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CAMPUS DE EXCELENCIA INTERNACIONAL



**DEPARTAMENTO DE FILOLOGÍA INGLESA  
FACULTAD DE FILOLOGÍA**

UNIVERSIDAD DE SALAMANCA

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GRADO EN ESTUDIOS INGLESES

Trabajo de Fin de Grado

***THE GREAT GATSBY: A  
MEDITATION ON AMERICAN  
SOCIETY IN THE 1920's***

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**Resumen:**

Este trabajo de fin de grado tiene como finalidad analizar el retrato que Francis Scott Fitzgerald hace de la sociedad de su época en su obra más famosa, *The Great Gatsby*. El trabajo se centrará en analizar como a través de los distintos personajes que aparecen en la obra, Fitzgerald realiza una fuerte crítica de factores como el capitalismo, el consumismo o el materialismo, centrándose en el impacto que estos tuvieron en la sociedad Norteamericana de los años veinte. Al mismo tiempo, la conexión que se realiza en el trabajo entre la obra de Fitzgerald y otra importante obra de la literatura del siglo XX, *The Waste Land*, permite apreciar que los aspectos tratados por Fitzgerald en su novela realmente preocupaban a los escritores del momento.

**Abstract:**

The aim of this essay is to analyse the ways in which Francis Scott Fitzgerald portrays the society of his time in his most famous work, *The Great Gatsby*. This essay will focus on analysing how by means of the different characters appearing in the novel, Fitzgerald strongly criticises aspects such as capitalism, consumerism and materialism through the impact they had on the American society in the 1920's. At the same time, the connection between Fitzgerald's work and another important twentieth-century literary work, *The Waste Land*, allows us to realize that the themes discussed by Fitzgerald in his novel really concerned the writers of the time.

**Palabras clave:** Estados Unidos, Felices años veinte, corrupción, materialismo, consumismo, falta de valores, clases sociales, prosperidad, publicidad, infelicidad, tierra baldía.

**Keywords:** United States, Roaring Twenties, corruption, materialism, consumerism, lack of values, social classes, prosperity, advertising, unhappiness, waste land.

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*The Great Gatsby* has become so much a fact of American literature . . . that it is almost impossible to imagine contemporary American fiction without Jay Gatsby.<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, *The Great Gatsby* is considered a masterpiece of twentieth-century American Literature. Nevertheless, in the year of its publication, 1925, there were few who were able to appreciate the true value of Francis Scott Fitzgerald's work. Proof of this is the fact that sales were below expectations. The previous novels published by Fitzgerald, *This Side of Paradise* (1920) and *The Beautiful and Damned* (1922), had a significant better reception from both critics and readers. According to Scott Donaldson, "during Fitzgerald's lifetime *Gatsby* sold fewer than 24,000 copies . . . less than half the totals for *Paradise* or *Damned*" (1). The initial critical reaction towards *Gatsby* was not good either. It was mainly negative, something that saddened Fitzgerald deeply (he came to think that people had misunderstood the sense of his novel). For the *New York Herald Tribune Book Review*, *The Great Gatsby* was "a trifle . . . neither profound nor durable" (qtd. in Donaldson 1); *America* saw Fitzgerald's work as "an inferior novel, considered from any angle whatsoever" and the *Milwaukee Journal* called it "a newspaper story" (qtd. in Bryer 34). It was not until the forties (shortly after the writer's death), that *The Great Gatsby* began to occupy the place it deserved in the history of literature. Publishers were mainly responsible for the "revival" of the novel. As Matthew Bruccoli points out, "between 1941 and 1949, seventeen new editions or reprints of *The Great Gatsby* were published . . . three years later, the novel became widely available and widely sold" (5). The sales increase of *Gatsby* was accompanied by a great amount of essays, articles and books devoted to analyse different aspects of the novel.

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<sup>1</sup> "Gatsby's Long Shadow: Influence and Endurance", pp. 22-23.

Probably, no other American novel has received more scholarly and critical attention than Fitzgerald's novel. These days, around three hundred thousand copies of the novel are estimated to be sold every year (Lehan 16), so that it can be said that *Gatsby* has gained in relevance with the passing of time.

When Scott Fitzgerald began to write *The Great Gatsby*, he had in mind the writing of "something *new* - something extraordinary and beautiful and simple [and] intricately patterned" (qtd. in Bruccoli 1). Undoubtedly, he achieved his aim. Nowadays, nobody questions the brilliance of the novel for the importance of its symbols, its detailed descriptions, its beautiful language or its innovations in narration (Nick Carraway, the narrator of the story, is also a character), among other things. At first sight, the plot of the novel may seem simple, since it tells the story of an impossible love during the Jazz Age. Nevertheless, *The Great Gatsby* is much more than a love story. On its pages there lies a strong attack against corruption, materialism and the lack of moral values that reigned in the United States during the Twenties. In the novel, Fitzgerald makes an exhaustive analysis of 1920s America as a whole. The aim of this essay is to show how by means of the different characters and places that appear in the novel, Fitzgerald criticises the American society in general and the aristocracy in particular.

