F. Scott Fitzgerald: The Jazz Age and The Great Gatsby

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Abstract: Fitzgerald wrote the work “Echoes of the Jazz Age” due to which he became the main exponent of the Jazz Age theory. The Great Gatsby by F. Scott Fitzgerald is a society progressing steadily towards the achievement of the American Dream. The society of the 1920s better known as the Jazz Age was significant for its commodity culture. This new heterogeneous crowd was fast changing the American society posing a challenge to James Gatz and becoming responsible for his transformation to The Great Gatsby. The Woman of the Jazz Age was busy chasing her material dreams without realizing that she had lost all her chastity in this quest. The women of the Jazz Age were best depicted in the characters of Daisy Buchanan, Myrtle Wilson and Jordan Baker. The woman of this age was characterized by greed, materialism, lust and selfishness. It is these trends of the Jazz Age that exemplify the myth of the American Dream.

Key Words: Jazz Age, American Dream, materialism, selfishness, myth

Fitzgerald wrote the work “Echoes of the Jazz Age” due to which he became the main exponent of the Jazz Age theory. The Great Gatsby by F. Scott Fitzgerald is a society progressing steadily towards the achievement of the American Dream. This journey towards the attainable yet unattainable is full of practical challenges. The society of the 1920s better known as the Jazz Age was significant for its commodity culture. The upsurge of the Jazz Age continued upto 1929. It signified hedonism.

After the First World War America was full of triumph and confidence. The young generation was free from the shackles of Puritanism breathing a sigh of relief from the traditional norms that had tied down the society till now. The young generation breaking free from the conventional restraints had declared its new motto of eating, drinking and being merry. Pleasure was the main principle behind all living which was far from moral. The new society of Jazz Age gave ample freedom to intermingling of opposite sexes. This revolution of the younger generation was not a passing phase, it culminated into a revolt by people of all ages, especially the middle aged people adopted the new culture losing their sense of morality and culture. This new heterogeneous crowd was fast changing the American society posing a challenge to James Gatz and becoming responsible for his transformation to The Great Gatsby as marked by Winifred Farrant Bevilacqua in her essay:

After disassociating himself from his family origins and the provincial territory of his birth, he begins to fashion a new image modelled on the nature of the world he wishes to enter not as Jimmie Gatz but as Jay Gatsby. At eighteen he eagerly exchanges his torn green Jersey and pair of canvas pants for the blue jacket and white duck trousers given to him by Dan Cody in which he looks like a millionaire’s dashing son. While he courts Daisy in Louisville, he conceals his status as ‘a penniless young man without a past’ under ‘the invisible cloak of his uniform’ as an army officer. (116 Bloom) Only through this disguise can he overcome the socio-economic barrier separating him from Daisy, and gain access to her world. When not actually in masquerade, he paints exaggerated verbal self-portraits. For instance, he tells Nick he is the last surviving member of a wealthy Midwestern family… (120 Bloom)

The atmosphere was corrupted with explicit magazines and movies. There was an increase in the population of bootleggers with the implementation of the Prohibition Act. There was an open culture promoting alcoholism. Men would casually carry gin in their pockets. Serving of alcoholic drinks before dinner became a social obligation. The Jazz Age was driven by the Prohibition Act, automobiles, explicit magazines and movies.

The American Dream continued even after the first World War because the 1920s made the Americans financially more stable. Europe had incurred huge losses during wartime and was in a pathetic state after four years of warfare. America had emerged as one of World’s leading powers after the Treaty of Versailles. This atmosphere of happiness and victory was being celebrated all throughout America.
The young generation was now free from the bondage of Puritanism. This generation almost came out with a rebellion and revolted against the puritan orthodox culture. They now wanted new rules which had no cultural restraints attached to them. They thought that the older generation had ruined them by establishing an authoritarian code of conduct.

F. Scott Fitzgerald could think of no better than giving this era an exclusive name, he called it The Jazz Age. This post World War age was aptly termed the Jazz Age because this was the time which witnessed the upsurge of the youth. They did not want to think about their past nor they thought about their future. They wanted to make the optimum use of their present day. People had money, moreover there was no boundation to follow traditions, therefore the people wanted to break free just to eat-drink-and-be-merry.

