

The Rise of Modern Metropolis and Complex Class Relations in *The Great Gatsby*: American Society in Flux in the 1920s

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Abstract

Abstract: The paper attempts to show the centrality of class in an America that was moving away from its identity of being predominantly WASP(White Anglo Saxon Protestant) steeped in Middle Western ethos to one that that just arisen on the world stage as the new economic force. With its stock markets and cities that became a potpourri of diversities in terms of their composition and experiences, it was an American character that was still in process of formation.

Keywords: *Class, Race, Cities, WASP, Mid West, American Dream, Great War.*

Reference to this paper should be made as follows:

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Notions June 2021,
Vol. XII, No. I,
pp. 029 - 033
Article No.04

Online available at :
[https://anubooks.com/
notions-vol-xii-no-1-jan-june-
2021/](https://anubooks.com/notions-vol-xii-no-1-jan-june-2021/)

Introduction

The Great Gatsby (1925) by F Scott Fitzgerald is one of the representative texts of the Roaring Twenties— an era that saw abundance of money, alcohol, and automobiles on the American street. The novel very well captures the changes that were happening in the post-war American society due to changes in the economic status of people and the sense of the disillusionment that came with the experience of the Great War. The young generation found it difficult to relate to the romantic idealism associated with the war because of the effect the experience of the war had on their psyche. Fitzgerald in *The Great Gatsby* very artfully portrays the climate of opinions prevailing in that era ranging from the task of rebuilding the nation to the fear of the decline of western civilization manifested in Tom Buchanan's concerns after his reading of 'The Rise of Colored Empires' by Goddard (Tom actually was referring to Nordicism as, discussed by Lothrop Stoddard's *The Rising Tide of Color*, which holds that the whites were being outnumbered).

Race, social class, and ethnicity are important themes in the novel foregrounding the American values and culture of the 1920s which saw alcohol as an unnecessary evil corrupting the society and hence the prohibition . Fitzgerald chronicles the lavish lifestyle, careless attitude, consumer culture, and the growth of metropolis in his novel which ended after the Wall Street crash of 1929, ushering in a period of financial difficulties.

The novel is set in 1922 and the major events take place in the North East— New York City which by now had become the center of American capitalism drawing in people from various parts of the country and Europe. Nick at the end of the book feels that the colorful, glamorous and confused life of the East does not lure him anymore and he craves to return to the stable and secure Midwest (which he at the beginning of the novel thought was "the rugged end of the universe"), a White Anglo Saxon Protestant hub, "where dwellings are still called through decades by family's name". There is a major shift in the world view and the economic relations between nations and people in the country. America is capitalizing on its newly acquired position as an interlocutor between the allies and the axis powers in settling the issue of war reparation and is basking in the easy inflow of money. It is manufacturing, marketing, consuming, and advertising its newly acquired status as a the finance capital of the world giving an opportunity to the likes of Jay Gatsby and Meyer Wolfsheim to change their fortunes overnight by making it new and big in the East where no one cared for one's ancestry and race. Gatsby and Wolfsheim we learn in course of the novel run successful drugstores— the only places people could buy alcohol from during the prohibition period. However we later learn that the nature of

the trade the duo indulged in was illegal and Tom describes Gatsby as a bootlegger who drives in a circus wagon, a yellow-colored Rolls Royce highlighting his status as a nouveau riche— “a lot of these newly rich people are just big bootleggers”. There is a huge cultural difference between people who live in the East Egg and the West Egg, the two ends of the Long Island Sound representative of the American society as a whole. People residing in the houses at West Egg were “the less fashionable of the two”, not in terms of the value of money but on the basis of inherited wealth. Gatsby living at West Egg is a self-made man with a lineage of farmers. Tom on the other hand is a rich man from an old and wealthy family in Chicago who went to the New Haven (Yale University), an elite University where the rich study.

