addition to this, classism in society was adding to the controversy and social exclusion.

Classism was present in the 20s among people with opposite social backgrounds, which is an often and popular occurrence throughout the years, yet in the roaring 20s, there was also a type of classism among the rich. This type of classism is known under the name of “old” and “new rich”, with the interpretation that “old rich” are the people who have been raised or have been passed down money by their rich family, whilst the “new rich” are people who didn’t inherit their money but rather earned it themselves. The normal flow of life among the different classes in the 20s is very well incorporated in the work of “The Great Gatsby”. The use of literary devices such as irony, symbolism and imagery are used to successfully embody the character of Jay Gatsby and Daisy Fay Buchanan in the society, where through the perspectives of the literary theories of realism, romanticism and Marxism, better insight is reached as to what the work is portraying.

## Fitzgerald’s life accounts for his writing and it encompasses his characters

F. Scott Fitzgerald was writing the novel, including his personal life experience along with things he observed that he was astonished by. Some studies (*Turner, 2014*) suggest that F. Scott Fitzgerald was a social realist <sup>1</sup>who at the same time, expressed himself as the laureate poet that he was in a dynamic time. He was a complex figure caught in between the partying 20s and the dogmatic structures of Catholicism which formed his moral consciousness. It is often discussed among critics and historians that he had traditional and conservative traits.

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<sup>1</sup> Socialist Realism follows the great tradition of 19th-century Russian realism in that it purports to be a faithful and objective mirror of life. (Britannica)

That is noticed in his works; the example can be taken with the idea of the American dream<sup>2</sup>. It is seen throughout the book that F. Scott Fitzgerald had an opinion on the American dream, which he formed from his personal experiences. His view, however, opposes the idea that the American dream stands for; instead, he believes that the American dream is an illusion where people are seemingly given an opportunity if they put in hard work, although even success makes happiness constantly out of reach. His ideas and beliefs are displayed in the book and portrayed in the protagonist - Jay Gatsby, whom many consider Fitzgerald's most splendid creation. If one looks at the protagonist Jay Gatsby, one might discover that it reveals a lot about Fitzgerald's beliefs and his writing.

It is often that works of literature tend to reflect the author's class and the analysis of class relations through the point of view of the author. This supports the idea of Marxist literary criticism, where it is determined whether the social content is progressive or detrimental to the Marxist movement.

## The representation of the 'new rich' through the protagonist

Jay Gatsby is part of the new rich and lives a life seemingly accepted by society and community. The imagery the author uses shows his extravagant lifestyle, which attracts the interest of many elite people who attend his luxurious parties. (Examples of the partys' imagery: *"...a corps of caterers came down with several hundred feet of canvas and enough colored lights to make a Christmas tree of Gatsby's enormous garden. 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... In the main hall a bar with a real brass rail was set up, and stocked with gins and liquors ... By seven o'clock the orchestra has arrived—no thin five-piece affair but a whole pitful of oboes and trombones and saxophones and viols and cornets and piccolos and low and high drums."*). He is an example of the people of the new rich in society.

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<sup>2</sup> The American dream is the belief that anyone, regardless of where they were born or what class they were born into, can attain their own version of success in a society by giving the best they can do with hard work. (University of South Carolina)

Another indicator which shows how Gatsby represents the new rich is the green light which Fitzgerald uses as a symbol for the division among the classes; while Gatsby is standing on one side and representing the new wealth, there is the Buchanans family, which represents the 'old rich'. The light symbolizes how the classes are not supposed to intermingle; the old money will always count on their wealth without worrying about work. The new money, however, is ambitious and is seeking more than just wealth; they are chasing dreams.

This begins with the youth Jay Gatsby, who was ashamed of his family because of their social status and financial struggles. It forms an idea in the reader's mind of how people were perceived back then. The author's story is of a similar nature to the story of the protagonist he created in his book. His family was living in a nice part of the town of New York; however, they were never considered the same as the rich people from back then. Similarly, Gatsby came from a poor family and got to be rich later on in his life. In Gatsby's youth, he was making decisions which were influenced by society, some of which were to neglect the family he was coming from.