## METHODOLOGY AND JUSTIFICATION

This essay will be structured in three parts. The first one will provide a brief glimpse of the time in which the novel is set. During the Roaring Twenties, important social and cultural changes took place in the United States and many of them are reflected in the novel. The second part will focus on the commentary that the novel makes on the American society of the Twenties. Finally, in the third part, I will deal with the connection that exists between *The Great Gatsby* and another Twentieth-Century Literature masterpiece, T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Fitzgerald was a great admirer of Eliot and it is interesting to see which aspects of the novel are influenced by the Nobel Prize winner.

In my opinion, the most remarkable aspect of *The Great Gatsby* is precisely Fitzgerald's depiction of the society of his time. It is for that reason that I have chosen to deal with this topic in this essay. The Jazz Age was a time of great social and economic prosperity, but it was also a time that brought out the darker side of the human being, since prosperity quickly gave rise to materialism. At the same time, the connection that exists between *The Great Gatsby* and *The Waste Land* (1922) is a theme that has been studied in depth by many scholars. Just like Fitzgerald's, Eliot's work criticises the lack of values that characterized the postwar society. Although *The Great Gatsby* is more focused on the lack of moral values, while *The Waste Land* is more focused on the lack of spiritual ones, it seems interesting to me to point out the similarities between both works when it comes to portraying the decaying society of its time.

**Chapter I**  
**The Roaring Twenties**

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It was an age of miracles, it was an age of art, it  
was an age of excess and it was an age of satire.

F. Scott Fitzgerald.

“Echoes of the Jazz Age” (1931)

*The Great Gatsby* is a novel set in one of the most fascinating periods in the history of the United States, The Roaring Twenties (1919-1929)<sup>2</sup>. Before analysing how Fitzgerald portrays the society of his time in his most famous work, it is worth the effort to stop for a moment to explain some important social and cultural changes that took place in the United States during that time, changes that in one way or another appear reflected in *The Great Gatsby*.

Talking about the Twenties means talking about social and economic welfare, consumerism and talking about the end of traditional social values, among many other aspects. World War I (1914-1918) marked the rise of the U.S. to the level of major world power. This circumstance was mainly due to the large amount of money that Europe owed to the United States after the end of the War. Being the main supplier for Europe during the Great War, the United States industry became one of the most productive industries in the world. As Rafael Abella points out, “el centro del poder económico mundial pasó de la City de Londres al Wall Street neoyorquino”<sup>3</sup> (20). The economic prosperity came in turn accompanied by a new feeling that little by little was gaining ground among the postwar American population. After witnessing how thousands of people had died in the War for an absurd reason, people began to accept the idea that enjoying the moment was really

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<sup>2</sup> According to Scott Fitzgerald, the Jazz Age “extended from the suppression of the riots on May Day 1919 to the crash of the stock market in 1929- almost exactly one decade” (qtd. in Castaño 45).

<sup>3</sup> “The center of the global economic power shifted from the City of London to New York's Wall Street.” [My translation]

important, the idea that life should be lived intensely. They believed that it was important to enjoy life while one was still young. Therefore, clinging to these ideas, people demanded more and more items that satisfied their immediate needs. It was mainly for these reasons that many industries prospered during the Twenties, especially the automobile industry, which became the most important one. In the years preceding the Great War, the automobile was considered a luxury item, a luxury only available to a few. However, this situation changed when, at the beginning of the Twentieth Century, Henry Ford succeeded in inventing the first affordable family car for the American middle class. It was the *Ford T* and it cost about \$ 525. It is estimated that in 1920, eight million vehicles were running on the American roads. At the end of the decade, in 1929, the number of people who owned a car increased considerably, now there were twenty-five million vehicles distributed throughout the country (Hernández 319). Undoubtedly, the automobile was a very important item during the Twenties. On the one hand, it helped to accelerate the urbanization process, since many people moved to the suburbs of the cities looking for a quieter life. For the first time ever, there were more people living in the cities than in the countryside (Hernández 322). On the other hand, it contributed in giving young people the freedom they so much craved. Thanks to the automobile, they no longer had to depend on their parents to go elsewhere. It is important to highlight that young Americans wanted to live their lives freely. They did not want to live subject to rules that prevented them from enjoying the moment. They always showed their rejection to traditional, puritan values and that was one of the reasons why Prohibition (that was an attempt to preserve traditional American values) was not respected. For young people, breaking the law which banned the manufacture, the selling, and the transporting of alcohol was not just a hobby but a cultural challenge (Cooper 60).

