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Disillusionment in *The Great Gatsby*: The Importance of Authorial Intent

The Great Gatsby is a widely read text and is popular among both critics and in high school English curriculum. The novel is not solely read for its plot or memorable characters; it is mainly analyzed by critics because of the multitude of ways in which the work is interpreted. Due to the number of critics interpreting the work, there are many critical factions on *The Great Gatsby*. There are two broad categories of criticism. The first group studies and interprets the work based off of ideologies or broad themes, and the second group studies the imagery of the novel. Both categories have a degree of merit; however, there is one thing that not many critics in either category bring up as a major topic of discussion. F. Scott Fitzgerald's own life and intents for the novel are typically pushed to the side in favor of a critic's own thoughts on the work. I propose *The Great Gatsby* needs to be looked at with Fitzgerald's intentions. In order to do this, I will be discussing the relationship between Fitzgerald and the characters of Nick and Gatsby, the idea of the American Dream with the depiction of societal corruption, and the use of imagery to prove Fitzgerald argues for a disillusioned worldview. Through the

influences of Modernism, F. Scott Fitzgerald in *The Great Gatsby* presents a disillusioned world as the correct view of society through the progression of stripping away illusions of the setting and characters.

Authorial intent and the extent to which it matters has been debated among literary theorists for decades. Within criticism of *The Great Gatsby*, there are a few critics like Merton Sealts and Paul Giles who argue for using authorial intent in the novel, but the majority of critics do not adhere to Fitzgerald's intentions. R.S. Crane, in his essay "Toward a More Adequate Criticism of Poetic Structure" defends the use of authorial input within a work. Crane does not believe that a critic should explain every thought of an author on their work, but a critic should look for "the actual rationale of the poem's construction in terms of the poetic problems the writer faced and the reasons which determined his solutions" (775). In order to understand the nuances of the work, critics must understand the particulars of the historical and poetic problems the writer faced. After World War I, many people became disillusioned with the world. Many people lost their faith in God, in humanity and in society. Romano Guardini in his book *The End of the Modern World* comments upon this shift towards disillusionment in society: "with the breakdown of the old world picture, man came to feel now only that he had been placed in a life of strange contradictions" (34). These contradictions were most notable in literature. The rise of Modernism in literature was spurred on by

the after effects of the Great War. As David Trotter explains in his essay “The Modernist novel”, after the war “there was also a feeling, more prevalent among writers than among critics, that the novel as traditionally conceived was no longer up to the job: that its imaginary worlds did not, in fact, correspond to the way one’s fellows spent their entire lives” (69). There was a push in literature among authors specifically to reflect the disillusionment which many felt after the war. Fitzgerald at the time of writing *The Great Gatsby* was influenced by the impact of World War I and other great writers and thinkers of the time, like T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and James Joyce, who were slanted towards the idea of a disillusioned world. After reading James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Fitzgerald praised the novel calling it “the great novel of the future” and in Fitzgerald’s letters he is constantly bringing up the names of these other aforementioned Modernist writers which demonstrates his attachment and admiration for the direction of literature becoming more mimetic in the use of stream of consciousness writing style (“10 Best Books”). *The Great Gatsby*, though primarily told through the eyes of Nick Carraway, has little snapshots which feel disjointed with the overall story. One such instance is when Daisy, Gatsby and Nick are all at Gatsby’s mansion and Mr. Klipspringer sits down to play the piano where little sections of the song are interspersed with Nick’s observations (95). In this way, Fitzgerald uses small bursts of stream of

consciousness in order to reveal what the character and setting represent in his overall interpretation of the work illustrating a disillusioned society.

The character of Nick Carraway is the main mouthpiece for Fitzgerald's intention of describing and exploring a disillusioned society through his role as the narrator. The similarities do not stop at the narrator and writer similarities.

Fitzgerald creates Nick to be like himself: a boy from the Midwest who moved to the East but still feels like more of an observer than someone who belongs exemplified again by the many times in which Fitzgerald references other major writers and thinkers in his letters but leaves himself out of the picture.

