

“...by a burst of jazz as the dancing began” A Study on Jazz Age through the backdrop of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*

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Abstract

This paper examines F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* as a literary lens through which the complexities of the Jazz Age are explored. The study situates the novel within the socio-cultural context of 1920s America, an era marked by economic prosperity, cultural transformation, and moral ambiguity. It argues that Fitzgerald’s narrative captures both the dazzling allure and the darker undercurrents of the period, exposing the contradictions of a society enthralled by material wealth and social status yet haunted by inequality and disillusionment. Central to this analysis is the critique of the American Dream, represented through Jay Gatsby’s rise and fall, and its entanglement with class divisions, consumerism, and unattainable ideals. By examining themes such as the divide between “old money” and “new money,” the fragility of social mobility, and the hollow pursuit of pleasure, the paper highlights Fitzgerald’s ability to portray the Jazz Age not merely as a backdrop but as an active force shaping human ambitions and failures. The study also reflects on the continuing significance of *The Great Gatsby*, arguing that its interrogation of wealth, desire, and authenticity remains relevant in understanding contemporary cultural anxieties. Ultimately, the paper underscores Fitzgerald’s achievement in transforming personal and historical experience into a timeless critique of human aspiration and moral decline.

Keywords: F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, Jazz Age, American Dream, wealth, social class, excess, moral decay, modernity, inequality

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The vibrant era stretching from the end of World War I to the start of the Great Depression is known as the Jazz Age. This spirited time was all about jazz tunes, the rise of flapper fashion, and a passionate pursuit of fun and wealth. Against the backdrop of booming economic growth and shifting social norms, the Jazz Age saw the rise of a new breed of individuals—wealthy tycoons, bootleggers, and socialites—who revelled in excess and indulgence. Yet, beneath the glitz and glamour lurked a darker undercurrent of inequality, corruption, and moral decay, themes that Fitzgerald masterfully explores in his iconic novel. As the Jazz Age roared into full swing, it left an indelible mark on American culture, forever shaping the collective consciousness and leaving behind a legacy that continues to captivate and intrigue generations of readers.

In the literary world of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, one cannot consider the Jazz Age as a historical backdrop—it’s a pulsating force that propels characters toward their dreams and ultimately exposes the emptiness at the heart of their pursuits. As Fitzgerald himself once remarked in his essay “My Lost City” *Personal Essays 1920- 1940*, “The parties were bigger...the pace was faster...the shows were broader, the buildings were higher, the morals were looser and the liquor was cheaper” (112). These words, echoing the sentiments of many contemporary writers, encapsulate the allure and excess of the Jazz Age, a time when society danced on the edge of chaos, intoxicated by newfound freedoms and material abundance.

However, beneath the surface glamour and extravagance lies a darker truth: the Jazz Age was a period marked by profound societal fissures and moral ambiguity. Renowned author Langston Hughes, in the poem, “The Black Man Speaks” reflecting on the era, observed, “I swear to the Lord I still can’t see why democracy means everybody but me.” Hughes’s poignant words underscore the glaring disparities and systemic injustices that plagued American society during the 1920s. In *The Great Gatsby*, these differences are vividly depicted by the stark juxtaposition of the extravagant lives of the affluent upper class and the hardships faced by the working class, as exemplified by figures such as Jay Gatsby and George Wilson.

The Jazz Age’s celebration of excess and hedonism often came at the expense of authenticity and genuine human connection. Daniel James Brown in his novel, *The Boys in a Boat* remarked, “It is hard to make that boat go as fast as you want to. The enemy, of course, is resistance of the water.” (Brown 53) This metaphorical resistance reflects the underlying tension between the relentless pursuit of pleasure and the elusive quest for meaning and fulfillment. In *The Great Gatsby*, characters like Tom Buchanan and Daisy Buchanan exemplify this shallow pursuit of pleasure, indulging in superficial relationships and materialistic pursuits while remaining emotionally adrift and morally bankrupt.

While the Jazz Age may glitter with the promise of prosperity and freedom, it also casts a long shadow of disillusionment and moral decay. Through the lens of *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald masterfully exposes the contradictions and complexities of this tumultuous era, inviting readers to confront the harsh realities lurking beneath the surface of the American Dream. As individuals traverse through the complexities of the contemporary era, they find themselves

confronted by remnants of bygone eras. In this journey, it becomes imperative to acknowledge the wisdom ingrained in history and understand that genuine greatness is not found in the chase of transient gratifications, but rather in fostering authentic human bonds and upholding moral principles.