***“His parents were shiftless and unsuccessful farm people—his imagination had never really accepted them as his parents at all.”***

(Nick, page 70)

His decision not to accept his family name was due to social pressure, which included being from a wealthy family so as to be perceived as successful in society. On many levels, the actions and decisions of the protagonist are approved and seem in the range of normal for the society of that time; hence it could be said that Jay Gatsby is a character that represents how the “newly rich” people from the society of the 20s were like.

Many consider his journey as a failed attempt at the American Dream. Alternatively, he did accomplish great success and wealth in his life, and if seen objectively, that is one of the main objectives described in the concept of the American Dream. What is not seen is the effect on him of the decisions he made, the society scarred him from a young age. The decisions he made as a young were decisions and events over which he had no control; it was a self-leading journey. The effects of rebelling against the social norms left many positive consequences in the life of Gatsby; however, at the same time, his originality was not recognized in society. This led to Gatsby chasing temporary happiness with hope as a leading value.

## The effects of the war on society are shown through the characters

The character of Jay Gatsby might be split into the person he was before the war and the person he became after taking part in the war. Before the war, he was a poor person who was trying his best to hide his identity from the real world, and he was making ends meet by finding various ways of survival. When Gatsby gets back from the war, he finds out that Daisy got married to a rich man, so he knows in order to get his girl back, he has to go by the rules of society and become a rich man himself. As it was for that time, becoming rich meant either coming from a rich family or getting rich by doing illegal activities. Since Gatsby was not from a rich family, the only way for him to attain wealth was by selling liquor illegally across the US.

*“I found out what your ‘drug-stores’ were.” He turned to us and spoke rapidly. “He and this Wolfsheim bought up a lot of side-street drug-stores here and in Chicago and sold grain alcohol over the counter. That’s one of his little stunts. I picked him for a bootlegger the first time I saw him, and I wasn’t far wrong.”*

(page 97, Tom)

He was part of the bootleggers<sup>3</sup>, and he made deals with speakeasies<sup>4</sup> all around the US. It was a usual tyrannical job to attain wealth; however, the untypical part of it all was how Gatsby was so determined to get the woman he fell in love with back to him. The debauchery of the period did not correspond to Jay Gatsby's action of going through all this trouble for a woman. He goes to the extent that at one instant, he asks Daisy to tell him that she only ever loved him and no one else.

*“Oh, you want too much!” she cried to Gatsby. “I love you now—isn’t that enough? I can’t help what’s past.” She began to sob helplessly. “I did love him once—but I loved you too.”*

(page 103, Daisy)

Thus, this proves that Gatsby was looking for some kind of acceptance and belonging, which leads back to the beginning of his life story when he didn't use his family name to present himself.

This also suggests that there were changes in Jay Gatsby's views and influence on society after the war; these changes in him are a metaphor for the changes that have occurred in society after the war. The Gatsby after the war resonates less with a typical 20s person but has more similarities with authors and people from the romantic era. There is a lot of individuality in the character of Jay Gatsby that simply says more than what society is up to make out of such a person. Even though his actions were approved by the community, the outcome he was getting from them was not something one would use to connect it to the roaring 20s. Gatsby's decision to go to war was imposed by the conditions he was in. Most of the decisions he made or steps he took were based on the views of society simply because there was no other option he could choose from. If his character gets a deeper analysis, it seemingly becomes a case of a person with more romantic traits. The following quote is proof of the romantic traits he attained.