Wolfsheim “makes” Gatsby in the business they run, seeing an opportunity to utilize the acquired manners which he had learned from his once benefactor and patron Dan Cody and his “Oggsford” degree for business benefits. He makes him join the American Legion—the largest organization of American war veterans founded in Paris in 1919 so that “he could use him good”. American society in the 1920s was a class conscious and racist society that looked eastwards toward England from where it got its manners. Oxford (University), therefore becomes an important trope in the novel, a pass that qualified one as a person of fine breeding overlooking other flaws. Gatsby boasts of his stay at Oxford which in his case was a “family tradition”, a half-lie that he tells Nick later revealing that his short stint at the place came after the armistice when some officers were given a chance to go to any of the universities in England or France. Europe remained an important center of learning for rich and affluent Americans at the beginning of the twentieth century, however, some American Universities like Yale were doing a good job to catch up with the European standards. The decision to send the officers to Universities as soon as they returned after the war show that the Trans Atlantic community wanted to bring normalcy to their countries after a war that had caused huge loss to both Europe and America. These nations were on the verge of emotional and cultural bankruptcy and sending the officers to Universities was a way of building it anew, mending huge psychological losses that the war had caused to Anglo-American values which attached some kind of romantic idealism and nobility to the wars. Young men from noble families came forward to participate in the Great War. We learn Nick Carraway participated in the war though he is not a full-time recruit and struggles hard to get established in the “bond business” as soon as the war ends. Similarly, it seems Gatsby also went and signed up for the war, for as soon as he returns from France in 1920 he does not own anything apart from his military uniform giving an illusion of similarity between the two. People who willingly got conscripted for the war had some sort of financial

backing in the form of their families and background, Gatsby had none, he just had an illusion of the future, the only thread that binds him to the covetous America that Nick and Daisy are the members of. Daisy falls for the manners and his insignia revealing a consciousness of class in her. This chasm between the two is always regretted by Jay Gatsby who attempts to fill it in the shortest of time and easiest the manner that comes to him—”however glorious might be his future as Jay Gatsby, he was at present was a penniless young man without a past, and at any moment the invisible cloak of his uniform may slip from his shoulders”.

For Gatsby, the East becomes a place to chase his dreams. Unlike the Midwest, it provided him with certain ambivalence and he could hide his humble beginnings and modest background under the garb of extravaganza, huge parties, and multitudes of voices. The rising fortune of America and his success at bootlegging business transform him from a man with only one military uniform into a man with vast array of choices at his disposal : “sheer linen and thick silk and fine flannel, shirts with stripes and scrolls and plaids in coral and apple-green and lavender and faint orange and monograms of Indian blue”. New York becomes the land of dreams with stock markets, loan giving , financing activities, and bond business where dreams became real and impossible happened. “Anything can happen now that we’ve slid over this bridge,” thought Nick when he saw some “negroes” in a white- chauffeur-driven limousine pass them in “haughty rivalry”. The time is the 1920’s and America had not yet seen the true emancipation of the blacks, yet the New York City had a number of them doing well. It was around this time that a number of artists and others from the Southern States migrated to New York in search of jobs and in order to escape the legal segregation of the American South and settled in Harlem giving rise to the Harlem Renaissance –a period of remarkable creativity in literature, music , dance , painting, and sculpture by African Americans . “A pale well dressed Negro” corroborates the running down of Myrtle by rash driving of a man in the yellow car. This change is highly resented by Tom Buchanan in the text. Tom believes in the idea of white racial superiority and is proud of his Nordic roots. He cannot buy the fact that a “nobody from nowhere” would come and take away his prized possessions. He does not mingle with the residents of East Egg for he does not know of Gatsby’s existence till very late in the novel high lighting the ignorance of the other emerging Americas in an America that was still dominantly white- upper class- protestant. Even the rootless East has “defined homogeneity in the midst of many colored, many keyed commotion in the form of West Egg and must contend not only with inhabitants of West Egg but with all of New York” as rightly pointed out by critic Schreier. This clash of the old and the new Americas is seen in the climactic scene at Plaza Hotel

in the New York city when Gatsby get into a raw after Tom passes some really demeaning remarks on Gatsby's social class and lineage. Clearly, neither of them wins highlighting that the flux the American society was in, in terms of the emergence of a new social class, rise of the modern city that would become the hub of civil rights movement in the coming decades. Ironically enough the events at the end of the novel take away the lives of Gatsby, Myrtle, and George Wilson, the three representing the 'other' in the novel saying in a way that an all-inclusive American Dream is still a far cry from here.

Yet *The Great Gatsby* by Fitzgerald remains one of the best exemplary texts of "The Jazz Age"—(a term is given by Fitzgerald himself) offering a glimpse of what the American society would be in the latter decades of the century that the world would invariably know as the American Age. It is a literary work that would continue to be read for its grandeur and minute detailing of the complex class structure and the cultural arena of the rising American cities the products of which would capture the world's imagination for a century at least.

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