Fitzgerald and his writing style

F. Scott Fitzgerald, often hailed as one of the preeminent voices of the Jazz Age, led a life as captivating and turbulent as the era he chronicled. Fitzgerald was a native of St. Paul, Minnesota, born in the year 1896, was raised in a middle-class family with aspirations for their son to achieve greatness. He attended Princeton University, where his literary ambitions flourished amidst a backdrop of academic challenges and social pursuits. After serving in World War I, Fitzgerald returned to the United States, determined to make a name for himself as a writer. His debut novel, *This Side of Paradise* (1920), thrust him into the limelight and positioned him as a leading figure of the burgeoning Jazz Age literary movement.

During the 1920s, Fitzgerald experienced firsthand the frenetic energy and excesses of the Jazz Age. Alongside his vivacious wife, Zelda, he became a fixture of the glamorous social scene, rubbing shoulders with the rich and famous in New York City and on the French Riviera. However, beneath the glittering facade, Fitzgerald grappled with personal demons, including alcoholism, financial instability, and a turbulent relationship with Zelda. These experiences profoundly influenced his writing, infusing his work to paint a brilliant picture of American Dream with themes such as money, love, status and so on.

Motivated by a desire to capture the essence of his tumultuous times, Fitzgerald penned *The Great Gatsby* in 1925, drawing inspiration from his own experiences and observations of the Jazz Age elite. Taking place against the backdrop of the extravagant abundance of Long Island's North Shore, the novel delves into subjects of riches, social status, affection, and the deceptive allure of the American Dream. For Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* symbolized more than just a literary victory; it also served as a poignant examination of the ethical decay and existential void concealed within the Jazz Age community. Indeed, his motivations for writing the novel were deeply personal, driven by a desire to both celebrate and critique the era that had shaped him and his generation.

Thesis Statement

F. Scott Fitzgerald adeptly employs the setting of the Jazz Age to explore the complex dynamics among riches, societal hierarchy, and the American Dream, exposing the shallow attraction and concealed disenchantment intertwined with the quest for wealth and social standing. Through vivid depictions of lavish parties, opulent lifestyles, and morally bankrupt characters, Fitzgerald critiques the societal values of his time, ultimately presenting a searing indictment of the hollow promises and inherent inequalities perpetuated by the Jazz Age ethos.

i. The Setting of Jazz Age

The Jazz Age, spanning roughly from the end of World War I to the onset of the Great Depression, was a period of profound cultural, economic, and social transformation in America. Emerging from the ashes of the war, the nation experienced a surge of prosperity and optimism, fuelled by technological advancements, urbanization, and newfound freedoms. The era was characterized by a fervent embrace of modernity and a rejection of Victorian-era constraints, giving rise to a vibrant cultural scene marked by jazz music, flapper fashion, and a burgeoning sense of individualism. As historian, Paul Johnson in his seminal work, *The Birth of the Modern: World Society, 1815-1830* (1991) notes, "The modern age was beckoning [man] into the wilderness, to conquer it" (163). This cultural revolution was mirrored in the economic sphere, as the stock market soared, and conspicuous consumption became a defining feature of the era. However, beneath the surface glamour lay simmering tensions and social disparities, as evidenced by the growing gap between the wealthy elite and the working class.

In Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, he skillfully grasps the indulgent essence and ethical uncertainty of the Jazz Age by vividly depicting locales such as West Egg, East Egg, and New York City. West Egg epitomizes the nouveau riche, characterized by expansive estates and flamboyant exhibitions of affluence, signifying individuals who have amassed wealth through bootlegging, speculation, or similar dubious avenues. Conversely, East Egg embodies the traditional aristocracy, whose riches are inherited and social status is undisputed. As a literary critic Lionel Trilling observes in his essay on F. Scott Fitzgerald,

In Fitzgerald's work the voice of his prose is of the essence of his success. We hear in it at once the tenderness toward human desire that modifies a true firmness of moral judgment. It is, I would venture to say, the normal or ideal voice of the novelist. It is characteristically modest, yet it has in it, without apology or self-consciousness, a largeness, even a stateliness, which derives from Fitzgerald's connection with tradition and with mind, from his sense of what has been done before and the demands which this past accomplishment makes. (11)

Amidst these opulent enclaves, Fitzgerald stages lavish parties and extravagant soirées, where the elite gather to see and be seen, indulging in excesses of food, drink, and entertainment. These scenes serve as a microcosm of the era's ethos, reflecting the frenetic pace and superficiality of Jazz Age life.

