

The Degradation of Desire: Queer Erasure in *The Great Gatsby* and Modern Culture

In a society that demands the erasure of queerness, Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* serves as an invitation to read beyond the lines. Through the novel's subtle yet pervasive queer subtext, as well as Nick's expressions of suppressed desire as admiration for Gatsby, Fitzgerald illustrates how the dominance of societal norms forces individuals to conceal their true identities, leading to moral and emotional decay. This degradation is reflected today in the Trump administration's erasure of LGBTQ+ history—including an attempted rewriting of the Stonewall Riots—and in the fetishization of queer identity in Japanese "Boy's Love" (BL) manga.

In *The Great Gatsby*, societal expectations compel characters to distort reality, casting disillusionment on what can be considered morally right. Fitzgerald premieres a homoerotic tone by juxtaposing Nick's vivid descriptions of Tom and Jordan. Notably, Nick's first impression of a post-Yale Tom is "a great pack of muscle... capable of enormous leverage" equipped with a "gruff husky tenor"—something that a first time reader might expect to be in a raunchy romance novel, while Jordan is described as a "slender, small-breasted girl... like a young cadet", with Nick highlighting her more 'boyish' characteristics (Fitzgerald 14-16). By implicitly comparing these two characters, Nick reveals a keen interest in the physical dominance that Tom exerts, more so than the meek presence that Jordan is afforded. Although partially a result of the patriarchal themes that underpinned societal conditions at the time, the difference in these two descriptions speaks specifically to the interest that Nick has in Tom's physical presence, contributing to a persistent homoerotic tone that is expanded upon throughout the novel. Moreover, Fitzgerald alludes to a sexual encounter when Nick, highly intoxicated after spending a day with Tom, enters an elevator to go home with Mr. McKee. When the elevator boy snaps at

Mr. McKee to "keep [his] hands off the lever" with an Orwellian clarity, there is an implicit reference to Mr. McKee and male genitalia (Fitzgerald 30). The elevator boy, symbolic of societal norms and expectations, in effect suppresses McKee's homosexual tendencies, telling him off for exposing an identity perceived as morally corrupt by society. Furthermore, the ellipses that follow descriptions of Nick and McKee in their underwear, which serves as an innuendo for sex, are the only instance of such punctuation being used in the book, underscoring the significance of the two sleeping together as something that would make larger society pause. Effectively, the two are shoved into a Kafkaesque closet of false identity and queer subtext is subtly introduced into *The Great Gatsby* to comment on the broader decay of society as one that represses queer identities for not necessarily fitting into "acceptable" norms.

In the same way, the recent Trump Administration has embarked on a campaign to erase queer identity as evinced by administrative efforts to scrub transgender and queer trailblazers from the history of the courageous Stonewall Riots; this is in accordance with Trump's most recent executive order to remove the "T" and "Q" from the LGBTQ+ acronym. The Stonewall Riots, occurring in the late 20th century, are undoubtedly the most prominent and monumental example of American LGBTQ+ activists fighting for equal rights. Furthermore, past administrations have a history of recognizing these riots as pivotal, with the Obama administration going so far as to establish the Stonewall National Monument. On the contrary, the most recent Trump Administration has not only removed transgender and queer peoples from the LGBTQ+ acronym, but taken serious steps to silence and endanger them as made clear by the government's treatment of the Stonewall Riots. Just like in *The Great Gatsby*, we see efforts by an institution (wealthy and upper-class society in *The Great Gatsby*, government in real life) to abuse systemic power in order to distort the stories of queer individuals, with the intent of further

tipping the delicate scale of power held between the individual and society. Moreover, the cyclical nature of the degradation of society is especially evident here. In both cases, we see a return to the inhibition of Americans' rights: *The Great Gatsby* offers insight into the early 20th century where queer rights were degraded, and the current administration's actions show a departure from late 20th-century civil rights movements. Continuously, we see the marginalization of queer people, whether explicit or implicit, and the stripping of their God-given right to freely express a singular and independent identity.