The automobile was just the first of a long list of items that gradually began to make a space for themselves in the American households. It was precisely during this decade when

important devices such as the radio emerged. The appearance of electricity made the invention of other useful electric appliances possible, like the refrigerator and the vacuum cleaner. All these devices contributed to making life much easier for thousands of Americans. Nevertheless, the economic prosperity, the appearance of devices that made life much more comfortable than ever, along with the ideas that young people had in relation to life, contributed to the creation of a greedy and consumerist society. In the words of Trinidad Castaño, “vivir el momento significaba comprar un automóvil, una radio, una casa para disfrutar hoy y pagar mañana”<sup>4</sup> (24). Being aware of the great purchasing power that the majority of the population had, businessmen rapidly began to look for new methods to increase sales. Thus, the hire purchase was introduced and advertising gained a relevance unknown until then. Attracted by mass advertising, people began to buy things not for necessity but for the only reason that having a certain object was the latest fashion. Now, the working and middle classes could have access “to aesthetic pleasures once limited to aristocracies” (Curnutt 106). Having a good standard of living that allowed the possession of many material goods began to be seen as a compensation for hard work so, as it can be appreciated, prosperity quickly turned into materialism. Consequently, moral values were lost, since people began to only value money and material possessions. As Kirk Curnutt perfectly illustrates, “this was a time, after all, when President Calvin Coolidge praised business with a reverence once reserved for religion: ‘The man who builds a factory builds a temple’ ” (88).

Many American novels of the time, such as those written by Scott Fitzgerald, Sinclair Lewis or Theodore Dreiser thoroughly describe the lack of values and the shallow goals that defined society in the Twenties. In *The Great Gatsby*, as we will see in the next chapter,

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<sup>4</sup> “Living the moment meant buying a car, a radio, a house to be enjoyed today and paid tomorrow.” [My translation]

Fitzgerald strongly criticises the consequences that capitalism brought to the country. Money and social status came to the foreground, and human values were sidelined. Everything came to be seen in terms of money, as one famous passage of the novel perfectly reflects, when Gatsby tells Nick that Daisy's "voice is full of money" (76). It can be said that in his most famous work, Fitzgerald asserts that prosperity has a cost and the toll is precisely "moral, not economic" (Curnutt 123).

Other events that took place in America during the Twenties described by Scott Fitzgerald in the novel are Prohibition and the social changes experienced by women during that time. Although Prohibition is never mentioned explicitly, it is clear that Gatsby has acquired his immense fortune thanks to alcohol smuggling. The passage of this law on 16 January 1920, according to which obtaining of alcohol became illegal, fomented the appearance of numerous bootleggers that, just like Gatsby, amassed great amounts of money. The manufacture and sale of illegal alcohol rapidly became a huge business that also contributed to the growth of organized crime. At the same time, Prohibition brought about small changes regarding woman's role in society. Up to then, only men could smoke and drink in public places. Everything changed with the opening of the so called speakeasies or illegal bars, where women initially were welcomed to drink, dance, and flirt (Batchelor and Davidson 582). For the first time ever, society began to accept the idea that women should not be conditioned by their destiny as wives and mothers. As Abella points out, "surgió así un nuevo tipo de mujer, deportiva, emancipada, dueña de sí misma y dispuesta a vivir su vida"<sup>5</sup> (12). In the novel, it is Jordan Baker (not Daisy Buchanan) who represents this prototype of woman.

To conclude this chapter about the important aspects of 1920s America that are

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<sup>5</sup> "Thus emerged a new kind of woman, sporty, emancipated, self-possessed and disposed to live her life." [My translation]

described in the novel, it is crucial to remember that the prosperity enjoyed by the American population reached its end in the year 1929, when the Wall Street Crash took place. Suddenly, the golden years gave way to a period of great economic hardship with the arrival of the Great Depression. As Fitzgerald stated in one of his famous essays, “the most expensive orgy in history was over” (“Echoes” 21).

## **Chapter II**

# ***The Great Gatsby: A Meditation on American Society in the 1920's***

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You are creating the contemporary world much as  
Thackeray did his in *Pendennis* and *Vanity Fair*.<sup>6</sup>

Gertrude Stein to Scott Fitzgerald, 1925.

Nowadays, it is widely acknowledged that *The Great Gatsby* is much more than a novel set in the Roaring Twenties. Fitzgerald's work so accurately evokes how life was like in America during the decade, that for many scholars it has become another historical document. Francis Scott Fitzgerald, just like many other Americans of the time, lived those years intensely, something that allowed him in turn to appreciate the corruption and materialism that the shine and glamour of that period concealed. Having witnessed firsthand the darker side of the human being, he intended to write a novel which reflected the amorality, the hypocrisy and the cynicism of that time. The result of that desire is *The Great Gatsby*, a novel that denounces to what extent money and materialism can deform the members of a society.