Fitzgerald utilizes the bustling metropolis of New York City as a backdrop for the novel's climactic moments, underscoring the stark contrasts and contradictions of the Jazz Age. In the city's seedy underbelly, characters like Jay Gatsby and Tom Buchanan engage in illicit activities and engage in morally dubious behavior, highlighting the dark undercurrents that lurk beneath the surface of society's glittering façade. As literary historian Matthew J. Bruccoli

contents in his New Essays on *The Great Gatsby*, “Despite inaccuracies and absurdities, *The Great Gatsby* has become a source for historians because of Fitzgerald’s sense of time, of the emotions evoked by particular moments.” (Bruccoli 9). In this way, Fitzgerald’s vivid depiction of the Jazz Age setting not only immerses readers in the opulence and excess of the era but also invites them to confront its deeper complexities and contradictions.

ii. The American Dream

In F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, the pursuit of riches and material prosperity emerges as a central motif intricately entwined with the essence of the American Dream. Against the vibrant backdrop of the Jazz Age, the book delves into the relentless chase for wealth and societal standing as characters navigate through the dazzling realm of extravagance and luxury. For Jay Gatsby, the mysterious main character, wealth symbolizes not only a means to regain the affection of his beloved, Daisy Buchanan, but also a representation of his rise from modest beginnings to the upper strata of society. According to literary critic Harold Bloom, *Gatsby* transcends his humble origins through conspicuous consumption, amassing materialistic symbols such as stacks of luxurious silk shirts, a flamboyant automobile, a grandiose mansion, and a library filled with untouched books. To Gatsby, these emblems of status epitomize the American Dream (Bloom 73).

However, beneath the façade of his extravagant parties and lavish displays of wealth, Gatsby remains haunted by the elusive nature of his aspirations, grappling with the realization that material success alone cannot fulfill the void in his life.

Characters like Tom and Daisy Buchanan, representatives of the old aristocracy, embody a different facet of the American Dream—one rooted in inherited privilege and social entitlement. As descendants of wealthy families, the Buchanans possess a sense of entitlement and superiority that is reinforced by their extravagant lifestyle and disdain for those beneath them. Tom’s callous treatment of Myrtle Wilson, his mistress from the lower class, underscores the pervasive influence of wealth and social status in shaping interpersonal relationships. Similarly, Daisy’s decision to marry Tom despite her love for Gatsby reflects the pragmatic choices dictated by societal expectations and the preservation of her privileged position.

Moreover, the symbolism embedded within Gatsby’s mansion, the green light, and other motifs further elucidates the novel’s exploration of wealth and the American Dream. Gatsby’s sprawling estate, with its extravagant parties and elaborate façade, represents the illusion of success and the emptiness of materialism. As literary scholar Richard Foster notes, “... Fitzgerald’s work the characteristically American subject of “nostalgia” for the timelss, the innocent and the ideal transmuted by the existential thrust of his imagination, ai it worked on his personal experience and observation...” (Foster 219). Likewise, the emerald glow at the edge of Daisy’s pier embodies Gatsby’s unreachable aspirations and the mirage of a brighter tomorrow—a guiding light of optimism that ultimately results in disappointment and desolation. By employing these powerful representations, Fitzgerald emphasizes the fleeting essence of the American Dream, questioning the belief that riches alone can ensure contentment and satisfaction.

iii. Social Class and Status

In the novel, *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald showcases the intricate social hierarchy and class divisions of Jazz Age society are vividly depicted, revealing the stark disparities and entrenched barriers that defined the era. Set against the backdrop of the Roaring Twenties, the novel presents a world stratified by wealth, where individuals are judged not only by their material possessions but also by their lineage and social connections. As literary critic Lionel Trilling observes, “*The Great Gatsby* portrays a society obsessed with status and appearance, where one’s place in the social hierarchy is determined by birthright and economic standing” (Trilling 157). Indeed, throughout the novel, characters navigate the complex web of social expectations and conventions, acutely aware of the privileges afforded to those at the top of the hierarchy and the limitations imposed upon those below.

Characters from different social classes interact in *The Great Gatsby*, illuminating the ways in which their backgrounds shape their aspirations and actions. Jay Gatsby, a self-made millionaire from humble origins, exemplifies the aspirational ethos of the Jazz Age, driven by a relentless desire to transcend his modest beginnings and attain the trappings of wealth and status. In contrast, characters like Tom and Daisy Buchanan, born into old money and entrenched privilege, embody a sense of entitlement and complacency that belies their moral bankruptcy. As literary scholar Matthew J. Bruccoli observes, “Gatsby’s outsider status highlights the tension between old money and new money in Jazz Age society, revealing the inherent fragility of social mobility and the enduring power of class distinctions” (Bruccoli, 133). Similarly, characters like Myrtle Wilson, trapped in a loveless marriage and yearning for a taste of the glamorous lifestyle enjoyed by the elite, serve as poignant reminders of the limited opportunities available to those on the lower rungs of the social ladder.