Equally important, *The Great Gatsby* exposes society's tendency to stifle individuals from pursuing a genuine exploration of identity. Fitzgerald, throughout the novel, zeros in on the more-than-platonic admiration Nick expresses for Gatsby. Nick dreamily describes Gatsby "smiling understandingly -- much more than understandingly... one of those rare smiles with a quality of eternal reassurance in it" (Fitzgerald 36). Nick's admiration for Gatsby borders on romanticism; every description of Gatsby is imbued with near-mythic qualities in a deeply emotional, poignant, and poetic tone. While not overtly sexual, Nick's devotion to Gatsby is tinged with desire and idealization, as well as a longing for something real and meaningful. While on a quest to discover true identity, Nick is forced to simultaneously navigate the societal conditions at the time under the Roaring Twenties-era impression that queerness is not to be celebrated. Moreover, Nick mentions that "only Gatsby, the man who gave his name to this book, was exempt from" his realization that the reservation of judgement had a limit (Fitzgerald 1). Interestingly, while this is the first page of the novel, this train of thought was developed some time after Gatsby's death, implying that Nick made this admission only after considerable reflection. Additionally, his reverence of Gatsby solidifies the idea that to Nick, Gatsby was different in nature than Tom or Daisy. Although both had gross accumulations of wealth, Gatsby

was somehow special and his actions were inconsequential, more so than Tom or Daisy, and therefore not deserving of as much judgement; one possibility for Nick's perspective is the desire that he held for Gatsby. In a desperate search for individuality, Nick was captured by the bear trap of excessive obsession that he laid for himself after refusing to dive into authentic, personal exploration. Rather than achieving self-actualization, Nick covers his deeply ingrained insecurity of being a sexual minority with an often overt obsession for Gatsby.

Likewise, a genre of Japanese manga, known as Boy's Love (BL), has become increasingly popular in mainstream Japanese culture with millions of citizens leisurely reading BL manga over the last few decades. At first glance, this is paradoxical. Japanese civil rights for queer relationships has only recently expanded to the ability to obtain civil licenses -- not even marriage equality; being LGBTQ+ in Japan still carries significant stigma. Moreover, it is important to note the pervasive themes of fetishization and infantilization of queer couples that span these BL series. Rather than a thoughtful discussion on queer peoples' civil rights history or an insightful consideration of queer peoples' role in society, readers take enjoyment in the often hyper-sexual nature of these books. Accordingly, queer people are commodified and rejected from mainstream society, only considered an object to be consumed and sexualized for the pleasure of a mostly straight audience. This, too, is a form of degradation. Therefore, it is easy to see how queerness is ultimately taboo in Japan (and many other east asian countries) despite the recent influx of queer media. In sum, the romanticization of illusion reflected in BL manga, which presents hyper-sexualized portrayals of queer relationships, as well as the more subtle themes of queer suppression in *The Great Gatsby* exemplify that regardless of how outwardly queer identity is expressed in literature—and in effect, society—LGBTQ+ identity is continuously degraded not only in America, but on the international stage.

Ultimately, the degradation of society is exhibited in both *The Great Gatsby* and in recent political and cultural developments, including responses to the Stonewall Riots and the negative effects of BL media. Despite the progress that has been made in advocating for queer rights and galvanizing politicians to protect LGBTQ+ liberties, this past year has shown us that we are in danger of returning to a strictly heteronormative society where queer liberties are suppressed. The degradation of society stems not only from active violence and suppression, but from a doctrine that refuses acknowledgement and celebration of the full spectrum of human identity. Indeed, Fitzgerald used *The Great Gatsby* to warn future generations of society's recurring tendency to make decisions that restrict Americans' rights. We must actively take steps to reconcile with this danger, calling upon lawmakers and larger society to ensure that our civil liberties are protected.