People of the Jazz Age wanted to follow Bohemian culture. They were more influenced by the teachings of Freud and had already forgotten Jefferson’s ideals. They believed in a free spirit now, far from their old orthodox values and conservative roots of puritan culture. Fitzgerald’s explanation about the term Jazz was: “first sex, then dancing, then music”.

The Woman of the Jazz Age was busy chasing her material dreams without realizing that she had lost all her chastity in this quest. The women of the Jazz Age were best depicted in the characters of Daisy Buchanan, Myrtle Wilson and Jordan Baker. The woman of this age was characterized by greed, materialism, lust and selfishness. Daisy secretly understood the infidelity of her husband Tom so she engaged herself in her social life to get away from the problems in her domestic life. She does not pay much attention to her daughter Pammy, whom she grows up to become a “fool” (Fitzgerald 12). Gatsby is at the same time, madly in love with whom she grows up to become a “fool” (Fitzgerald 12). Gatsby is at the same time, madly in love with whom she grows up to become a “fool” (Fitzgerald 12). Gatsby is at the same time, madly in love with whom she grows up to become a “fool” (Fitzgerald 12). Gatsby is at the same time, madly in love with whom she grows up to become a “fool” (Fitzgerald 12). Gatsby is at the same time, madly in love with whom she grows up to become a “fool” (Fitzgerald 12). Gatsby is at the same time, madly in love with whom she grows up to become a “fool” (Fitzgerald 12). Gatsby is at the same time, madly in love with whom she grows up to become a “fool” (Fitzgerald 12). Gatsby is at the same time, madly in love with whom she grows up to become a “fool” (Fitzgerald 12). Gatsby is at the same time, madly in love with whom she grows up to become a “fool” (Fitzgerald 12). Gatsby is at the same time, madly in love with whom she grows up to become a “fool” (Fitzgerald 12). Gatsby is at the same time, madly in love with whom she grows up to become a “fool” (Fitzgerald 12). Gatsby is at the same time, madly in love with whom she grows up to become a “fool” (Fitzgerald 12). Gatsby is at the same time, madly in love with whom she grows up to become a “fool” (Fitzgerald 12). Gatsby is at the same time, madly in love with whom she grows up to become a “fool” (Fitzgerald 12). Gatsby is at the same time, madly in love with whom she grows up to become a “fool” (Fitzgerald 12). Gatsby is at the same time, madly in love with whom she grows up to become a “fool” (Fitzgerald 12).

Gatsby’s ultimate fate was realized when Daisy finally selected her own husband Tom over Gatsby. After overrunning Myrtle, when Daisy spoke to George Wilson she misinformed him by framing statements in such a way as if Gatsby was having an affair with his wife. Wilson totally misled by Daisy’s version, went ahead and

Myrtle Wilson, is again a strong representative of the woman of 1920s. She lives amongst the deprived sections of the society in the Valley of Ashes. She befriens Tom Buchanan in order to fulfil her financial requirements. She wanted to be a part of the East Egg society to which she could otherwise not belong. Her husband, George Wilson, was a garage owner without any stable income. Tom in his violent fits often misbehaves with Myrtle but she put up conveniently with his rough behaviour just to belong to the class of the old rich.

Myrtle tries to put on the grace and sophistication of the old rich ways and mannerisms. Tom Buchanan also buys an apartment in New York in order to have a relaxed extra-marital relationship with Myrtle, a home away from home. Myrtle in a yearning to belong to the East Egg aristocracy, gives up all her chastity and integrity. Poor Myrtle never realized that she could not enter the world of the old rich just by her put-on acts of sophistication. Just by buying a puppy from a Rockefeller resemble or wearing a chiffaun ahe could never become a part of the class she coveted. She threw herself into a life from which there was no come back and succumbed to her doom.

