

The Toiling Effects of Being “Borne Back Ceaselessly into the Past”

A New Critics Analysis of *The Great Gatsby*

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I pledge that my portion of the work in this essay is entirely original except when specifically indicated. I have reviewed my essay to ensure correct quotations and citations and I have not plagiarized any of the content of the essay.

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## Abstract

*The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald is a timeless masterpiece of American literature. Although the events that the characters endured are long past, the emotions that they stir within the human consciousness have been preserved by every reader in the past 96 years. Factors such as war, love, and selfishness are defining things that shape the characters, and in turn, the world that surrounds them. Throughout this literary critique, I closely examine the text of the novel to connect all the different aspects of Fitzgerald's masterpiece to a single underlying theme of nostalgic longing. Within the analysis, I connect the theme with many of the important characters to reveal how their questionable actions could be explained. Additionally, I connect the theme to the novel's symbolism to create a greater depth of emotion than what can be seen on the surface. Finally, I discuss the reason why this longing exists in the first place and how it could quite possibly be a faulty human condition that still exists within the generations of our own time.

Many critics and literary scholars have dissected *The Great Gatsby* in an attempt to pinpoint the various themes and how they intertwine to reveal a universal meaning that every reader can relate to. Although the literary theories differ, every single one of them has expanded the novel's experience for the reader and added to the legacy that is, *The Great Gatsby*. Within my own interpretation, I examine the characters to highlight the disintegrating morality that belongs to the so-called "lost generation" and reveal how it's possible that most, if not all, of their decisions, could be linked to an underlying sadness. This sadness surrounds the novel and takes form as a longing within almost every major character in the story. It seems that this longing can all be traced to the past; A longing for a nostalgic time in their life where things were different. Aside from the characters, Fitzgerald also uses specific diction, figurative language, and symbolism to unite the same theme within every major event of the book. While reviewing the novel, I will be documenting my interpretations as well as incorporating critiques of the past that, like myself, have attempted to discern the literary classic through close inspection of the text alone.

The way that Fitzgerald shapes the characters within *The Great Gatsby* is one of the major reasons why the novel has grown to become so iconic. The storyline does a great job of obscuring the moral line and, as a result, creates some of the most unlikeable characters in American literary history. One of these characters, Tom Buchanan, is depicted as abusive, deceiving, unfaithful, and vulgar. He makes undoubtedly wrong decisions throughout the entire novel for no apparent reason other than he can. The actions of Tom though, as heinous as some of them are, can still be connected to the same theme of longing for the past. Textual evidence supporting this theory starts in the very first chapter of the novel, where it tells us that Tom not only grew up rich but he grew up exceedingly successful. "Her husband, among various physical

accomplishments, had been one of the most powerful ends that ever played football at New Haven- a national figure in a way” (Fitzgerald 9). Shortly after this quote, Fitzgerald places the first literary clue pertaining to why he never seems content throughout the storyline. Nick describes Tom as “one of those men who reach such an acute limited excellence at twenty-one that everything afterward savours of anticlimax” (Fitzgerald 9). Could this explain why he acts so vulgar? His tapering morality may act as somewhat of a sad attempt to recapture the rush he felt in his youth that has long passed him by.

In contrast to Tom, the novel presents its focal point, Jay Gatsby, as one of the good characters. This is interesting to note because it is not Gatsby’s actions that prompt this difference but rather the way Fitzgerald reveals those actions to the reader. In an article critiquing *The Great Gatsby* it is suggested that “Fitzgerald does not describe in detail the shady and criminal sides of Gatsby’s life; instead, he hints, thereby holding the reader in suspense” (Grande). By shaping the perspective of Gatsby in this way, Fitzgerald is able to develop a much more charming and likable character for the reader. The actions of Gatsby though, good and bad, can also be linked by textual evidence to the same nostalgic longing that is associated with the other characters. In fact, Gatsby is the most apparent example of this longing in the entire novel. He spends almost the whole storyline attempting to reunite with the so-called, love of his life. But was she really? The text tells us in chapter eight that, before the war, they spent very little time together, and even when they finally do come back together, Gatsby wants more than just Daisy’s love. Gatsby wants everything to be exactly how it was when she loved him before.

"He wanted nothing less of Daisy than that she should go to Tom and say: 'I never loved you'. After she had obliterated four years with that sentence they could decide on more practical measures to be taken. One of them was that, after she was free, they were to go

back to Louisville and be married from her house--just as if it were five years ago."

(Fitzgerald 69)

This shows that Gatsby doesn't want Daisy's love as much as he wants to recreate a moment in his life. His pursuit is ironic though, considering the text shows a very different view of Daisy compared to the one that exists in his memories. Regardless of this, Gatsby still refuses to give up on his nostalgic longing. A critic of the novel that addresses a similar stance on the topic states, "If Daisy does not quite measure up to what he has dreamed, he will just have the piano player play songs to keep him in the world of faith rather than risk slipping into the disenchantment of the real world" (Pidgeon). The real world refers to the present, a place that almost all of the novel's characters seem to be trying to escape.

