

ENGLISH B
EXTENDED ESSAY

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Research Question: To what extent is the portrayal of minorities in F. Scott Fitzgerald's "The Great Gatsby" true to the realities of the "Roaring Twenties"?

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1. Introduction

This essay investigates the extent of comments and observations focusing on the minority populations of New York and the standing of these communities in the constantly highlighted theme of financial power. The language used in *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald has recently been called into question (Del Gizzo, 5) in an effort to explore the accuracy of racial and sexual bias which is in the novel. The development of the story is influenced by the portrayal of the minorities in the book as the discriminatory aspects of 1920s America is an identifying aspect of the Jazz Age. Overall, I call into question the accuracy of these themes throughout the book. The book can be looked at from multiple analytical viewpoints, hence its cult fanbase and classical status. One of these viewpoints could be purely romantic, however my observation during the novel focused on Nick Carraway's take on societal norms in the newly forming American elite class.

The 1920s was an era in which racism, discrimination and oppression were normalized aspects of American society (Darrow, ch.34), and these customs' reflections can also be seen in Fitzgerald's storytelling. Even though New York City was an international hub booming with business and parties after the war, American culture wasn't particularly accepting of people who were different than them (Darrow, ch.34), may it be something as easy to change as financial status to something that is impossible to change such as race or sexual orientation. Throughout the book, Gatsby lies time and time again to hide his background (Fitzgerald, 70) because he is ashamed and afraid to be judged as 'New Money' and doesn't reveal the true source of his resources until the end. In my opinion, his choice to keep his history a secret is also influenced by his efforts to impress Daisy. The repeated distinction between new money and old money insinuates that Gatsby wouldn't have even been a worthy opponent to Tom,

especially because he is aware that the swaying factor in Daisy's choice was Tom's financial status. He creates elaborate stories to protect his secret, proving the importance of fitting into such a critical society. (Fitzgerald, 51) One of these stories is whether or not he actually attended Oxford, when in reality he barely studied for 2 weeks at his local College St. Olaf in Minnesota, close to where he was born in North Dakota as a poor farmer's boy. (Fitzgerald, 76)

The American Dream is strengthened by the repeated appearance of the green light from Buchanan residence, clearly showing that even if you are rich, that background isn't something you can achieve. The American Dream as a theme is an important factor in the story's development and the economic status of 1920s America. Nick mentions this in his monologue by quoting his father, "I am still a little afraid of missing something if I forget that, as my father snobbishly suggested, and I snobbishly repeat, a sense of the fundamental decencies is parcelled out unequally at birth." (Fitzgerald, 4) On paper, Jay Gatsby is the embodiment of the American Dream, a farmer boy who was lucky enough to succeed financially and throw lavish parties in an exclusive community in New York, his ambitions fall short when he is faced with the harsh truth that he can not change his history. The storyteller, Nick Carraway, comments on this issue by explaining that East Egg residents are more private about their wealth, that they are old money and how they look down upon West Egg residents claiming that they are made up of bootleggers and other businessmen who have newly come into money by making illegal dealings, he further elaborates on this by saying that West Egg is "the less fashionable of the two, though this is a most superficial tag to express the bizarre and not a little sinister contrast between them." (Fitzgerald, 7) This snarky tone used to enhance and highlight the difference of financial background is the least impactful discriminatory tone overall, because of more hurtful comments being made on ethnicity, religion and sexual

orientation. The exclusion of people with different identifying factors is constant throughout the book.

The creation of a 'new money' class was a result of the prohibition era. After the scarcity caused by the war, people started to exhibit more materialistic traits as financial opportunities arose. With the theme of the 1920s being extravagant and glamorous parties, the prohibition's alcohol ban was highly ineffective. The only significant byproduct of the prohibition laws was the creation of a new bootlegger new money class, providing alcohol to these luxurious parties. As New York society grew, the diversity of people within the city and the scale of the parties grew with it, further expanding this new class. Sarah Churchwell, professor of humanities at the University of London further elaborates on this issue by saying "One of the unintended consequences of Prohibition was that it created this accelerated upward social mobility".

Even with these new opportunities to climb the social ladder present, racist and classist thoughts persevered. At night, as glasses of champagne were poured, everyone danced together. (Scutts, 2) But once the sun was up, their lives went according to the same racist practises from segregated buses to bathrooms.