In the beginning of *The Great Gatsby*, Nick states that "reserving judgements is a matter of infinite hope" (2). Nick's problem, however, is that he judges practically everyone he meets in some way or another. No matter how open-minded one stretches themselves to be, one eventually has to reach a conclusion on a person's character since people unconsciously judge and compare each other. Nick is a manifestation of Fitzgerald's capabilities to judge and also to try and withhold judgement. Merton Sealts in his article "Scott Fitzgerald and *The Great Gatsby*: A Reappraisal" discusses Fitzgerald's similarities and differences between his works and the relationship between Fitzgerald, Gatsby and Nick. For the relationship between Fitzgerald and Nick, Sealts states: "He endowed Nick with the same ironic detachment he had practiced himself in his earlier fiction"

(152). Sealts connects Nick with Fitzgerald as they both have this “double vision” where they are able to perceive the world from multiple perspectives. Nick is given the ability to see with both ironic detachment and with a meaningful understanding of the particularities of life. Nick, like Fitzgerald, tries to suspend judgement and attempts to see other characters from a different perspective, but ultimately, he falls short and resorts to judgement leading him to think better of Tom and Daisy in largely forgiving their moral failings while being more skeptical of Gatsby and Myrtle. Fitzgerald put his perspectives into the novel through the character of Nick in order to comment upon the shifting worldview he witnessed without strictly attaching his name to the commentary. Through these uncoincidental similarities Nick serves as a device for Fitzgerald in order to gain aesthetic distance between himself and his portrayal of this worldview.

There is a line of critics who see the novel as an anthem for positivity and dreaming despite the obstacles. Critics like Johnson and Gunn believe that Fitzgerald, through the characters of Gatsby and Nick, advocates for the idea of persevering in dreaming despite obstacles. It is true, Nick, though being critical of Gatsby, still idealizes him in some capacity, even though these idealized versions ultimately die due to the worldview presented in the novel. In the first chapter, Nick discusses how he never truly liked or agreed with Gatsby, but how he still respected him. He admits that Gatsby represented “everything for which I have an

unaffected scorn” (2). This comment occurs before the reader is even introduced to Gatsby, so it is an important piece of information to how Fitzgerald, through the character of Nick, is able to critique and set up Gatsby’s character to be viewed in a more objective perspective than when Gatsby is truly introduced. From the same page, Nick describes how due to Gatsby’s death, he was unable for a time to be interested in the “abortive sorrows and the short-winded elations of men” (2). Though Nick states that he was only affected for a short amount of time, the imagery he presents especially surrounding the valley of ashes is affected. (an argument elaborated on later in the paper). Through the death of Gatsby, Nick was able to see how society and the dealings of others seem meaningless. During a flashback directly after the funeral, Nick remembers how it felt to go home to the Midwest for Christmas “we drew in deep breaths of it as we walked back...unutterably aware of our identity with this country for one strange hour, before we melted indistinguishably into it again” (176). Fitzgerald notes how being away from society gives a person clarity about their own place in the world and going back into society makes a person into a larger communal idea. Nick is now reflecting not just on Gatsby’s death, but on societal ideals which he recognizes as illusions.

One of the main reasons critics and readers believe Gatsby is the hero of the novel is because of his dedication to his dream. As Johnson declares “the human

condition is to aspire” and both Johnson and Giles Gunn believe that Gatsby’s ability to aspire and imagine is the secret to the novel’s success (117). Indeed, Gatsby’s determination would be admirable in any other goal, however, winning the affections of a married woman is not a good thing in which to aspire. It is not even merely winning the affections of Daisy, but the activity of trying to relive and erase the past, which is something that no human being can do. Though readers do like to entertain the possibility of the impossible, it is upsetting that Gatsby is determined to succeed in the impossible, as with certainty he will fail. Gatsby does get close to obtaining his goal as he wins Daisy’s love again, but he asks too much of her in asking her to re-do the past (132). Gatsby’s impossible dream is a parallel to the dreams of Americans at this time. After World War I, Americans had high hopes for society and world relations; the economy in the 1920s was booming, and society was shifting so that there was a new middle class who could afford to live in comfort. Americans wanted to believe in this impossible dream that anyone could achieve this new life of luxury and that there would be no more wars. Fitzgerald and other thinkers at the time would have been able to look at the shifting politics in Europe: namely the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia and understand that this dream of a bright future full of peace for everyone was impossible. There was hardship and crisis which was masked with optimism for the future. Gatsby represents these optimistic dreamers who mask the reality of