This theme of nostalgic longing is not limited to just the male roles within *The Great Gatsby*. It also appears within many of the female characters of the novel. In Lois Tyson's critical interpretation of the text, she uses Jordan and Daisy as examples because of the way they reminisce about their childhood. In chapter one, Daisy briefly mentions the girl's upbringing in Louisville. Daisy describes, "Our white girlhood was passed together there. Our beautiful white-" (70), before being cut off by Tom. Tyson gives another textual example from chapter three, where the girl's youth is described as,

"a romantic past where, Jordan recalls, she walked on 'soft ground' in her 'new plaid skirt... that blew a little in the wind' and where Daisy 'dressed in white and had a little white roadster, and all day long the telephone rang in her house and excited young officers from Camp Taylor demanded the privilege of monopolizing her that night.' This is a world of virginal romance: new skirts, white dresses, white roadsters, ringing telephones, and handsome young officers." (Tyson 146)

The glorified past of both Daisy and Jordan can then also be connected to the immoral decisions that they make throughout the novel. In the case of Daisy, it is evident from her dialect that she longs for the same attention that she had in her youth. One example of this dialect is when Daisy compares Nick to a rose. Upon the comment, Nick immediately thinks to himself, “this was untrue. I am not even faintly like a rose. She was only extemporizing” (Fitzgerald 14). He also states, “That was a way she had” (Fitzgerald 11). Considering this longing for lost attention, is it not surprising that Daisy chooses to cheat on Tom when one of the men from her past comes bearing that reminiscent affection.

The last major character left to analyze is the novel's narrator, Nick Carraway. Although the novel takes place from his perspective, he, for the most part, doesn't seem to be the center of the novel's attention. A literary critique closely inspecting the text commented on this idea, stating,

“We tend to highlight Gatsby and his pursuit of Daisy, and the conflict that arises between him and Tom Buchanan—two wealthy men, each determined to defeat his rival and claim exclusive ownership of the beautiful woman. But Fitzgerald chose a first-person narrator, and, in certain respects, Nick is the most interesting of the novel's characters.” (Cain)

In one way, Nick is interesting because, although he does look upon his past from a nostalgic perspective, he is one of the only characters that seem to be looking for something new in their future. One example where his longing is emphasized within the text is when he is describing his home. In chapter 9 Nick states, “That's my Middle West... the thrilling returning trains of my youth, and the street lamps and sleigh bells in the frosty dark and the shadows of holly wreaths thrown by lighted windows on the snow” (Fitzgerald 107). He seems to look upon his home and

childhood very personally and fondly, just like the other characters in the novel. Although the theme of longing can be connected to Nick in this way, the text also seems to showcase his attempt to achieve something new, most evidently in the way that he decides to leave his home and go east to join in the bonds business. It can also be seen in the way that he goes out of his way to read new books, meet new people, and even indulge in new experiences. Nick initially does a good job of defying the common theme of nostalgic longing but by the end of the novel has completely given up. Following the trend of the other characters in the novel, he attempts to run back to where things are familiar and where he is comfortable. In Nick's case, he goes back home. He states in the final chapter, "After Gatsby's death the East was haunted for me... distorted beyond my eyes' power of correction. So when the blue smoke of brittle leaves was in the air and the wind blew the wet laundry stiff on the line I decided to come back home" (Fitzgerald 108). The novel purposely puts the main character in opposition to the theme as a way of exemplifying the struggle of living in a world focused on a lost past. A struggle that even Nick gives into by the conclusion of the story.

Aside from the well-crafted characters of *The Great Gatsby*, this theme can also be linked to many of the major events and settings that occur within the novel. The most controversial and highly debated of these is the intentions behind Fitzgerald's ominous "Valley of Ashes." The text describes this place as

"a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens; where ashes take the form of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and, finally, with a transcendent effort, of ash grey men, who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air." (Fitzgerald 19)

Although the theories of what this place could stand for differs among scholars, there is one consensus that is shared among many literary critics due to the vast amount of textual evidence. That is the “Valley of Ashes”, “symbolically, can embody man’s alienation from nature or even the corrupting influence of modernity as the modern city discards its used abundance” (Hauhart). This could be the effect of the lavish lifestyles that we see throughout the text. The luxuries that many of the main characters take for granted, may have a cost greater than they are even aware. Upon examination of the text, it seems that it could be one of the many reasons that they feel the need to return to the past. In order to create the sense of urgency to recreate a lost past, Fitzgerald vividly describes the darkness that has consumed the present. Darkness that not only seeped into the morality of the characters but the whole world itself.