As it had been pointed out in the previous chapter, the prosperity enjoyed by the American population during the Twenties fomented the creation of a consumerist society. This is an aspect that Fitzgerald thoroughly describes in the novel. As Richard Lehan states, "*The Great Gatsby* was one of the very first novels to depict the vacuousness of the new commercial culture" (32). Fitzgerald uses the characters of Jay Gatsby and Myrtle Wilson to describe and criticise the absurd consumerist spirit that characterized Jazz Age America. Myrtle is a middle-class woman who desperately seeks to leave her dull existence behind. Her husband, George Wilson, who is often described as a "spiritless man" (Fitzgerald, *Gatsby* 17), runs a garage-filling station in one of the most depressing areas of New York City: the

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<sup>6</sup> Gertrude Stein to Francis Scott Fitzgerald, 22 May, 1925, qtd. in *The Crack-Up*, p. 308.

valley of ashes. Myrtle, who has always wanted to be an upper-class lady, thinks that she will gain status through the acquisition of many material goods. Deceived by what she reads in magazines and advertisements, she buys every single item that, according to those magazines, will turn her into a distinguished woman. It is important to emphasise that most of the advertisements that flooded the United States during the Twenties focused on demonstrating how certain products could change someone's life. These advertisements aimed principally at women, "informed the consumer how to become an ideal and higher social form of herself through acquisition of the right things" (Berman, *Ideas* 56). It is in the second chapter of the novel where we find the evidences that prove the fact that Myrtle is a woman manipulated by consumerism. In this chapter, Fitzgerald describes "the panoply of consumer items Myrtle gathers around her to convince herself she leads a glamorous and exciting life" (Curnutt 102). Her apartment in New York (which tries to be an imitation of the aristocracy's dwellings) is overcrowded. The living room is "crowded to the doors with a set of tapestried furniture entirely too large for it" (Fitzgerald, *Gatsby* 20). On the table, there are "scandal magazines of Broadway" (20), presumably the magazines from which Myrtle obtains her shallow ideas. Her behavior throughout this chapter demonstrates that she acts as if she were an aristocrat, her behavior is completely absurd. Consumerism has undoubtedly shaped her mind. Proof of it is the fact that she wears three different dresses in a single day, as well as the fact that she lets four taxicabs pass before selecting the one that is paint lavender, the fashionable colour according to the magazines of the time (Berman, *Ideas* 53). She also urges Tom to buy a dog because "they're nice to have" (Fitzgerald, *Gatsby* 19), thus demonstrating that she buys things by the simple fact of accumulating goods and feign and not for necessity. Myrtle's behaviour is a clear example of how commercial culture deceived people by making them believe they could be something they were not. On many occasions, just as it happens to her, consumerism and materialism led to destruction. The fact that the consumerist symbol



par excellence of the 1920s, the automobile, is what puts an end to Myrtle's life, is a declaration of intent on Fitzgerald's behalf. In fact, the automobile is a very important symbol in *The Great Gatsby*. Throughout the novel, different altercations appear in which a car is always involved. Fitzgerald uses the car wreck as a metaphor, since apart from symbolising consumer destruction, it also represents "the loss not only of a significant monetary investment but of human life" (Curnutt 119). "Capable of dreaming only of dresses and gimcracks", Myrtle appears depicted as "the waste product of a commercial culture" (Long 154).

Nevertheless, Myrtle is not the only character in the novel that believes that the acquisition of material goods will help him or her build a new identity. Gatsby himself, whose desire is to be a gentleman, also acquires numerous items to become an authentic member of the society of East Egg. However, his taste is slightly extravagant, since aristocrats do not wear pink suits or call their friends "old sports". Gatsby's taste demonstrates that he has also been influenced by what magazines say. At one point, being aware of it, Daisy makes a connection between Gatsby and advertising when she tells him, "You always look so cool . . . . You resemble the advertisement . . . . You know the advertisement of the man" (Fitzgerald, *Gatsby* 75-6). Although Gatsby and especially Myrtle embody the consuming spirit of the society of the Twenties, there is an important difference between them; a difference that contributes to the fact that the readers see Gatsby in a different way from the way they see Myrtle. The difference is that Gatsby (unlike Myrtle) does not care about wealth or status. It is his deep love for Daisy that drives him to do everything he does.

It is important to highlight that Gatsby (together with Nick) is precisely the only character in the novel that has not been corrupted by wealth and money. Through the characters of Tom, Daisy and Jordan Baker, Fitzgerald portrays the emptiness that

characterizes the lives of all those people “who devote themselves to nothing more than accumulating money and social standing” (Smiljanić 5). As I have stated previously, capitalism brought along serious damages to the population living in America during the Twenties since, just as Fitzgerald reflects in the novel, the desire for money and power led to the loss of moral values.