suffering and believe that solely focusing on a specific dream will make everything better. Gatsby masks his suffering of losing Daisy with the illusion that he can turn back time to win her love. Fitzgerald through contradicting Gatsby's idealism with his death and impossibility of his dream of ever becoming reality reflects the dreams of the American people for peace and success.

Related to the dreams of the American people is the most popular idea of many critics of *The Great Gatsby*, which is interpreting the work through the ideology of the American Dream. This popular interpretation coincides with the idea that the novel presents American society as corrupt and meaningless. One critic, Marius Bewley, in his essay "Scott Fitzgerald's Criticism of America" argues that the novel is a depiction of the American Dream in a time of societal corruption. Societal corruption in this case means the abuse of the entrusted power given to society for private gain. More simply, if one were to trust in the ideals of society rather than relying on their own ideals, then one is more likely to become corrupt by societal illusions. The American Dream is the idea that anyone, regardless of their status can become successful in society as long as they work hard enough. It is one of the founding ideals of America that hard work will result in success, but this ideal is thwarted in *The Great Gatsby*. Gatsby works his way to the top, thus seemingly achieving the American Dream. He even deceives Nick the first time they truly get to talk in the car on the way to have dinner in New York

where Gatsby tells Nick that he inherited his wealth from his dead relatives in the Midwest when in fact he earned his money through illegal means. Even earning his way to the top using deceitful means he does not get to enjoy his wealth as all he wants is Daisy. He also ends up dead with no one coming to attend his funeral except his father and Nick. Not only does the novel contradict the American Dream, it brutally kills the one person who achieves it. This brings to light the illusion of the American Dream since no one can achieve it in the novel.

Peter Hays, another critic in support for the interpretation of the American Dream argues that in the novel “Fitzgerald condemns the rampant, heedless commercialism of his era, as well as the rigid classism based on wealth, of which he felt he had been a victim” (171). Indeed, through the perspective of Nick, readers can view the differences in classes especially between Tom, Daisy and Jordan against Myrtle, Wilson and even Gatsby who seems to be a part of the rich and elite, but all three die. All three become entangled with the world of the rich and end up dead by association. They represent the mortality and brutality of society to those who try and climb the social ladder with no relatives or inheritance to fall back on. In order to prove Hays’ claim that Fitzgerald himself felt this rigid classism, there needs to be an investigation in his letters. In his letters to his editor, Max Perkins, Fitzgerald is consistently concerned and asks many questions about the pricing of his books, especially comparing his prices to other major authors at

the time, which could lead one to believe that he was concerned about his own wealth and classism as well as the wealth of others. The fact that Myrtle, Gatsby and Wilson all die indicates that the American Dream is an illusion that characters may try to reach but it will always be out-of-grasp.

One of the main divides in the criticism of *The Great Gatsby* is between looking at the imagery and looking at the ideals. The imagery which Fitzgerald provides is very important for his message of disillusionment in society. Fitzgerald is able to use images in juxtaposition to illustrate the worldview he presents in the novel. W. J. Harvey notes that Fitzgerald's use of language portrays the disillusionment of society especially in juxtaposition with imaginative language. Fitzgerald uses this imaginative language to distinguish between the illusions and the disillusioned worldview he presents. This juxtaposition of images is commonplace throughout the novel, but one of the most important and starkly contrasting images is in the setting. The imagery surrounding New York and the Buchanan's house is much different than the imagery used for the pile of ashes where Myrtle and Wilson live. Nick, on first arriving at the Buchanan's house notes "their house was more elaborate than I expected, a cheerful red-and-white Georgian Colonial mansion...the lawn started at the beach and ran towards the front door...jumping over sun-dials and brick walls and burning gardens...it reached the house drifting up the side...as though from the momentum of its run"