It was Myrtle’s end that depicts the essence of Jazz Age materialism as described by Tanfer Emin Tunc:

Myrtle’s accident, which Fitzgerald describes in graphic detail, is important not only for its conflation of sex and violence, but also for its role in the death of Gatsby’s idealism. Daisy accidentally kills Myrtle with Gatsby’s Rolls Royce-the quintessential symbol of Jazz Age materialism- and then leaves the scene of crime for the security and respectability of East Egg…The fact that Myrtle’s breast was violently ripped open “like a flap” (Fitzgerald 92) illustrates how she, and her breast, were simply sexualized pawns, objects to be played with by old-wealth men like Tom who had social permission to abuse, and then discard, working-class women when they grew tired of them. Myrtle died with her mouth ripped open, as if gasping for air, because her vision of the American Dream had left her suffocating in the Valley of Ashes. The only way out became using her body to acquire the materialism that she believed defined happiness. (Hobby 77)
murdered Gatsby, after which he himself committed suicide. When all these events were taking place, Daisy fled Long Island with her husband Tom. It was more important for Daisy to protect herself rather to sort out the turn of events which had clicked due to her.

The new trend promoted mixed parties in which men and women freely intermingled without any moral police guarding them. The women adopted a lifestyle which made them free individuals. They wore all types of clothes which revealed most of their skin. The boys preferred to wear Jerseys which were without sleeves just like the dress code of the hero of This Side of Paradise. These shirts were called ‘petting shirts.’ The people were morally lost and they found pleasure only in sensuous music and dances. The close dances, short clothes and sensuous music had a corrupting influence on the younger generation. When their parents tried to stop them, they gave them curt replies.

Kissing became a common gesture between young boys and girls. The characters like Rosalind in Fitzgerald’s This Side of Paradise were considered to be trend setters for young girls. In the beginning moral decay was found only among the young generation but slowly seeds of moral degradation penetrated deep into all sections of the society and all age groups.

The American woman got the right to vote in the 1920s. This gave her a status equivalent to men. Till now a woman’s job was to look after the house but with greater political freedom, there was more economic independence which widened here periphery and restricted her no more to just household chores. Now women were interested in looking beautiful and stylish and they served as casual and lively counterparts to their male companions.

In the post First World War decade, Freud and his theories were appreciated by the people. American literature was full of new terminology such as Electra and Oedipus Complex, Sadism etc. There was change in every arena of life: fast racing cars, racy magazines, movies, altogether a revolution was in the offing. Men and women not only sang and danced together but also indulged in drinking bouts together. It became common courtesy to serve alcohol before dinner. There was no restriction on consumption of alcohol even among the younger boys.

With access to automobiles, there was nobody stopping the younger generation. It increased their mobility and they easily got away from their parents which lead to more freedom in making individual choices and decisions. The racing automobiles were soon followed by racy and sensual movies and magazines which had a scintillating effect on American senses. In short, the doctrine of Freud, more female freedom, the prohibition, movies, magazines and automobiles, all had an effect on the American population in the 1920s after which the effect became more permanent as the middle aged people now adopted the ways of the younger generation. The Americans were lost in their dream of money and success which they built upon the ruins of their devastated society.

The Jazz Age was symbolic of wealth which was deeply associated with the American Dream. It was this money which cast a corrupting influence on man. The man here being Jay Gatsby who had to amass money in order to gain love. This poor man James Gatz was unable to marry the girl of his dreams due to his economic position and status.

James Gatz is the epicentre of all action who tries to regain his beloved Daisy who had gifting him for Tom Buchanan due to the latter’s high birth and position in the old wealth. James Gatz’s Struggle to win back Daisy’s love is based on his economic elevation to carve himself a niche among the Noveau Riche. This achievement of new wealth would conclusively help him to get Daisy’s attention and love. However, the attainment of wealth was fret with many practical challenges.

As Nick Carraway, the prime narrator of the novel and Daisy’s cousin tells us that Gatsby started his career as an Army man, hiding his ordinary status behind his uniform, in his youthful years he managed to court Daisy into a love affair at Louisville. This love affair was not to last long because when Gatsby was away, Daisy’s mother managed to convince her to get married to Tom Buchanan, an eligible bachelor due to his high birth and exclusive place among the members of the old wealth. Daisy, after shedding a few tears accepted Tom as her husband and completely sidelined Gatsby’s letter that she received on the day of her wedding.