Fitzgerald makes use of the characters of Tom and Daisy Buchanan to depict a harsh portrait of the American upper class. Both, Tom and Daisy, described in the novel as arrogant and unscrupulous people, represent the corruption wealth can bring. They are immensely rich, something that “allows them to feel socially superior to the world around them” (Lehan 99). Their fortune allows them to believe that they can use people as if they were things for their own well-being, and that is precisely what they do with Myrtle and Gatsby respectively. Trapped in a loveless marriage, Daisy uses Gatsby for her amusement for several weeks. Once she discovers the origin of Gatsby’s fortune, she chooses her husband over Gatsby, thus choosing money over love. However, her decision implies something more. In the words of Richard Lehan, “once Daisy comes to understand the source of Gatsby’s money, her interest in him is gone forever. Gatsby never realizes how tenuous his relationship with Daisy really is, how much it depends not just on money but the right kind of money” (57). Daisy is aware of the fact that unlike Tom’s, Gatsby’s fortune has not been inherited but recently acquired. Therefore, Gatsby will never be able to guarantee her the security and stability that Tom provides her. In addition to this, the elitist society of East Egg (the place in which the Buchanans live) would never accept a self-made rich like Gatsby. The fact that Gatsby lives in West Egg despite his immense fortune suggests that he has not been welcomed by the established aristocracy living in East Egg.

In the novel, Daisy is depicted as an extremely beautiful woman. Nevertheless, as the story moves forward, we realize that her delicate appearance hides a woman that is in turn

greedy, selfish, hurtful and shallow. Throughout the whole novel, she only demonstrates some kind of emotion once. It occurs in the fifth chapter, when Gatsby shows her his collection of fine shirts: “He took out a pile of shirts and began throwing them, one by one, before us, shirts of sheer linen and thick silk and fine flannel which lost their folds as they fell and covered the table in many-colored disarray . . . . Suddenly with a strained sound, Daisy bent her head into the shirts and began to cry stormily” (59). The intense feelings that Daisy shows in this scene reveal her materialistic side (she never gets to show this feeling towards Gatsby himself). However, this is not the only scene in which Daisy’s true self is exposed. At the end of the novel, we witness how Daisy, and also Tom, allow Gatsby to die for a crime he never committed. Daisy unintentionally kills Myrtle but leaves Gatsby to take the blame. Tom and Daisy are so perverse that they do not help him at any time (they do not even attend his funeral). Nick Carraway, who has witnessed all the events, perfectly defines the Buchanans’ true nature in a single sentence: “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, *Gatsby* 114). Both, Gatsby and Myrtle “die as sacrificial victims so that the Buchanan way of life can go on, their sense of superiority can be sustained, and their arrogance can remain inviolate” (Lehan 79).

Jordan Baker is also described as a shallow woman. She is not characterized in great detail, but her appearances help us to appreciate her personality. Jordan represents the archetype of the Jazz Age “modern” woman: independent and sporty (she is a golfer), but at the same time, she is depicted as dishonest. Her actions betray her: once, she fixed a golf tournament for her own benefit, and on another occasion, she “left a borrowed car out in the rain with the top down, and then lied about it” (Fitzgerald, *Gatsby* 38). It is important to emphasise that Jordan’s life, just like Daisy and Tom’s, is completely empty (she is always

bored). Despite their great fortunes, they do not know what to do with their lives, just as Daisy states, “What’ll we do with ourselves this afternoon . . . and the day after that, and the next thirty years?” (Fitzgerald, *Gatsby* 75). Their attitude is the typical attitude that characterized the social set to which Jordan, Tom and Daisy represent, the aristocracy. Tom and Daisy are always traveling from one side to another looking for the happiness they lack. Proof of that is the fact that they married in Louisville (Kentucky), then they moved to California, then to France and then to Chicago before travelling East. Robert Ornstein’s point is that “surrounded from childhood by the artificial security of wealth, accustomed to owing rather than wanting, they lack anxiety or illusion, frustration or fulfillment” (56). Fitzgerald criticises the fact that those who possess the means lack the will to pursue a dream and those who really have a dream cannot make it real because their money is not “respectable”, as is Gatsby’s case.

It is interesting in turn to underline how Fitzgerald uses the parties that Gatsby organizes every weekend at his mansion to make a comment on the society of his time. As Brian Way claims, “Gatsby’s parties are a microcosm of Jazz Age America” (x). Almost all the guests that attend Gatsby’s parties are people whose only concern in life is to go from one party to another and get drunk. They do not know Gatsby (in fact, each guest has a different opinion on Gatsby’s identity and some are not precisely good), but that does not prevent them from attending his parties and taking advantage of his liquor and his food. As Nick states at the beginning of chapter three, they come and go “like moths among the whisperings and the champagne and the stars” (26). Gatsby’s parties reveal the degradation that the American upper class reached. At the parties, we find men who cheat on their wives with younger girls, “introductions forgotten on the spot . . . enthusiastic meetings between women who never knew each other’s names” (27) and wives who are indignant because their sober husbands want to take them home when they are having a good time. The guests’ names that Fitzgerald

enumerates at the beginning of chapter four are very significant. There are guests who have the names of animals (Francis Bull, Edgar Beaver) or guests who have the names of fish or flowers (Beluga, Newton Orchid). Through this association, Fitzgerald emphasises these people's lack of humanity. All of them benefit from Gatsby's hospitality but only one guest, the owl-eyed man, will attend his funeral.