2. Discrimination

The discriminatory nature of New York's society can be observed from an issue as simple as when someone has come into money, whether they earned it or they were born into it. This requirement bypassed factors such as skin color and sexual orientation altogether, focusing on the significance of financial status as a class system. However, the discriminatory

societal structure doesn't stop at the borders of the fluctuating totals of the character's bank accounts, it stretches further to include the invariable features of people's identities. Before the Civil Rights Act of 1964, oppression and discrimination towards African Americans and other minorities was legal and sometimes even enforced by the government. (Hersch, 431) Racism is a theme tightly knitted into American society because of its usage while the states were coming to be, and the normalisation and usage of casual racism can be seen from the first chapter. The only discriminatory factor focused on in the book isn't religion. Cynical remarks range from a plethora of topics, including comments on women's promiscuity and religion but the most prominent topic is the common usage of racism in the storyline. Many racist remarks are scattered across the novel, highlighting the discriminatory community dynamics of the 1920s.

2.1 Racism

Racism isn't only a recurrent theme, but it is also a *justified* one. New York's elite and educated society doesn't only make racist comments, they also make an effort to legitimise their claims by using invalid arguments. When Nick goes over to visit Daisy in Buchanan residence, he has a chance to talk to Tom and during their conversation Tom tells Nick about a book he read, 'The Rise of the Colored Empires'. "Well, it's a fine book, and everybody ought to read it. The idea is if we don't look out, the white race will be—will be utterly submerged. It's all scientific stuff; it's been proven." (Fitzgerald, 13) This tone-deaf and ignorant statement highlights Tom's beliefs that the white race is the superior race, and his efforts to justify his opinion using *science*. He is a rich white man living in 1920s New York and still manages to paint himself as the victim, exposing his victim complex. This victim

complex can also be seen further on in the book, when he blames Daisy for her interest in Gatsby while he is cheating on her with Myrtle.

The bias against African Americans is spread as a thin veil across the story, overlooking the black community in New York. They frequently travel into New York, and geographically it is impossible to go to the clubs they prefer like the Yale Club in Midtown without going through the lively streets of Harlem. Leaving out a distinct area in New York on purpose when it is stated that they make most of their earnings by selling alcohol and drugs to clubs in that area arises the question whether or not they were being exploited since they were never acknowledged as a community while the white elitist community sold them everything with a huge profit (Scutts, 3). 1920s Harlem was going through major changes, as the repeatedly forgotten community began getting exposed to art and literature, triggering an awakening movement called *the Harlem Renaissance*. (Pruitt, 3)

During this era, the art scene of Harlem flourished, it became an inclusive centre for people of all backgrounds to come together to create. (Pruitt, 2) Throughout the book, the neighbourhoods populated by minorities are overlooked and the only mention of black people in the city is an abrasive comment, in an effort to disparage and belittle “three bucks and a girl” (Fitzgerald, 54) being driven in a limousine by a white chauffeur. A community so essential in creating the identifying factor of the Roaring Twenties, Jazz is nothing but a cynical hum in the background. David Savran, a professor of Theatre and a chairman at the American Theatre talks about the importance of Jazz by saying “Jazz was everything. A weltanschauung, a personal identity, a metaphysics, an epistemology, an ethics, an eros, a mode of sociality—an entire way of being.” African American people aren’t described in the party scene or mentioned as a part of society, and their exclusion from the storyline as the most influential attributes to

the delicacies the focused elite frequently enjoy shows that their place in society wasn't correctly reflected in the novel.

2.2 Religion

Religion is another aspect of personal identity which has been weaponized to further the elitist agenda of socialites. If one were to look at the prejudice in the novel from a more positive standpoint, the racial assumptions could be all collected under the theme of the importance of financial status in the novel but if that were the case, this intolerant attitude wouldn't also be observed towards Jews, a generally very wealthy class, especially Jewish businessmen. In Chapter 4, Mr. Wolfsheim is introduced as a colleague of Gatsby's, but his Jewish heritage isn't only highlighted by his name but also his physical qualities. The only minority business man mentioned in the book is reduced to a "A small, flat-nosed Jew with two fine growths of hair which luxuriated in either nostril." He then underlines his 'Jewishness' by saying that he has an "expressive nose" big enough to cover Gatsby. His only qualities are his ties to organised crime and big nose. This underlines the lens Nick observes his world through, a lens which highlights and underlines physical and intangible differences of people he meets. Given that he is not affluent himself, if we were to accept the thought process of generalising these statements in a group of monetary possessions, he would have to be more accepting and tolerant towards others since he would also be a part of a group which is discriminated against.