The theme of ‘old money’ versus ‘new money’ permeates the narrative of *The Great Gatsby*, underscoring the profound implications of wealth and social status for characters like Gatsby and Tom Buchanan. Gatsby, despite his immense wealth and extravagant displays of opulence, remains an outsider in the world of East Egg, where lineage and pedigree reign supreme. Tom Buchanan, on the other hand, embodies the entrenched privilege of old money, wielding his social standing as a weapon to assert dominance and control over those around him. Ultimately, Fitzgerald’s portrayal of social class and status in the novel, in his word, “His family were enormously wealthy — even in college his freedom with money was a

matter for reproach — but now he'd left Chicago and come East in a fashion that rather took your breath away" (Fitzgerald 5)

This serves as a searing indictment of the entrenched inequalities and moral decay that plagued Jazz Age society, inviting readers to confront the enduring legacy of wealth and privilege in shaping the human experience.

iv. The Jazz Age Lifestyle and Excess

In this novel, the Jazz Age lifestyle is depicted as a whirlwind of extravagance, decadence, and unrestrained indulgence. Through the lens of Jay Gatsby's legendary parties, Fitzgerald offers a window into the hedonistic excesses that defined the era, where champagne flowed freely, music blared late into the night, and guests reveled in the thrill of momentary escapism. As literary critic Paul Fussell observes, "The Great Gatsby portrays the Jazz Age as a time of uninhibited revelry, where the pursuit of pleasure and excitement reigns supreme" (Fussell 76). Indeed, the novel's iconic scenes of opulent parties serve as a microcosm of the larger cultural zeitgeist, reflecting the societal norms of the time and the insatiable appetite for novelty and sensation.

The characters in *The Great Gatsby* are driven by a relentless pursuit of pleasure and excitement, mirroring the cultural ethos of the Jazz Age. From the flamboyant Jay Gatsby, who orchestrates elaborate soirées to impress his elusive love, Daisy Buchanan, to the reckless Tom Buchanan, who engages in extramarital affairs and displays a brazen disregard for societal conventions, the novel's characters embody the spirit of their time. As literary critic Malcolm Cowley observes, "Manners and morals were changing all through his life and he set himself the task of recording the changes. These were revealed to him, not by statistics or news reports, but in terms of living characters and the characters were revealed by gestures, each appropriate to a certain year." (Cowley 3). Indeed, the pursuit of pleasure becomes a driving force for characters like Gatsby and Daisy, leading them down a path of self-destruction and disillusionment.

However, beneath the veneer of glamour and excitement lies a darker truth: the consequences of excess and the inevitable disillusionment that follows. As the novel unfolds, Fitzgerald masterfully reveals the hollow emptiness that lurks beneath the surface of Jazz Age society, where material wealth and social status offer little solace in the face of existential despair. Characters like Gatsby, who amass fortunes and throw lavish parties in pursuit of an unattainable dream, ultimately find themselves ensnared in a web of deceit and disillusionment. As literary scholar Alfred Kazin observes,

It is significant, too, that he takes such credit for and pride in a house he neither designed nor built but chose. It seems in every particular to express his own idiosyncratic exhibitionism, but it also clearly represents a kind of ambition not peculiar to Gatsby, revealing him as a type rather than the anomaly he at first seems. (Kazin 233-234)

Certainly, the novel's unsettling conclusion stands as a poignant warning about the dangers of prioritizing hedonism, emphasizing the vulnerability of human life and the persistent appeal of the American Dream.

Conclusion

In conclusion, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* stands as a timeless exploration of the complexities of the Jazz Age, revealing the allure and consequences of excess, the pervasive influence of social class, and the elusive nature of the American Dream. Through vivid imagery, rich character development, and masterful storytelling, Fitzgerald immerses readers in the glitz and glamour of 1920s America while simultaneously exposing the underlying moral decay and existential disillusionment that lurk beneath the surface. The novel's portrayal of extravagant parties, reckless behaviour, and the relentless pursuit of pleasure serves as a poignant commentary on the human condition, highlighting the inherent tensions between ambition and authenticity, illusion and reality.

As one reflects on the enduring relevance of *The Great Gatsby*, they are reminded of its timele