The behaviour of the majority of the characters that appear in the novel demonstrates how during the Jazz Age, capitalism did nothing but corrupt society. In *The Great Gatsby*, we can appreciate how materialism has displaced important values such as love, family, and marriage. As Changizi and Ghasemi point out, "the characters in the novel have, to a great extent, lost touch with morality. Adulterous affairs, murder, illegal alcohol use, bootlegging and organized crime permeate the whole novel" (64). The absence of religion is also significant in Fitzgerald's world. The advertising billboard located over the valley of ashes containing the eyes of Doctor T.J. Eckleburg is the symbol that Fitzgerald uses to depict the absence of spiritual values. At one point in the novel, George Wilson (Myrtle's husband) identifies these eyes with God. It is true that those gigantic eyes have witnessed firsthand the behaviour of all the characters in the novel. Therefore, Doctor T.J Eckleburg could be considered a God who "sees everything" (Fitzgerald, *Gatsby* 102) . Nevertheless, the fact that the God of this world is an advertisement, demonstrates to what extent advertising and materialism had damaged society. Fitzgerald criticises the fact that business had become the new "religion" of America.

The place in which this billboard is located is known as valley of ashes. This ghostly place, described in the novel as a "desolate area of land . . . a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills" (16), stands as a metaphor for the moral and social decay that characterized Jazz Age America. It also symbolises the corruption of the upper class, capable of only thinking of its own pleasure, thus leaving poor people anything but dust. The main

inhabitant of this land is George Wilson, a “spiritless, anaemic, and faintly handsome” (Fitzgerald, *Gatsby* 17) man, whose only amusement is to sit in front of his garage and watch the traffic go by. This place is associated with death since, it is in the valley of ashes (in front of Doctor T.J. Eckleburg’s eyes) where Daisy kills Myrtle without any remorse. Myrtle’s blood mingling with dust symbolises Myrtle’s role as a victim of the Buchanans’ corruption. The word “dust” is precisely a word that constantly appears in *Gatsby*. The statement that Nick pronounces almost at the end of the novel, when he says, “there was an inexplicable amount of dust everywhere” (94) is especially significant. With this statement, Nick demonstrates one more time how corruption was a constant in his world.

It is important to emphasise that when it comes to depicting the corruption that dominated America during the Twenties, Fitzgerald makes a distinction between East and West. The most honest characters in the novel, Nick and Gatsby, come from the West of the United States, from Minnesota and North Dakota respectively. In this way, Fitzgerald associates the East (where Tom or Jordan are from) with materialism and moral emptiness on the one hand and the West with traditional values on the other hand. As Lehan writes, “behind the idea of the East is a sense of fixed money, of institutional power, of class differences . . . behind the idea of the West is a sense of mobility, of new opportunity, of a personal and human scale” (50). Nick’s experiences in the East make him want to return to his home, to the Mid-West. His initial fascination with Tom and Daisy’s world quickly turns into disgust. He does not want to turn himself into a selfish and shallow person, so he decides to go back to Minnesota before it is too late. Once Gatsby is murdered, nothing ties him to that decaying world. In the end, Nick realizes that it can be true that Gatsby has acquired his fortune through illegal activities, however he is much more worth “than the whole of the ‘rotten’ world that destroys him” (Minter 87). Being a kind person, as Fitzgerald seems to demonstrate through Gatsby, has terrible consequences in such a destructive world. Gatsby

still maintains a series of qualities that those around him have completely lost, qualities that make him “great”. He is a kind-hearted man who has faith in life. Though Daisy betrays him, he never comes to appreciate her true self and fights to make his dream real until the end. Therefore, it can be said that Gatsby is an exception in a deeply corrupt and materialistic world where “the excellence of things” has replaced “human excellence” (Berman, *Twenties* 5).

At one point in the novel, Nick describes the city of New York as seen from the Queensboro Bridge as a city with the “promise of all the mystery and the beauty in the world” (44). Nevertheless, this glimpse is only an illusion since, beauty is immediately followed by death when a hearse passes in front of him. This sight of New York City is the perfect metaphor to describe the world that Fitzgerald depicts in his novel, a world that was extremely attractive on its surface, but extremely destructive in its interior.