He is able to get a sneak-peek into New York's elite using his privileges as a Christian white male. There is no mention of religion in the upper class of New York, making Christianity seem like the "default" because the only mention of religion in the text is to

separate people with different spiritual backgrounds. In the rare occurrences that Catholicism is mentioned, it is mentioned as a thought system which aims to uphold important values such as honesty, care for others and humility (Fitzgerald, 28). Even though Christianity is painted as a tool which helps maintain crucial values, it isn't mentioned in the particularly 'unholy' acts which take place in their society such as Myrtle's death. For example, Daisy's and Tom's shortcomings as a couple such as their problems with infidelity are always analysed from a secular standpoint, but their positive attributes are linked to their beliefs. The tolerant attitude displayed towards Christianity then continues on to the second chapter, and it is a use of symbolism. The eyes of doctor T.J. Eckleburg is identified as 'God'. Wilson then goes on to quote the New Testament, "Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows." Given the social dynamics of New York's elite, this ironic remark enhances the idea that you could look at the situations from many different perspectives and once again highlights that the book lacks divine judgement. During this conversation, Wilson justifies his obsessive and controlling attitude towards Myrtle with the eyes of god, but then when Michaelis asks where he attends church he replies with "Don't belong to any". If we were to insert divine judgement into the book and not only in positive aspects of the storyline, this new lens would underline the sins committed throughout the book.

2.3 Sexual Orientation

The Great Gatsby's story development includes sexuality in depth.. From the elaborate schemes of adultery to the strong feelings of lust, the physical agendas of heterosexuals are explained in detail. Sexuality is as important of a concept as money and power because it is a very influential factor of our identities and the fueling factor of sexuality emerges in the novel as love triangles and promiscuity. The acceptance of homosexuality has fluid borders because

of constantly changing social norms. In the years following World War I, as the United States entered an era of unparalleled economic growth, social norms loosened and a new understanding of sexuality emerged. (Meehan, 78) An iconic symbol emerged during this era, a symbol of all that was new to the city, a girl with a slim dress dancing with a cigarette in her hand. The importance of party culture in New York City was then distributed with mass media, attracting even more people and more diverse crowds. (Stabbe, 4)

The dynamics weren't as rigid as we would assume to be, with parties attracting LGBTQ and heterosexuals who were just looking for fun or a good party. In 1920s New York, the newly forming society of the city was no alien to the homosexual community present there. It was known that several masquerade balls would take place a month, which were essentially drag balls. (Stabbe, 4) Before the prohibition, the diverse LGBTQ community bloomed in the city as thousands of people filled the Renaissance Casino in Harlem with drag makeup on. (Waxman, 3) Drag makeup is a form of makeup that blurs the limits of sex with heavy eye makeup and extravagant clothing. These drag balls began back in 1869 Harlem and they were not only accepted, they were a spectacle (Waxman,3). This social agenda of the city was completely missed in the novel, with the only mentions of LGBTQ were snarky comments made on the characters weaknesses. The critical language used to describe people with different sexual preferences is contrasted with the ambiguous language used by Nick when describing Gatsby. His level of adoration for Gatsby seems questionable for someone who doesn't find him attractive, and this allows Fitzgerald to portray the internalised homophobia he embodies.

2.4 Gender Roles

The 1920s were still quite conservative, and this approach even affected fashion. *Flappers*, the iconic girls which shaped our views of the Jazz Age with their skirts and cigarettes are now what represent that era weren't free to wear what they want or live as they wished, and they were met with strong pushback when they attempted to do so. (Chaucer, 88) An excellent example of this is the character Jordan Baker, the wealthy and pretty best friend of Daisy's. She is an independent woman who goes out with a lot of men, just like the rest of the men of New York, but she is met with disapproval from her aunt, Tom and even Daisy. There are many remarks in the book stating that these actions are not womanly and that they are inappropriate and they repeatedly voice their disapproval of her actions. (Fitzgerald, 38)

Nowadays, in the media representation of the 1920s, we are met with a misrepresentation of the lives of women. (Aposto Magazine) The short skirts we see flappers wearing today weren't around back then, with the dresses usually being at ankle length. Their consumption of cigarettes and alcohol was viewed as scandalous. (Pruitt, 3) With the changing social dynamics, the amount of single women working exceeded 50%. "Women were working, but they were working in *women's jobs*." says Lynn Dumenil. There was an apparent glass ceiling in the 1920s. In *America's Women*, Gail Collins states that in 1927 men weekly earned 29.35USD, whereas for women that number was only 17.34USD. With their slow regaining of financial independence, women started to get involved in politics with a few women being elected to the U.S. House of Representatives, but the glass ceiling became more apparent when none were selected to join the Senate.