Immediately following Fitzgerald’s description of “The Valley of Ashes” he introduces Doctor T.J. Eckleburg, or rather, the eyes of Doctor T.J. Eckleburg. Eyes that stare out from an old oculist advertisement and are described as “blue and gigantic- their retinas are one yard high. They look out of no face, but, instead, from a pair of enormous yellow spectacles which pass over a nonexistent nose” (Fitzgerald 19). Fitzgerald does a thorough job of describing the eyes so it seems evident that they have some important role within the theme of the novel, but what could that role be? The symbolism behind the eyes is explored in a re-examination of *The Great Gatsby* by Tom Burnam. He asks could it be,

“The eyes of God, as Wilson, whose own world disintegrates with the death of Myrtle, calls them? As a symbol of Gatsby's dream, which like the eyes is pretty shabby after all and scarcely founded on the "hard rocks" Carraway admires? Or-and I think this most likely-do not the eyes in spite of everything they survey, perhaps even because of it, serve

both as a focus and an undeviating base, a single point of reference in the midst of monstrous disorder?” (Burnam 12)

Within my interpretation, it seems the eyes are in fact, a symbolic representation of God. But not just any God, the God that the novel’s characters have left behind as the darkness of the present consumes them. This can be textually supported by the way the advertisement itself is depicted. The text states the people had “forgot them and moved away” and the eyes have been “dimmed by many pointless days” (Fitzgerald 19). Considering it is most likely that the eyes of Doctor T.J. Eckleburg have a deeper symbolic meaning than it can also be assumed that the way he comments on the advertisement does as well. The first quote could be a metaphor for how the current generation had forgotten about God and moved on with their immoral lifestyles and choices. The second quote could be a metaphor for how God has become less involved in society or “dimmed” by the many sinful or “pointless” days.

Another example of the symbolism that has engrained its way into the legacy of *The Great Gatsby*, is the green light at the end of the Buchanan's dock. The green light appears several times throughout the text and seems to change in significance as the storyline progresses. A literary analysis of the symbolic colors within the novel claims, “the first time... the green light just represents Daisy, who is his lifelong pursuit and dream” (Haibing). This is the most evident speculation due to the light being attached to the end of Daisy’s dock. This could be a physical illustration of Gatsby’s longing that is, for the most part, concealed to the reader and only revealed by the literary clues. The next time the green light is brought up is when Gatsby is giving Daisy a tour of his estate in chapter five. Gatsby tells her, “You always have a green light that burns all night at the end of your dock” (Fitzgerald 59). According to the author of the literary color analysis mentioned previously,

“It seems that he is nearly realizing his dream, but he becomes lost in a deep reverie because of the big difference between the real Daisy and his imaginary Daisy. So now the green light seems to have lost its original significance and the fascinating charm, which symbolizes the big difference between the dream and reality.” (Haibing)

The dream, according to the theme of nostalgic longing, is the past, specifically the time he spent with Daisy in his youth. The reality is that he can never recreate the past, no matter how much he wants it and no matter how hard he tries to achieve it.

So now that the theme of nostalgic longing has been connected, through literary evidence, to almost every major character and symbol in the novel, the question is raised; why is it that they feel the need to escape the present and return to the past? On the surface, it is easy to see that the past, for many of the novel's characters, was better than the present. In some cases, the past was a more innocent time, in others, it was more comfortable. In some situations, though, there are specific reasons that this longing seems to exist, or at least one of the many reasons that it seems to exist. One of these is the effect that the Great War has had on the morality of the characters. In the very first chapter of the novel, the novel's narrator, Nick Carraway, admits that he “participated in that delayed Teutonic migration known as The Great War” and “came back restless”. He even comments on his home that “now seemed like the ragged edge of the universe” (Fitzgerald 8). Nick though, is not the only character that played a part in the war. The text tells us that Gatsby himself was quite successful during the war, noting how he “was a captain before he went to the front, and following the Argonne battles he got his majority and the command of the divisional machine-guns” (Fitzgerald 93). It is not stated, but it could be implied that these characters lost some of their innocence in the war. Gatsby for example, could have made regrettable decisions, ones that he now has to live with, and is

envious of the past that he now idolizes in his mind. One literary critic of the novel claims that the great war took an effect on not only the attitudes and desires of the characters but the whole society itself. He states, “after World War One, the economy in the United States boomed and flourished. People became obsessed with material and thus made money as their first goal of achievement” (Jiang). There is textual evidence to support this claim riddled throughout the whole novel. Through the Buchanan's we see material goods being worshiped, like when Daisy is brought to tears by how luxurious Gatsby's fine shirts were. We can also see material goods being utilized to get what the characters want, like how Gatsby acquires his wealth just to manipulate his situation and achieve his impossible goal of recreating the past with Daisy. This is just one of the many possible underlying attributes that could make the characters present such a dark place, and make them long to return to a nostalgic past.

*The Great Gatsby* is undoubtedly a novel that will never be forgotten or duplicated. F. Scott Fitzgerald does an excellent job of using detailed imagery and specific word choice to depict a very raw time in American society. The character's numerous flaws are, in many cases, relatable to the reader and seem to not only demonstrate the sad morality of the era but the sad morality of the human condition that still affects the generation of today. The carefully crafted symbolism that is interwoven throughout the novel sparks the perspectives of many different themes, but it seems none as much as the urgent sense of longing for a nostalgic past. This theme is not only one of the most evident, but it is also one that can be traced to the hearts of people all across the world even today. When the novel comes to a close, it leaves this theme of longing unresolved. It never gives a solution to the impossible goal of recreating the past, which is unknowingly, affecting the actions and morality of almost every character in the book. Instead, it

ends with a poetic thought from Nick that ties in the theme for the final time, “So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past” (Fitzgerald 110).

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