
The Many Layers of Jay Gatsby

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Despite being a member of the Lost Generation, F. Scott Fitzgerald found a way to be remembered through *The Great Gatsby*. The novel provides a critical outlook of the USA during the Prohibition, Jazz Age and Roaring Twenties while exploring themes of decadence, class inequality, the American Dream and American modernism. And while some of his other novels deal with similar concepts, like *This Side of Paradise* (1920) and *The Beautiful and Damned* (1922), or include Fitzgerald's own experiences and relationships, like *Tender Is the Night* (1934) and *The Last Tycoon* (published posthumously in 1941), it is *The Great Gatsby* that is considered one of the greatest American novels. Even though there are myriads of reasons to cite as the novel's success, the complex character of Jay Gatsby and everything he represents is undeniably one of them.

Gatsby is not a simple character. Of course, no character is simple, but Gatsby in particular possesses an incredible number of layers that make him stand out in the novel as the most intricate character of all. While he starts out as a simple man who loves luxury, by the end he comes to symbolize much more, where his life and journey become everybody's life and journey. However, even then there is more to him than meets the eye. Gatsby is like an iceberg, at first glance he seems small and unambiguous, but an immense bulk hides under the surface.

The tip of the iceberg constitutes Gatsby's pure and unadulterated greed. A greed for wealth, possessions and success. This is common to every person in the world. Everybody dreams of being successful and well-off. The capitalist society we live in has cultivated this ideal life in our minds where we can only be happy if we are prosperous. In the surface layer lies the primordial sin of greed that affects all of humankind.

But in the second layer, we find that this profound desire for wealth is only a means to an end: to gain the love of Daisy Buchanan. This devotion to another person, this idea that Gatsby has spent his entire life becoming the man he is now only to win Daisy back is extremely romantic. In the face of this love, greed turns pure and is almost justified. In the face of love, nothing one does can be wrong. The superficiality of Gatsby's actions gains a whole new, more wholesome significance than before.

However, we need only look deeper to know that Daisy is not just a romantic interest, but rather an object. She symbolizes Gatsby's achievement of happiness, and that happiness involves the desire to acquire. Gatsby said it himself: "Her voice is full of money,'(...)." (Fitzgerald, 1925/2019, p. 103), and Nick recognizes "It excited him too that many men had already loved Daisy—it increased her value in his eyes." (Fitzgerald, 1925/2019, p. 126). This means that his idea of eternal blitheness is deeply connected to the acquisition of money, property, possessions, assets, simply amassing a great fortune. But this fits the time and era where Gatsby is placed, since he "(...) is materialistic because (...) material life offers one of the few recognized ways in which the American can express his idealism." (Berman, 2001, p. 86).

Nevertheless, at the end of the novel, Gatsby is redeemed and becomes a symbol for originary American hope. Through this glorification, he comes to stand as the perfect personification of the American dream, a man that, through hard work and perseverance, achieved his ultimate goal, a

self-made man. Yet, we can only absolve him by forgetting every act he has committed all throughout the novel: his corruption, bootlegging, adultery and being an accessory to murder. This cleanse is stated just a few paragraphs before the ending:

(...) I went over and looked at that huge incoherent failure of a house once more. On the white steps an obscene word, scrawled by some boy with a piece of brick, stood out clearly in the moonlight and I erased it, drawing my shoe raspily along the stone. (Fitzgerald, 1925/2019, p. 152).

Only by eradicating this obscenity, the last remnant of Gatsby in his house, can he finally embody the originary American hope. But this obscenity is not only all the deeds he perpetrated in his waking life, but rather the one thing that needs to be eliminated in order for Gatsby to become the image of American identity, and that is “Gatsby’s racial indeterminacy, his troubling ‘off-whiteness’, and his link to ethnic criminality.” (Will, 2010, p. 136). By quickly scraping away the obscenity staining the *white* steps with a shoe, like one would squash a cockroach, we remove the racial overtones that Gatsby was attributed with by Fitzgerald himself. Gatsby is a character that constantly vanishes: he disappeared on Daisy, he was rarely seen at his own parties and his life was almost entirely unknown, merely whispers in the mouths of his guests, until he finally disappeared from the world entirely. Fitzgerald writes those unassuming lines, where the obscene word is never even revealed and seems to have no practical purpose in the novel, with a clear motive, since by placing these words near the end, near Gatsby’s redemption, he calls attention to them deliberately, and by doing this he

seems to be suggesting that the crucial turn in the text (...) takes place by means of the same mechanism of ‘vanishing’ that lies at the heart of his obscene indeterminacy. If the threat of Gatsby in the text lies precisely in the way in which he ‘vanishes’ from categorization and social or racial signification, then Nick’s erasure of the obscene word stages a similar process (...) (Will, 2010, p. 138).

The name Jay Gatsby or James Gatz was not chosen haphazardly either. As Richard Godden points out: “(...) we should perhaps remember that ‘Gat’, the root shared by Gatz and Gatsby, in German means ‘hole’ and in Dutch ‘hole, gap, break’.” (Godden, 2009, p. 195). But, whereas Godden takes the meaning of hole, I choose to take the Dutch meaning of “gap”, since there is an undeniable gap between James Gatz and Jay Gatsby, but also between the corrupted, racially indeterminate Gatsby and the symbol of American modernism Gatsby. In order for the novel to have the ending that Fitzgerald intended, the first Gatsby must be erased, this “gap” must be abridged and mended, as if there was something that needed to be mended in the first place.

When most people think of Gatsby, they think of his wealth, of his love for Daisy and his thwarted attempt to get her back. They see the quintessential American Man of the 1920’s, roaring and jazzy, but they forget everything that Gatsby was in-between the beginning and the ending of the novel, everything that he represented and was stripped from him by the very person that created him in the first place. His essence is not being the representation of the “Great American Man”, but rather the opposite, which was not considered so great at the time. In the end, Gatsby’s greatness lies in the fact that he represented everything that needed to be represented and was dearly lacking in the twenties, and we can find this only in the deepest layer that lies at the bottom of the ocean.

References

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