Grandeurs of Wealth

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**Fitzgerald’s Theme:**

In the 1920’s American society, great wealth did not determine great pedigree.

**Thesis:**

The comparison and contrast of the novella and its film adaptation will prove that the film does not support Fitzgerald’s original theme.

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F. Scott Fitzgerald’s novella, *The* *Great Gatsby*, discusses the individual’s quest to join society’s upper class through the accumulation of wealth. Specifically, Gatsby endeavors to “be someone else” through his participation in the haute society of 1920s New York, yet ultimately fails due to the congruousness of his character. Fitzgerald uses Gatsby to demonstrate that the newly wealthy lack the experience, taste, and understanding of the culture’s social nuances, therefore, they are incapable of joining the upper class solely by virtue of their wealth. Jack Clayton’s 1974 film adaptation of the novella captures much of the glitz and glamour of the book’s period, but sacrifices the intricacies of Gatsby’s character. The differences between the character’s versions contributes to the film’s divergence from Fitzgerald’s theme that, in 1920s America, one’s wealth could not change his or her position in society.

The film’s portrayal of Jay Gatsby’s character as a confident member of New York’s upper class rather than an awkward *nouveau riche*, contributes to the difference between the film and movie’s expression of the theme. In the novella, Nick notices that Gatsby tries too hard to appear to be cultured and sophisticated, “I was looking at an elegant young roughneck… whose elaborate speech just missed being absurd… I’d got the strong impression that he was picking his words with care” (Fitzgerald, 49). On the other hand, Redford’s Gatsby seems elegant and a natural gentleman. As a *New York Times* review of the movie states, “As Gatsby, Robert Redford is too poised, too obviously ‘acceptable’… [Redford] looks and sounds as if he belongs right at the center of his extravagant, dopey parties” (Hirsch). The movie’s portrayal of the character defies the idea that Gatsby is going against his nature to *try* to conform to an image of wealth. It is obvious that even with his immense fortune Fitzgerald’s Gatsby is out of his element in the lavish Long Island North Shore. Compared this to Redford, who seems too comfortable, as if his wealth has given him the ability to make himself at home amongst the rich and powerful.

The printed Gatsby uses his wealth to throw lavish parties and make himself appear cultured and socially accepted. However, without experience and taste, his parties appear excessive and tacky to experienced individuals like the Buchanans. To highlight Gatsby and Daisy’s romance, the film omits Daisy’s disinterest in Gatsby’s gaudy lifestyle. In the novella, after entertaining Daisy for the first time at one of his parties, Gatsby admits that, “She [Daisy] didn’t like it… she didn’t have a good time” (Fitzgerald, 109). In the film, Daisy enjoys her time at the party and admits that the people attending were “more interesting than the people she knew.” While her misery at Gatsby’s party in the novella demonstrates how Gatsby’s money did not give him the culture and social grace that he desired, Daisy’s appreciation of the West Egg residents and Gatsby’s party does not accomplish the same effect in the movie. Daisy’s admission not only makes Gatsby seem more acceptable, but also plays down the scorn that the establish upper class held towards the newly rich. The silver screen’s Gatsby once again proves himself to be a natural member of the nobility, and his wealth gives him the ability to do so.

In addition to taste, Gatsby lacks understanding of high society’s social nuances. However, his graceless shortcomings go unmentioned in the film and therefore he seems fitted to his society and altered by his wealth. One instance in which Fitzgerald’s Gatsby seems unaware of others’ social subtleties is when he fails to recognize an insincere dinner invitation from the Buchanans following a visit between them, Nick, the Sloanes, and Gatsby. Tom is astonished by his ignorance of the simplest social formality, “‘My God, I believe the man’s coming,’ said Tom. ‘Doesn’t he know she doesn’t want him’” (Fitzgerald, 103). This scene was not included in the film and takes away from Gatsby’s social awkwardness and proof of wealth’s inability to make one socially accepted by the rich and powerful.

Fitzgerald utilizes Gatsby’s humble background as James Gatz from the rural Midwest to demonstrate how a lack of experience affects Gatsby’s inability to conform to the society of East Egg. The novella introduces Dan Cody, the man who first introduces Gatsby to the pleasures of wealth, and his position as Gatsby’s role model. Like Gatsby, Cody is newly rich from his successful copper mining ventures. Along those lines, Cody leads a lavish lifestyle of excess, from which Gatsby learns. On the other hand, the film does not go into detail about Gatsby’s origins, but shrouds the character in mystery. While the audience is introduced to his father at its conclusion, the movie does not impress the fact that Gatsby was once a humble man who sought to reform his character through the acquisition of wealth. Gatsby’s journey from “rags to riches” is omitted and so is any doubt that he may not be a decorated and educated gentleman. The movie does not make the point that Gatsby is therefore lacking the experience required to support a distinguished and noble lifestyle.

While Gatsby’s character may be abridged in the film version of *The Great Gatsby*, an analysis of Gatsby’s and Daisy’s relationship supports the Fitzgerald’s theme in both the novella and the movie. In the film, a sequence of scenes alternating between Gatsby with Daisy and Tom with Myrtle draws a parallel between Tom and Daisy’s actions. The film seems to imply, similar to Fitzgerald, that Daisy is merely having an affair with Gatsby to “add excitement to her life,” similar to how Tom engages with Myrtle. So, like how Myrtle believes her relationship with Tom is the result of genuine love, Gatsby is led on to believe that Daisy truly cares for him. This is the result of Gatsby’s innocence to the customs and practices of the wealthy like Tom and Daisy, who regularly entertain themselves with extramarital affairs. In this way, Gatsby is still able to demonstrate wealth’s inability to buy one’s way into the elite of society.

However, the film’s portrayal of Daisy’s character defeats the meaninglessness of the affair and Gatsby’s societal innocence. In the novel, Daisy comes across as more confident while Mia Farrow’s Daisy seems more fickle and delicate. In their review of the film, *The Independent Film Journal* writes about Daisy’s character, “Ms. Farrow—although more fragile than the Daisy of Fitzgerald’s novel—delicately conveys [a] mixture of grace and carelessness…” (*The Independent Film Journal,* “The Great Gatsby”). The weakness of Daisy’s character, makes her ultimate decision to stay with Tom seem less like a manipulation of Gatsby’s affection and more like an acceptance of her husband’s brutish will. Therefore, the artful juxtaposition between Tom and Daisy’s relationships seems more like a contrast than a comparison, and Gatsby is spared from an image of innocence and gullibility.

The alterations made to the film’s characters were done to preserve both the nostalgia of the era and the style of Fitzgerald’s depiction of the excess of 1920s American society. This distraction from the plot and message of the story is the main criticism of the film, “Under director Jack Clayton, the film’s emphasis on *style* and its pervading attention to *mood* have, to some extent detracted from its drama” (“The Great Gatsby,” *The Independent Film Journal*). The preservation of the movie’s ambiance distracts from the completeness of the message originally delivered by Fitzgerald. To idealize Gatsby for the casual audience, the film’s creators stripped him of his humble beginnings, tasteless lavishness and awkward social shortcomings to create a pleasant gentleman. Against the message of the novella, Redford demonstrates that wealth can in fact make a man.

Works Cited

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