
How did Illicit Activities Shape *The Great Gatsby*?

Ludmila Duchini

The Great Gatsby can be considered by many people the greatest American novel due to its distinct portrayal of the Jazz Age and the 1920s, its poetic style, and its narratology. Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald (1896–1940) was an American author who was part of the Lost Generation and who also served in the U.S. Army. He was married to Zelda Sayre, with whom he shared a lifestyle full of massive expenditures, journeys, parties and alcohol. These characteristics of Fitzgerald coincide with many of the characters in his novel. The Roaring Twenties was a period very well known for its great technological and economic development, and its flourishing art and creativity. In the music field, African Americans were the protagonists due to the popularity that jazz music gained. This was a consequence of the Eighteenth Amendment and Volstead Act, which prohibited the sale, transportation and manufacture of alcohol throughout the entire country. Due to this prohibition, speakeasies, in which jazz music was played, thrived since they were the centre of illegal activities such as the sale of alcohol:

By 1929 the police commissioner of New York City estimated that there were 32,000 nightclubs and underground leisure speakeasies. Such a climate made drunkenness a badge of social prestige and conspicuous consumption or a sign of individual valour against conformity and puritan repression (Currell, 2009, p. 177).

Prohibition and its illicit consequences shaped this decade, and these are one of the main topics portrayed in *The Great Gatsby*. To begin with, the reader can see alcohol consumption present in almost every scene, which represents how common, attractive and fashionable this banned activity was. Some examples of this are Nick getting drunk in a small party at an apartment in New York; Daisy drinking a bottle of Sauterne before her wedding; Tom and Daisy Buchanan serving alcohol in all the meetings they host, and, the most important one, Gatsby's parties. These parties are portrayed as the most popular events in the city because they are full of excesses and illicit activities. Although nobody really knows the host, everybody wants to go to his mansion only for superficial reasons. They are trendy, people can see celebrities and spectacles, and more significantly, they feel free to eat and drink as much as they want. McGowan (2010) describes these parties as "a countercultural space for carnival excess beyond the constraints of a Prohibition culture outside its gates" (p. 148).

For every demand, there is somebody who offers it, and in order to satisfy the market, criminal organizations began to appear: "Enacted in response to agitation by temperance societies, Prohibition encouraged a sharp rise in organized crime and public mayhem as rival gangs competed for market share in the booming bootleg industry" (Rzepka, 2009, p. 456). Furthermore, Rzepka explains that these organizations made massive profits by selling alcohol and gained incredible power throughout the entire nation, and as a consequence, there was corruption even from the authorities which were easy to bribe by these influential criminals (p. 456). In *The Great Gatsby*, Gatsby is a character who came up from nothing and ended up being incredibly wealthy, although, during most of the novel, it is a mystery how he made such a large amount of money.

The reader discovers how Jay Gatsby became very rich when he approaches the end of the book. When Gatsby and Tom fight in the Plaza Hotel for Daisy's love, Tom confesses that he knew how Gatsby made his fortune: "He and this Wolfshiem bought up a lot of side-street drug-stores here and in Chicago and sold grain alcohol over the counter" (Fitzgerald, 1925/2010, p. 109). Gatsby's answer is: "What about it? I guess your friend Walter Chase wasn't too proud to come in on it" (Fitzgerald, 1925/2010, p. 109), which confirms what Tom has revealed. Moreover, all of this is said while a bottle of whiskey, which has been brought by Tom, is on the table. This part of the story not only shows that the reason why Gatsby had gained so much power and wealth was his involvement in an illicit business, but also how hypocritical it was for Tom to accuse him of being a criminal while he possessed alcohol and had been drinking during the whole novel. Besides, Gatsby's naturalness while answering suggests that he did not feel ashamed nor regretful because it was a common activity in which almost the entire nation was involved; if someone was not a seller, it was likely that he was a customer.

Moreover, *The Great Gatsby* also portrays how powerful people can bribe officials and get away with an illegal practice. When Gatsby and Nick are going to have lunch in Manhattan and a policeman pulls them over, Gatsby waves a white card in front of his face. As soon as the officer recognizes him, he apologizes and lets Gatsby get away with driving faster than the speed limit. Gatsby explains to Nick that this happened because he had done the commissioner a favour once. Fitzgerald did not state explicitly what this favour was about, but this part suggests that the police knew about Gatsby's business and, although he was a criminal, they decided to look the other way because they were also corrupt and somehow involved in his illegal organization.

The Great Gatsby is a novel that represents very vividly and accurately what the U.S. was like in the 1920s. It shows how Prohibition led to a nation in which almost all of its citizens practiced banned activities and how this was considered something completely ordinary. Gangsters were not the only criminals; from common people to authorities, every social group was involved in the alcohol market. This also reflects how many people could rise to a new social class by taking advantage of the Eighteenth Amendment and Volstead Act. The Prohibition ended up achieving the complete opposite goal that the government wanted to achieve, and Fitzgerald represented this social aspect of the decade in a masterly way.

References

- Fitzgerald, F. S. (2010). *The Great Gatsby*. Vintage Classics. (Original work published 1925)
- Currell, S. (2009). *American Culture in the 1920s*. Edinburgh University Press Ltd.
- McGowan P. (2010). The American Carnival of *The Great Gatsby*. In H. Bloom (Ed.), *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby—New Edition* (pp. 145-156). Infobase Publishing.
- Rzepka, C. J. (2009). Twentieth-Century American Crime and Detective Fiction. In J. T. Matthews (Ed.), *A Companion to the Modern American Novel 1900–1950* (pp. 454-465). Blackwell Publishing Ltd.