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<sup>3</sup> bootlegging, in U.S. history, illegal traffic in liquor in violation of legislative restrictions on its manufacture, sale, or transportation. (Britannica)

<sup>4</sup> speakeasy, also called blind pig or gin joint, place where alcoholic beverages are illegally sold, especially such establishments in the United States during Prohibition (Tikkanen and Duignan))



*“Well, there I was, way off my ambitions, getting deeper in love every minute, ...”*

(Gatsby, page 109)

His sorrows and hope to get to his loved one, who was already married, suggest traits of a romantic person. His decisions were driven by society, but the aim of his actions was of a romantic nature, to get to the love of his life. Even though he has known her his whole life Gatsby still seems to be blinded by his love for her. His life decisions are focused on getting to her, as he is constantly in search of happiness, as he assumes that he will get it once he gets to be with Daisy. However, through his blindness, he refuses to realize that the thing he is searching for is not Daisy but rather an illusion of feeling happy and accomplished. This can be traced to a lifelong search for satisfaction, looking into his childhood when he was feeling like an outcast as if he was not part of the community.

## **Romantic features in the protagonist oppose the ideas of realism and are neglected in society**

As it can be noticed, the protagonist was often left isolated from a young age; in his young days, he was trying to make ends meet and go to the surface of society. His life inspiration was unconditional love for a woman; alternatively, he also got 20s influence and was looking for the woman he loved to be fully his. It is a case of a personality that displayed both features of romanticism and realism. His decisions were mainly of realism nature; however, his goals and intentions identify with romanticism.

This is very significant because it shows how society was driven towards competing over social status rather than feeling true happiness and love. Fitzgerald shows how Gatsby is lured into the world of money because he thinks that the money will lead him to Daisy, his true love. The opposing views of realism and romanticism implemented in the decisions of Gatsby are shown through the elements of irony in the book. The example can be given with the dramatic irony which happens when Gatsby is waiting for Daisy to

call him after the night of the accident, not knowing that she and Tom have reconciled together and being murdered later.

The personality of Gatsby is of a tragic hero who follows the social norms but does not end up as how society would have shaped him. Overall, his decisions were implied by the community because he was not in a position to choose what he could do. However, once luck served him, he did succeed in getting to a better position, and once he did, his decisions in life were well taught, and there was a lot of dedication and work from his side, hence imposing the idea of the American dream. His living state got from the margins of society to a much better position, yet his aims before the war only became stronger after he went into the war. He never had anyone in life to be there to support him or direct him. That could be a cause why he ended up alone and isolated in life, it was when his funeral happened that the consequences were obvious, in the race for a good life he never stopped to connect with people and to feel happiness but rather chase it. Similarly, Daisy was chasing social status, her choosing of Tom over Gatsby was a symbol where she chooses money over love and happiness.

## The role of women during the ‘jazz age’

Daisy was the woman Gatsby fell in love with before he went into the military. He was leaving for the military with the idea that once he comes he will have the girl by his side and they will get engaged. At that time, women were getting engaged during the early ages of their 20s or even before and were not considered to be in a romantic relationship unless they were married. Daisy had a similar experience, she was seeing Gatsby, but because of her family, she got married to a man from a well-situated family while Gatsby was in the war. She was left with no choice, as her family would never let her marry someone who did not come from a high socioeconomic background, recognised in the world of the elite. This is yet another display of how prevalent social norms shaped the lives of many and, at the same time, were unjust and implied stereotypes of the female gender.

F. Scot Fitzgerald introduces Daisy to depict the social stratum of the upper middle class in the 20s. She is a crucial character who also plays a role in describing the social status of her class in the 20s as well as her position as a woman. She is described as a shallow person whose only concern is material wealth.

***“They’re such beautiful shirts,” she sobbed, her voice muffled in the thick folds. “It makes me sad because I’ve never seen such—such beautiful shirts before.”***

(page 94, Daisy)

Her vague personality is shown on many occasions; a noticeable moment depicting her personality is when she is more impressed by Gatsby’s wealth rather than by the fact that he has true feelings for her.