## **Chapter III**

# **T. S. Eliot's Influence on Fitzgerald When Writing *The Great Gatsby***

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It seems to me to be the first step that American  
fiction has taken since Henry James. . . .<sup>7</sup>

T. S. Eliot on *The Great Gatsby*, 1925.

T. S. Eliot is considered one of the most important writers in the history of world literature. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that many writers, among them Scott Fitzgerald himself, have found inspiration in some of his works. In Eliot and Fitzgerald's case, admiration became mutual. For Fitzgerald, T. S. Eliot was "the master of us all" (qtd. in Randall 51). On his part, Eliot recognised Fitzgerald's merits when after having read *The Great Gatsby* three times, he stated: "it has interested and excited me more than any new novel I have seen, either English or American, for a number of years" (qtd. in Miller 243). Fitzgerald was always a great admirer of *The Waste Land*, and this poem is perhaps the work that influenced him the most when writing *The Great Gatsby*. The relationship between the valley of ashes and Eliot's Waste Land has not gone unnoticed by scholars. The main inhabitant of the valley of ashes, George Wilson, is very similar to the living dead that appear in Eliot's poem. Fitzgerald even used Eliot's term at one point in *Gatsby*: "The only building in sight was a small block of yellow brick sitting on the edge of the waste land, a sort of compact Main Street ministering to it and contiguous to absolutely nothing" (17). Both works coincide in criticising the emptiness of contemporary world through characters whose lives are meaningless. However, as it will be discussed below, this is not the only similitude that exists between these Twentieth-Century Literature masterpieces.

Both, *The Great Gatsby* and *The Waste Land* are works set in an urban landscape. While Fitzgerald's work is set in New York, Eliot's work is mainly set in London, a city that

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<sup>7</sup> T.S. Eliot on *The Great Gatsby*, 31 December, 1925, qtd. in Miller 243.

in the poem is depicted as “Unreal” (210). Both worlds are inhabited in turn by people whose lives are completely empty, “people who are fundamentally alike whether covered with ashes or sparkling with jewels” (Randall 55).

In the first chapters of *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald describes two different but at the same time interrelated worlds. The opulence of the Buchanans’ colonial mansion in East Egg contrasts with Myrtle’s sloppy apartment in New York. So does Eliot in the second section of *The Waste Land*, entitled *A Game of Chess*, where he describes a group of women who belong to both, the higher and the lower classes of society. The first part of this section portrays a wealthy woman that stands in her bedroom surrounded by luxurious items. In the second part, the action shifts to a London pub, where one woman talks to other about their mutual friend, Lil. In this contrast between the higher and the lower classes made by both writers, important similitudes between *The Great Gatsby* and *The Waste Land* can be seen. Daisy’s moans of boredom (“What’ll we do with ourselves this afternoon? . . . and the day after that, and the next thirty years?” [Fitzgerald, *Gatsby* 75]) are similar to the desperate words that the wealthy woman appearing in *A Game of Chess* pronounces,

‘What shall I do now? What shall I do?

I shall rush out as I am, and walk the street

With my hair down, so. What shall we do tomorrow?

What shall we ever do?’ (224).

In both cases, their laments demonstrate how in spite of their wealth, both women do not know what to do with their lives. Their opulent possessions do not free them from having an empty life. At the same time, there is another scene in Fitzgerald’s work that strongly recalls the scene in Eliot’s pub. I am referring to the scene that takes place in Myrtle’s apartment, in the second chapter of the novel. In both scenes, women appear gossiping, either about their own lives or other people’s lives. As the following quotes perfectly illustrate, there is also

certain similarity between the dialogues that appear in both scenes; Mrs. McKee's words, "I almost married a little kike who'd been after me for years. I knew he was below me. Everybody kept saying to me: 'Lucille, that man's way below you!' But if I hadn't met Chester, he'd of got me sure" (Fitzgerald, *Gatsby* 23) are reminiscent of the woman in the pub's words,

You ought to be ashamed, I said, to look so antique.

(And her only thirty-one.)

I can't help it, she said, pulling a long face,

It's them pills I took, to bring it off, she said (Eliot 226-8).

The fact that all these women gossip about others demonstrates how empty their lives are.

The conclusion that Eliot and Fitzgerald wanted to convey by making this contrast was that life was as meaningless and shallow for the upper classes as it was for the lower classes. In a deeply materialistic world, both, rich and poor are condemned to lead a dull existence. This is the only option for all those who have lost spiritual or moral values, those whose only aim is to have material success. Eliot's world is settled by people who are dead in life:

Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,

A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,

I had not thought death had undone so many (210).

The same happens in Fitzgerald's New York, where Nick Carraway realizes that George Wilson is not the only living dead that inhabits the city: "At the enchanted metropolitan twilight I felt a haunting loneliness sometimes, and felt it in others - poor young clerks who loitered in front of windows waiting until it was time for a solitary restaurant dinner - young clerks in the dusk, wasting the most poignant moments of night and life" (*Gatsby* 37).