Women's freedom was also heavily influenced by the increasing use of birth control because it allowed women to limit their responsibilities as wives and explore their sexualities without the unnecessary burdens of doing so. (Collins, 44) This freedom wasn't met with much

positive feedback though, and the limits on women persevered. With the Women's Rights Movement (1848-1920) just ending, a liberated generation of women was being created but changing the dynamics of American society wasn't completely possible yet. Daisy was aware of the limited presence of women and the difficulties they faced. Concerning the gender of her child, she says "I'm glad it's a girl. And I hope she'll be a fool — that's the best thing a girl can be in this world, a beautiful little fool." (Fitzgerald, 16) This sentence showcases how women should not hold meaningful places in society, and to stay away from the battles needed to earn a say in their lives. Focusing on prettiness and marriage is much more suitable for women in the book.

Jordan's free sexuality was also used to extend the misogynistic views of Fitzgerald, painting her main personality trait as dishonesty. "Jordan Baker instinctively avoided clever, shrewd men, and now I saw that this was because she felt safer on a plane where any divergence from a code would be thought impossible. She was incurably dishonest. She wasn't able to endure being at a disadvantage and, given this unwillingness, I suppose she had begun dealing in subterfuges when she was very young in order to keep that cool, insolent smile turned to the world and yet satisfy the demands of her hard, jaunty body. It made no difference to me. Dishonesty in a woman is a thing you never blame deeply." (Fitzgerald, 46) She is painted as a pathological liar and an insatiable woman for simply being independent and free. The fact that Nick says he doesn't blame dishonesty in a woman is also a sexist remark, insinuating that he doesn't evaluate the moralities of women and men on the same scale. He makes her dishonesty seem like an effect of her grand sexuality. Another example of the shallow storytelling of women in the book is how Myrtle is displayed. "I married him because I thought he was a gentleman," she said finally. 'I thought he knew something about breeding, but he

wasn't fit to lick my shoe.'" (Fitzgerald, 29) Besides Jordan, Myrtle is the only other woman who owns her sexuality and she is painted as a shallow and inconsiderate woman just like her.

3. Conclusion

The representation of minorities in the book greatly speaks to how Fitzgerald viewed those issues. Many of his historical remarks were shallow and failed to include the battles being fought in the background to advance the dynamics of society. The Harlem Renaissance was a crucial part of the development of New York city, as African Americans formed the identifying musical and artistic features of the Roaring Twenties, they were given almost no visibility in the book. New York is known to be a *melting pot*, with many religions and ethnicities coexisting. In the novel, there is almost no religious diversity. The only religions mentioned are Judaism and Christianity, with Christianity being painted as the sole belief system in New York. In the very limited part of the book with Jewish representation, the appearance of Wolfsheim is highlighted as well as his illegal dealings. This lack of representation spills over to include the LGBT community as well, with a complete omission of queer people. With drag balls being an essential part of NYC party culture, their lack of representation had to be a calculated decision. Experimental sexuality is a subject which has been thoroughly covered up, with Nick's questionable adoration for Gatsby not being addressed. This overlook of the topic as a whole seems to be the work of internalised homophobia, and the taboo nature of the topic.

When it comes to gender roles, the women in this book have been boiled down to two stereotypes. The beautiful and naive housewives such as Daisy Buchanan, and sexually active *bad* characters such as Jordan. The storylines regarding their personal agendas fall flat as they aren't discussed enough with the male focused view of the novel. Female characters weren't

developed enough and were essentially boiled down to simple generalisations with no thoughts of their own. Women who own their sexualities were made out to be shallow, bad women and the naive and beautiful stereotype was just an extension of their husband, with no interests of their own. Overall, *The Great Gatsby* is a novel which overlooks important historical events and focuses solely on the lives of cis white Christian males and fails to develop the storylines of other groups they exist with.

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