On the other hand, once Daisy finds out that Gatsby became rich through illegal actions, she becomes insecure about leaving her husband.

***“She wanted her life shaped now, immediately—and the decision must be made by some force—of love, of money, of unquestionable practicality—that was close at hand. That force took shape in the middle of spring with the arrival of Tom Buchanan. “***

(Nick, page 110)

The priorities of Daisy are questionable and worthy of analysis as she immediately goes back to her dishonest and cheating husband once she realizes that Gatsby does not have the reputation of the old elite. Her vague persona explicitly shows how she gives up on her dignity over maintaining a good social picture, she was greatly influenced by the social norms of that time.

## The social norms presented in the novel

It is evident that the social norms in the roaring 20s were of great influence to the people as well as the author living in that time. Fitzgerald includes the influence and the incorporation of social norms in the people in society. As discussed before, the period of the 20s was for many a period of hope and development, however, the 20s in the US were hard for immigrant people. Afro - Americans were put in exceptionally difficult situations where they were facing racist and ethnic conflicts. While some were in favour of including and incorporating Americans from different races and ethnic groups into mainstream society many native-born Americans responded with nativist fear of the increasing cultural diversity. The ones who were hit the hardest were African Americans and Hispanics. Many of them were facing employment discrimination, thus not getting employed. The ones who got jobs were usually working in the worst conditions which were harmful to their health. In the book, this is presented through the character of Tom Buchman.

The character of the antagonist Tom Buchman follows the eugenics ideology<sup>5</sup> with the main idea of racial eugenics to maintain superior white populations over indigenous populations. He is a white supremacist who is representing the upper class or “old rich” in society.

*“Well, it’s a fine book, and everybody ought to read it. The idea is if we don’t look out the white race will be — will be utterly submerged. It’s all scientific stuff; it’s been proved.”*

(Tom, page 10)

*“Nowadays people begin by sneering at family life and family institutions, and next they’ll throw everything overboard and have intermarriage between black and white.”*

(Tom, page 94)

*“for a common swindler who’d have to steal the ring he put on her finger...”*

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<sup>5</sup> the scientifically erroneous and immoral theory of “racial improvement” and “planned breeding,” which gained popularity during the early 20th century.

(Tom, page 97)

The idea that his wife would like someone who came from a poor background is simply not possible in his mind. Tom who represents the upper stratum of society would not consider that Gatsby would or could go for Daisy who is shown as a possession to the upper class and Tom. This supports the Marxist point of view which conveys that people from the upper class were shown as wanting to be superior to the other classes. Tom plays an important role in the book as he is clearly the antagonist who is against the success of Gatsby and against the accomplishments of the 'new rich' in general. He represents an image of a primitive society which does not evolve.

## Concluding how Fitzgerald successfully embodied the society in the characters

Through the lenses of his own experience and life in the 1920s Fitzgerald successfully creates the characters which are representing the norms and classes of the society. The characters show the development in society and how liberal society used to feel after the time of the war. The progressives and betterment of the society are presented with the aspect of the 'new rich' while the 'old rich' represent the stagnant society which associates with racism and false beliefs. The roles of the protagonist and antagonists complete the picture of what the classes of society used to be like.

The literary skills of the author enable him to fully grasp the picture and create the work of "The Great Gatsby" where largely, the different perceptions are shown and the so-called double vision of the author. Besides living in the time of the 20s and using modernism and realism as styles, the author also incorporates the character of Jay Gatsby as a romanticist. By doing this, the author shows how society has evolved since the period of romanticism but at the same time, it shows how the new society is cruel and aims towards reaching the top of the hierarchy. This shows the flaws of the society by showing how the

characters were headed towards attaining money which at that time was considered as something that would bring them happiness.

In order to show this, the author uses different tools - literary devices very wisely. Another important component which is noticed in the book is how the characters portray Marxist ideas, here Fitzgerald represents the different classes and the interpretations of each class which defines the experience within each social stratum.

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