(6). The house seems to have a life of its own, being described as “cheerful” and the lawn is “running” up to the house. Both images evoke positive and lively emotions. The pile of ashes, which is purposefully never given a name, evokes opposite imagery: “this is the valley of ashes—a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens...of men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air” (23). The valley of ashes is described in bleak, dark, and hazy imagery which leads to a stark contradiction between the rich who live in the East Egg and the regular people who live between the rich and New York. The small detail about the men who are “already crumbling” is an image of hopelessness and disillusionment. The implication is that these men have no meaning to their lives and are just wasting away, slowly dying, becoming ashes. Fitzgerald could have just as easily written these scenes without the amount of specific imagery. These instances of juxtaposition in imagery exemplify how Fitzgerald argues for a disillusioned worldview since the regular non-rich characters are described in terms of ash and only the rich, the end goal of the American Dream, are described in vivid detail.

One of the main arguments which cements this idea of dying dreams in a hopeless society is in the final few paragraphs of the novel. Fitzgerald after presenting most of the story through the specifics of Gatsby, Daisy and Tom now generalizes it into a concluding message more applicable to the audience. Nick,

distraught and introspective over the death of Gatsby, goes to the beach, lies in the sand and thinks about America and how it looked to the settlers in comparison to how it looks now. He thinks of how America must have looked so appealing to those sailors as “a fresh, green beast”, a “new world” and Fitzgerald/Nick immediately undercuts this “enchanted” moment by stating that this is the last time in history that anyone would be face to face with something “commensurate to his capacity for wonder” (180). Fitzgerald in this sentence states that nothing else has ever lived up to man’s capacity for imagination and illusion than the blank slate that America must have looked like to the Dutch sailors. Even this moment is ironic as America was indeed not a blank slate as there were people living on the land. Compared to this moment, the present and the future look grim because human expectation and imagination is greater than what reality can provide. Nick then compares the vision of the sailors to Gatsby looking at the green light on the end of Daisy’s dock and how he must have felt as though his dream would come true; Nick also asserts that Gatsby did not know that his dream would never be realized because it was “already behind him” (180). Nick/Fitzgerald, in reflecting on the last moment that the human capacity for imagination was met, highlights the impossibility of Gatsby’s dream. This does not stop people from idealizing Gatsby’s determination for following his dream, but it does point out the hopelessness and impossibility of his dream. Nick states that Gatsby believes in the

future and Fitzgerald adds that the future “year by year recedes before us” (180). The word “recedes” leaves no doubt that Fitzgerald believes that human hopes for the future is impossible as the idea of progress becomes less tangible. All of these implicit thoughts conclude in the final line of the novel: “So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past” (180). It is the strangest combination of happy and hopeful metaphors mixed with stinging irony. The mix of hopeful imagery has led many critics, like Johnson and Gunn to the belief that this sentence is a call to action for people to keep dreaming no matter the impossibility of the realization of their dreams, however, there is no denying that the adverb “ceaselessly” has a defeatist and hopeless attitude. If Fitzgerald’s intended message was to keep on dreaming no matter the inevitable outcome, there would be more imagery and instances in the novel which point to this message. Fitzgerald explains that humanity perpetuates unattainable ideals that pass from generation to generation. Just as Gatsby was swept away by an impossible dream, so, argues Fitzgerald, society at the time was being swept away by illusions.

Critics should give more weight to the thoughts and ideals of F. Scott Fitzgerald which were written into *The Great Gatsby*. In order to fully understand the nuances of the novel, as R.S. Crane proposes, one must look back to the authorial intention and the rhetorical situation of the author. F. Scott Fitzgerald’s decision to present disillusionment as the correct worldview in *The Great Gatsby*

was influenced explicitly by the Modernist Literary movement towards mimetic storytelling techniques and overall story. *The Great Gatsby* through its imagery, characters, and setting exhibits these more mimetic qualities by together arguing for a disillusioned worldview in the novel.