The depiction of a fractured and decaying world is not the only aspect that both works

have in common. As Dale Randall goes on to explain, “man’s inability to see is surely one of the major themes in both works” (52). In a deeply corrupted world where people lead a wretched life, the lack of moral and spiritual values has “blinded” men. They do not see beyond wealth and beyond their own pleasure. Both, Eliot and Fitzgerald’s works, contain several examples in which people’s inability to see is evident. In the first part of *The Waste Land*, entitled *The Burial of the Dead*, the man that stands in the Hyacinth garden claims:

Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not  
 Speak, and my eyes failed (202).

In the same section, the line that alludes to Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, “Those are pearls that were his eyes” (206), represents in turn how “the organs of vision . . . have become bits of mere material wealth” (Randall 52). In *The Great Gatsby*, the examples of “blindness” are also recurrent, as the following quote shows: “The little dog was sitting on the table looking with blind eyes through the smoke” (25). In Fitzgerald’s novel, numerous examples appear in which characters seem to see but at the same time “missee” (Lehan 122). Proof of that is the fact that Myrtle mistakes Gatsby’s car for Tom’s, as well as the fact that George Wilson comes to believe that Gatsby is Myrtle’s lover (and the man who drove the car that killed her as well) and mistakenly kills him. Furthermore, the sense of sight is present in other ways. For example, Doctor T.J. Eckleburg’s enormous eyes over the valley of ashes observe everything the characters do throughout the novel. Additionally, Nick’s purpose in the novel is to *see* and describe what he sees. Apart from this, it is important to highlight that in both works there is a character that has vision problems. In *The Waste Land*, the main character of the poem, Tiresias, is precisely a blind man. Nevertheless, Tiresias becomes the wisest of all the characters that appear in Eliot’s work. His androgynous nature allows him to appreciate the true self of the rest of the characters, whether they are men or women. In Fitzgerald’s work, a man with “enormous owl-eyed spectacles” (*Gatsby* 30) also becomes the wisest

person that Nick Carraway encounters in a really shallow world. Despite his vision problems, this man is the only one in the novel (together with Nick himself) capable of appreciating Gatsby's kindness. He attends Gatsby's parties, but at the same time he will be the only guest that will attend his funeral, thus demonstrating he is an honest man. As it happens in *The Waste Land*, the man who has vision problems turns to be the man who "sees" further.

## **Conclusion**

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Although *The Great Gatsby* is deeply rooted in its time, it is considerably more than a revelation of life in the jazz age.

It transcends its time to reveal something about America, [and the] American character.<sup>8</sup>

After having analysed *The Great Gatsby* in relation to the reflection that its author, Francis Scott Fitzgerald makes on the society of his time, the following conclusions have been drawn:

Just as I have explained throughout this essay, Fitzgerald portrays the American society of the Twenties as a corrupt and selfish society in which people's only aim was to guarantee their own pleasure. As I have pointed out in the first chapter, the Jazz Age was a period that had its pros and cons. During that decade, significant advances that contributed to improve society's lifestyle were achieved. Nevertheless, people failed when it came to taking advantage of the benefits that all those advances brought about. Easy money and the sense of disillusionment caused by the Great War, which in turn contributed to the fact that people wanted to live fast and wanted to live the moment, led to the creation of a materialistic society.

The connections between *The Great Gatsby* and *The Waste Land*, two works that are so close in time (they were written in 1925 and 1922 respectively), demonstrate to what extent the lack of moral and spiritual values of the postwar society came to be a real concern for modernist writers. Their worry for an uncertain future led them to criticise the society of their time in some of their works, as Fitzgerald and Eliot do in their most praised works. Their main goal by writing this critique was to raise people's awareness about the society

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<sup>8</sup> "Fitzgerald's *Gatsby*: The World as Ash Heap", p. 252.

that was being created, before it was too late. Through the characters appearing in their works, they wanted to make people realize that the human values (the truly important ones) were being lost.

In the Twenty-first Century, the world depicted in *The Great Gatsby* may seem like a distant time to all of us. However, after having seen how life was like in 1920s America, I have realized that our society has not really changed in relation to that time. Constantly, in our daily lives, we watch on the news how people who have everything in life and who are extremely rich steal even more money, and people who are hard-working and honest do not have enough money to provide their children with a good future. Therefore, we can claim that unfortunately, corruption is still a constant in our world. Something similar happens with materialism and consumerism. Nowadays, if you do not have a certain fashionable object, you run the risk of being marginalized by other people. Materialism has given rise to a shallow society in which many times people buy items without really needing them. In addition to this, in our modern world, there are many people whose lives are totally manipulated by consumerism. Just as Myrtle Wilson does, they buy every single item that according to advertising or according to a certain celebrity everyone needs to have in order to look cool or fashionable. All in all, it can be stated that (as it happened in Gatsby's world) we still live in a society in which more importance is given to the value of material goods than to people's value.



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