James Gatz on learning that Daisy was now staying at her East Egg residence among the old rich managed to get himself a house in the West Egg among the new rich. The reason to stay in West Egg was to be counted as a member of the wealthy class. This would definitely help Daisy get attracted towards him. To be counted among the rich was also not easy for Gatsby as he had clandestine deals as a bootlegger with the help of Meyer Wolfsheim and this was the source of his newly attained wealth.

Gatsby’s mansion in the West Egg was a hub of carnival life. He would throw larger than life parties inviting limitless guests only hoping that one day Daisy would also be one of those guests. Gatsby’s invitation to Nick Carraway to his party was the best possible way to reach out to
Daisy. Nick being Daisy’s cousin finally managed to make the lovers meet.

In the background of the main plot, there are important characters of the sub-plot such as Jason, Nick’s friend, Myrtle, Tom Buchanan’s mistress who is already married to George Wilson, the owner of a dilapidated car garage. Myrtle’s wish to belong to the wealthy class is fulfilled when she meets Tom Buchanan in a train journey. She immediately knows that she had got her first and her last chance to belong to the coveted class.

Nick’s forced journey to Myrtle’s apartment guided by Tom Buchanan helps him to get closer to Tom’s life or rather the life of the old wealth. Nick soon realized that Daisy could not be compensated for Myrtle when Tom broke Myrtle’s nose for taking Daisy’s name. The drinking bouts at Myrtle’s place brought the characters closer and made Nick comprehend the real Myrtle, her husband Wilson and Tom Buchanan easily.

On the other hand Gatsby’s parties complete with orchestra, women, wine and delicacies finally attracted Daisy’s attention. However this was short termed as Tom Buchanan soon realized what was happening. Daisy was at a loss for words when Gatsby inquired whether she loved him. This shows that even though Daisy had some attraction towards Gatsby, she never wanted to quit her position as a member of the old wealth which she could only retain in companionship with Tom Buchanan.

During Daisy’s and Gatsby’s journey back home, Daisy was driving the car, she struck Myrtle who was running out of her house in a fit of frenzy. The car accident was the end of Myrtle’s life, significant because it decided the final destiny of the protagonist. George Wilson inquired about the accident and got the final information from Tom Buchanan who only told him what the actual truth was. Nick Carraway describes the next scene seeing a thin circle of blood on the surface of the swimming pool and Wilson’s dead body in the adjoining lawns at Gatsby’s mansion. Thinking that Gatsby was the prime suspect of his wife Myrtle’s murder, Wilson first shot Gatsby and then himself.

Nick Carraway was left alone to perform the last rites of The Great Gatsby. He expected many people to turn up at his funeral but to his dismay only Gatsby’s father, an old friend and Nick attended the last rites. Tom and Daisy were however oblivious of anything that had happened without taking onus of all that was their doing. They went out from East Egg and on their return went back into the vast carelessness to which they belonged.

The attainment of wealth and thereby Daisy’s love was the achievement of the American Dream by Gatsby. The stories of rags to riches and the attainment of the American Dream was commonplace with burning examples like Carnegie. Commenting on the influence of the Jazz Age on Gatsby and Myrtle, Fitzgerald has said:

It was a compelling mistake on the part of Gatsby and Myrtle when they tried to behave in this way, allured by the popular Jazz Age culture of the day. Besides coming to the re-narration of events, Gatsby gave an account of the incidents that lead to the murder of Myrtle. He ensured that people thought it was not Daisy who was driving the car but it was him (Gatsby) who used the emergency brakes to stop the car. He told Nick about Daisy’s role in the accident: “(Daisy) fell over into my lap and I drove on” (Fitzgerald 145)

It was majorly this overwhelming influence of the Jazz Age Culture which leads to the unfulfilled wishes and tragic lives of Myrtle, Gatsby and all others who were influenced by the optimism of this age.

References:


