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How far is F. Scott Fitzgerald efficient in reflecting the moral corruption in the American Society of Roaring Twenties?

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ABSTRACT:

F. Scott Fitzgerald is one of the artistic authors in American literature who has always inspired young generations ever since he was first published. The very first reason why his masterpieces are so impressive, is his flashing some sections from his real life in his short stories and novels. Furthermore, he is shining at reflecting the characteristics of his period-the glittering Jazz Era, the sophisticated, stylish Roaring Twenties.

There are many sections of Fitzgerald's life, which is very similar to his novel *The Great Gatsby*. To give some examples, Gatsby falls in love while he is a lieutenant like Fitzgerald and Daisy is keen on a wealthy life, full of luxury just like Zelda who is Fitzgerald's wife in real life. Nick Carraway has also some similar aspects with Fitzgerald. They both go to Ivy League colleges (Nick goes to Yale and Fitzgerald goes to Princeton.). The real life of the author, embedded in the story, always makes the novel more alluring. That is why I chose *The Great Gatsby*.

This extended essay is mainly an attempt to figure out the social attitudes during twenties and grasp the mood of this enigmatic Jazz Age by enjoying the masterpiece of one of the most transcendent, peerless American authors-F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*.

Moral corruption is the main issue that is covered in this essay and the efficiency of Fitzgerald in reflecting the collapse of ethical values is focused on.

INTRODUCTION

Roaring twenties is one of the most spectacular, enigmatic and complicated decades of the American society- a decade of dissipation, prosperity, a time of rebellion, the golden age of jazz bands, dancers, cinema and technological developments, but this image is just the visible side of the scene and generally misleading. The 1920's in the United States totally consists of deep conflicts when the rich were getting richer and the poor were getting poorer day by day. It is the decade of *bootleggers*- in other words smugglers who pretended as if they were so lucky that they made millions by working hard, being aware of their capacity and improving their minds and claim that they dealt with no such illegal business affairs and what really makes them dangerous is the infinite power they have that can abuse and intimidate any men who deduce and intend to prove their illegal acts. Those mean, evil men even do not hesitate before murdering a person; nothing could thwart the endless pursuit of dirty money. Immorality was overspread throughout the society. Materialistic passions had taken place of spiritual things. People were purified of their feelings and perfect happiness was likely to exist if you had money, brand new luxurious cars and a glorious house, even love could not make more massive impact than money for someone's life and not belonging the same strata with whom you loved, was a huge barrier that ruled out all the possibilities in order to marry her/him.

The American Dream concept was originally emerged from the idea that suggests the pursuit of perfect happiness. Every individual has right to have a comfortable life and liberty. However, it was never intended to ignore the moral values when climbing the social ladder. The society did not grasp the main idea of the American Dream, people put the money into the core of their lives, and the greediness of the society and the ambition of becoming an upper class person, which is not possible without being economically powerful, overshadowed the "real" American Dream. Consequently, The American Dream collapsed and this deterioration in the American Dream introduced the moral corruption in the society.

F. Scott Fitzgerald, one of the gifted handed authors in the American Literature, adroitly reflects the pursuit of social status and wealth in his masterpiece "*The Great Gatsby*" by focusing on many themes especially the most significant one- moral corruption in the American Society of Roaring twenties. The story is about a poor man- Jay Gatsby, who turns into a millionaire just in five years. All of the incidents throughout the story revolve around

Jay Gatsby's everlasting love, and his determination, obsessions, basically his ambitions that make him hypnotized and petrified. However, Gatsby is not the only single character who is morally deteriorated in the novel. Fitzgerald gives different perspectives of immorality in twenties by several different characters like Myrtle Wilson, Daisy Buchanan, Tom Buchanan, Meyer Wolfshiem, Jordan Baker and even George Wilson and Nick Carraway.

REFLECTING THE MORAL CORRUPTION through CHARACTERS

Myrtle Wilson

Myrtle Wilson is a lower class woman first introduced in chapter 2. F. S. Fitzgerald mirrors the moral corruption by fictioning a downtown character who always try to level up in the society by ignoring her honor, her loyalty to her husband and by becoming disrespectful to a married man's wife- Daisy Buchanan. Myrtle always intends to indicate herself as an upper class woman by her gestures, her acts; when she is with Tom Buchanan. To give an example; Myrtle's enthusiasm about having a police dog could be related to today's mainstream- having a teacup dog which nowadays regarded as an indispensable accessory that shows a woman's social status. The situation is more or less the same in twenties when a police dog completes a woman's attempts to demonstrate herself as an uptown girl. "She looked at me and laughed pointlessly, then she flounced over the dog, kissed it with ecstasy, and swept into the kitchen, implying that a dozen chefs awaited her orders there." (Fitzgerald, 34)

Being discontented with her real personality and feeling humiliated about being a repairman's wife, she gives up her real identity; but becomes an artificial, fake upper class woman. Tom has all the power as well as the money that he is able to give everything she is striving and the most crucial point is that he is like a tremendous step which leads her to the life she would always like to be a part of. That is why, she endures everything in order to be a part of Tom's life, she even tolerates physical abuse. "Making a short deft of movement, Tom Buchanan broke her nose with his open hand." (Fitzgerald, 39) In other words, she doesn't complain about being humiliated or doesn't feel ashamed of obeying a wealthy man or doesn't reproach to be a mistress; what she moans about is to be gas stationer's wife.

Myrtle becomes aware of the wrong decision she made which was marrying an empty-handed man, when she learned that her husband- George Wilson had borrowed his wedding

suit. She doesn't mind whether he loves or cares her; the only thing she minds is his being such a hopeless, pathetic man who is not even capable of buying a tuxedo for his wedding "The only crazy I was, was when I married him. I knew right away I made a mistake. He borrowed somebody's best suit to get married in, and never even told me about it, and the man came after it one day when he was out:" Oh is that your suit?" I said. "This is the first I ever heard about it." But I gave it to him and then I lay down and cried to beat the band all afternoon." (Fitzgerald, 37) Myrtle would rather be treated like a creep by a man who has money, instead of another man to whom she means everything.

Tom Buchanan

A married man's having an affair with a married woman and making no attempt to keep it concealed, is a kind of indicator of a demoralized society. Tom Buchanan, the antagonist of the novel is an arrogant, wealthy man from an old, well known family. He deals with no illegal business affair nor he is deeply willing to make a change in his social status by ignoring the moral facts. However, he is such a selfish man that considers a married woman as a fling and fools his wife. He has no intentions of marrying Myrtle. Furthermore, He just distracts Myrtle's attention by telling lies like his wife's being catholic, so that he can form a barrier against marrying Myrtle since Catholics do not believe in divorce. "It is really his wife that is keeping them apart, she's a catholic and they do not believe in divorce." (Fitzgerald, 36). It is obvious that the way he treats Myrtle is even worse than the way he treats Daisy. To him, Daisy is worth a three hundred thousand dollar pearl necklace ("...then he went into a jewellery store to buy a pearl necklace."- Fitzgerald 170), while Myrtle is worth a dog leash.

He got furious when he learned Daisy's relationship with Gatsby and pretended to be betrayed in a very despicable way by his wife and a man who always said "old sport", as if he always had moral conscience in his affair with Myrtle. A defeat against Gatsby, in other words Daisy's choice, would be the only single thing that could hurt Tom Buchanan. It was not the point that love would determine the winner. It was the matter of winner versus loser. Tom wanted nothing but to prove his superiority against Gatsby; he didn't concern about his wife's deep love. He just couldn't let her wife slip away to an illegal liquor dealer. " 'She is not leaving me!' Tom's words suddenly leaned down over Gatsby. 'Certainly not for a common swindler who'd have to steal the ring he put on her finger'" (Fitzgerald, 127)

Jordan Baker

Moral failures in the society are also reflected by Jordan Baker- a close friend of Daisy and the fling of Nick Carraway. Feeling no guilt because of lying and tricking people, showing no reactions against immoral relationships are mirrored by Jordan's arrangement of Gatsby's meeting with Daisy at Nick's home, which is another decay in the society. "He wants to know.' Continued Jordan. 'if you'll invite Daisy to your house some afternoon and then let him come over.'" (Fitzgerald, 76)

Her cheating in the golf tournament and concealing it in order to be the golf star also demonstrates the ambition of people who are strictly obsessed to prove themselves in the society.

Nick was ignorant to Jordan and She couldn't stand careless people; she was also likely to be aware of the fact that Nick was considering her as one of his ordinary affairs, just like another fling that is why she got engaged to another man. Nick was to blame for this engagement. However, Jordan's response to Nick's ignorance was confidentially having an affair and engaging with another man; in other words what Jordan did was to respond his partner's immoral behavior with an indecent way. "When I had finished she told me without comment that she was engaged to another man." (Fitzgerald, 168)

George Wilson

There are always specialized, unique people that decomposes from the society to a certain extent. However, the moral decline in the society even changes naïve people like George Wilson who is a gas stationer, a poor man married to Myrtle Wilson, who always strives for being a part of the luxurious life and regards her husband as a pathetic man.

Although, he was his wife's man and always respectful to his wife, he was transformed into an evil man because of the reflections of morally collapsed society, after he realized his wife's affair with another man. He locked his wife and it somehow caused the unfortunate car accident which resulted in the death of Myrtle, as she suddenly jumped in front of the Gatsby's yellow *Rolls Royce*, while getting away from George Wilson. After the

accident, he was convinced that Gatsby was her affair and he could do nothing but to get revenge by shooting Gatsby which was an indecent reaction from a decent man.

“Michaelis was astonished; they had been neighbors for four years and Wilson had never seemed faintly capable of such a statement.” (Fitzgerald, 130) Moral corruption alters George Wilson and gradually ruins and assimilates him to the other people. He even doesn't have the slightest interest in religion any more that he decides to end a man's life by his own hands, whereas he was a religious man before all of those progressive incidents. He used to say to Myrtle “You may fool me; but you can't fool God.” (Fitzgerald, 152) In this passage the very first signals of G. Wilson's transformation are perceived and interpreted by his neighbor Michaelis.

In a nutshell, George Wilson is a kind of evidence that supports the hypothesis which basically states, it is almost impossible to differentiate from the society; because the trends and the main habits of the community simply drag people and make them stereotypes, even if they intend to preserve themselves

Nick Carraway

Nick Carraway- the narrator of the novel and Daisy's cousin, has exceptional characteristics and admirable traits that not only distinguish him from the society, but also help him to be seen like a righteous, good gentleman. However, the moral side of Nick Carraway is nothing; but just what superficial and uncritical people sustain. Nick is an open minded, reliable person and a quiet listener; those of which are some fundamental values that a moral man should possess and these features of him simply indicate him as a confident man who can be relied on. Nevertheless, witnessing immoral affairs and showing no reaction to them (as Nick says ‘Did I have to know all this, before he could ask such a little thing?’ at the page 76) and handling the responsibility of arranging the meetings of the lovers is an expected behavior from a kind of degenerated person like Nick Carraway in the novel. Nick-the narrator of the story knows everything about all the lies, deceiving acts and hypocritical attitudes in the novel and doesn't react the existing neatness, expressing no contrast idea against all the tricks and everyone's attempts to fool the others , he doesn't even hesitate to support Gatsby's indecent request of meeting with Daisy in his house. “ ‘I'm going to call up Daisy tomorrow and invite her over here to tea’” (Fitzgerald, 79)

The only person whom Nick envies is Gatsby who is a smuggler and has an abundant of demoralized values. It is most likely that they share the same dream-being wealthy; but the only difference is that Nick knows where to abandon his dreams, realizing his moral failures unlike Gatsby and at least tried to change that he was no longer numb against the shameful, vicious tricks of Tom Buchanan, by objecting to shaking hands during his encounter with Tom in New York (Fitzgerald, 169). He finally figured out that the fast life of revelry on the East Coast was full of moral emptiness.

Nick was never seriously interested in a serious relationship with Jordan Baker, who was just a fling to him. He even didn't care Jordan's sudden, astonishing engagement. "She told me without comment that she was engaged with another man. I doubted that, though there were several she could have married at a nod of her head, but I pretended to be surprised."

Jordan summarizes their relationship and emphasizes his carelessness in a paragraph at page 168. "Nevertheless you did throw me over. You threw me over on the phone. I don't give a damn about you know..... You said a bad driver was only safe until she met another bad driver? Well I met another bad driver, didn't i? I mean it was careless of me to make such a wrong guess. I thought you were rather an honest, straightforward person. I thought it was your secret pride." (Fitzgerald, 162) Nick is a kind of hypocrite that seems to seek morality, but does the same similar things like the other people, while judging them.

Meyer Wolfshiem

Meyer Wolfshiem is the companion, business partner and *the old sport* of Jay Gatsby. Besides, dealing with illegal business acts, he is such an amoral man that he would not even like to be bothered with his closest friend's- Gatsby's neither tragic murder nor his funeral, whom Wolfshiem claims that "they were so thick like that in everything." (Fitzgerald, 162); as he states in his letter, which is sent to Nick Carraway, "I cannot come down as I'm tied up in some very important business and cannot get mixed up in this thing right now." (Fitzgerald 157). The letter basically emphasizes that the friendship has no value and the only contact that keeps two men together is nothing but business affairs, in other words dazzling, tremendous

effect of the money. However, the bitterest fact of the moral corruption is somehow echoed by Meyer Wolfsheimer, which is being aware of having already been morally collapsed; and adopting the situation, adopting the type of character he has been. “ ‘When a man gets killed I never liked to get mixed up in it in any way. I keep it out. When I was young man, it was different- if a friend of mine died, no matter how, I stuck with them to the end. You may think that’s sentimental, but I mean it- to the bitter end.’” (Fitzgerald 163) He strongly believes, there must be sacrifices; but those things belong to past and they were in such a period that the person himself was the most important thing in the world and cannot be in voluntary exposure to unnecessary danger, no matter what happens to the others even if he was the closest friend.

Daisy Buchanan

The sharpest edges of immorality is resounded by Daisy Buchanan who is partially based on Fitzgerald’s wife- Zelda. She is the everlasting love and obsession of Jay Gatsby; Nick’s cousin; the pretty, popular, uptown girl among the military officers; and most importantly the symbol of disloyalty, weakness of mind, *vast carelessness* and materialism in the United States of Roaring Twenties.

She was falling for Gatsby, but she was so sensible that she knew, she could have no future with poor Gatsby, as they were living in a society where the very first thing that used to be taught rich girls, they could not be with a man who belonged to a lower strata. That is why, she married to a rich man with no hesitations, being disrespectful and disloyal to Gatsby. Although, she became happy during the very first years of her marriage, it all turned into a mess and she complained her being so wise before marrying him.

“I’m glad it’s a girl and I hope she’ll be fool- that’s the best thing a girl can be in this world, a beautiful little fool.” (Fitzgerald, 22) She somehow supports her daughter being fool which means being a kind of moral person, in twenties, which demonstrates, Daisy is likely to believe that morality brings happiness, yet she is still after immoral dreams, but this time having an affair with Gatsby, as a married woman. “As he left the room again, she got up and went over to Gatsby and pulled his face down, kissing him on the mouth.” (Fitzgerald, 111) She kissed him, not caring her daughter’s being there.

Her affair with Gatsby could be regarded as an honorable action, if she strictly held on her passions, her dreams by defending her love and struggling against all the accusations, despite being a married woman. However, she always chooses the easier way. She doesn't protect Gatsby during the conversation in the hotel room which includes Tom, Gatsby and Daisy. Gatsby claims that she has always loved him, but she just says she once loved Tom and she loves him now. In fact, what she mentions, is not love, being hypnotized by money, once in her vulnerable younger years and once as a married woman...Even Gatsby is aware of the materialistic passion she is in. When he says "Her voice is full of money." (Fitzgerald, 115)

She was the genuine material girl, who always focused on the outward, giving no respect to love. "She never loved you, do you hear? She only married you because I was poor and she was tired of waiting for me." (Fitzgerald, 124) Tom bought a hundred thousand dollar, pearl necklace for her and somehow she realized that she loved him. Gatsby showed her his tremendous mansion and she suddenly became interested in Gatsby, as if he had casted a spell on her. Moreover, she didn't confess her being the murderer of Myrtle Wilson, instead she preferred to leave the town, leaving no address or any message to Gatsby and Nick. She always ran away from the harsh times by showing enormous carelessness and ignorance. The only thing she minded was not getting any trouble. "They were careless people Tom and Daisy- they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made..." (Fitzgerald, 170)

In other words, Daisy mirrored the typical features of the 20s when emotions weren't enough to fulfill the dreams, and the most bizarre thing was to mention about love, as the U.S. had already lost their souls.

Jay Gatsby

The “Great” Gatsby is the protagonist of the novel who is the center of all the actions and who is somehow related with all the moral corruptions in the story. He is like the combination of the every single character that the features of the characters harmonize in his character, he especially resembles Nick and Myrtle in many aspects, as well as F. Scott Fitzgerald’s himself, since it is asserted by many authorities that Fitzgerald was inspired by his affair with his wife before writing this novel. The thing that provides him not to show any resemblance with someone else is the strong determination and the ability to create a new identity which makes him unique and *great* in Nick’s eyes, since many people share almost the same dream with him, but no one could achieve it unlike Gatsby. It was most likely that no one was that morally blind like Gatsby, even though Gatsby himself shows some moral behaviours throughout the story like taking the blame of the accident.

“I found out what your drug-stores were. He and this Wolfshiem bought up a lot of side street drug-stores here and in Chicago and sold grain alcohol over the counter.....Walter could have you up on the betting laws too, but Wolfshiem scared him into shutting his mouth” (Fitzgerald, 127-128) Gatsby tries everything in order to be rich by giving up his moral values. Being wealthy is everything to him. Ambition and greediness takes place of morality in those days.

“It amazed him he had never been such a beautiful house before.” (Fitzgerald, 141) When he first meets with Daisy, he envies her house or at least he feels like he is obliged to own a house like Daisy’s so that he could be with her. That is why the very first thing he does is to exhibit his mansion to Daisy. He wanted to prove that he is no longer weak; but one of the most powerful men in the whole country in economic aspects. In fact, Gatsby’s love may not be real love either. It is like an obsession and a hard goal to reach since he was poor and most of the men in the town had already fallen in love with Daisy. “It excited him too, that many men had already fallen in love with Daisy- it increased her value in his eyes.” (Fitzgerald, 141) By reaching his aim, he would prove himself many things and Daisy would be a kind of bridge that would make him an upper class person or at least make him feel like somehow leveled up in the society.

Gatsby and Myrtle, they both would like to be a part of the upper class, that is why they are obsessed with certain people; but the difference is that Gatsby sways his own way

and reaches his goal by his own efforts; whereas Myrtle adopts the role of being an upper class men's mistress.

CONCLUSION

The Great Gatsby- the beautiful, romantic, dazzling experience for the reader and one of the most famous masterpiece of F. Scott Fitzgerald, whose legacy to American Literature has influenced and impressed many generations from decade to decade, reflects the basic instincts of human beings- the hollow pursuit of wealth and social status, consumptionism and materialism of a totally corrupted society, especially in moral perspectives, in Roaring Twenties- the glamorous age of jazz bands. It is such a community that a man only calls for another man's mansion in order to get back his tennis shoes from his house without being bothered with the man's funeral, instead of showing his respect to him by attending his funeral and God knows he doesn't even know him, yet he comes to his party. The priority of everyone is nothing but to have fun that they even dare to go to someone's mansion whom they don't know and shamelessly characterizing the mansion as an *amusement park*. (chapter 3) Fitzgerald creates a portrait of reckless disregard for consequences; selfishness and ugliness of the morally corrupted American society by fictioning the characters according to those days' social trends which makes money and the other materialistic things the most fundamental necessities in the society by mirroring how people strive for climbing the social ladder by ignoring their moral values.

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