

# Social class in the great gatsby



Social class is a critical theme in the novel *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald as it focuses on life during the 1920s in the Roaring Twenties era. The author sets up the novel into distinct social classes – upper class, middle-class and lower class. Throughout the novel *The Great Gatsby*, the author F. Scott Fitzgerald makes a connection between the setting presented in the novel and the theme of social class to illustrate different viewpoints and attitudes toward life during the Roaring Twenties.

Firstly, East Egg is known as the place where all the wealthy people such as Tom and Daisy Buchanan and Jordan have inherited their money from generations before as it is known as ‘old money.’ They live luxurious lifestyles and look down upon anyone who is of West Egg, also known as new money, and have a different attitude toward life in this time period. For one, the characters presented that live in East Egg are described as snobbish and opinionated. For instance, Tom declared, “Oh, I’ll stay in the East, don’t you worry,’ he said, glancing at Daisy and then back at me as if he were alert for something more. ‘I’d be a God damn fool to live anywhere else” (Fitzgerald 18). While Tom’s comment provides insight toward what people of the upper class think of West Egg, the author also provides insight toward the upper class in the 1920s and how they felt that they were superior to everyone else. Tom’s snobbish attitude toward West Egg perfectly illustrates the attitude of the people in East Egg. To add, Tom seems to be very judgemental as he claims that “A lot of these newly rich people are just big bootleggers” (Fitzgerald 100). Tom’s judgemental character allows the readers to recognize the viewpoints of the upper class and how Tom constantly feels the need to look down upon West Egg. To further illustrate

the mentality of the upper class during this time period, the narrator observes, " They were careless people, Tom and Daisy - they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money of their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made" (Fitzgerald 248). The author describes Tom and Daisy as " careless people" who only cared about their wealth which gives the readers insight as to how wealth buys privilege allowing them to get away with anything without having to face the consequences and " retreat back into their money of their vast carelessness" (Fitzgerald 248). Thus, the attitudes of the upper class illustrates their superiority over others as a result of their social class.

The people of West Egg, also known as ' new money' were born into the middle-class or a poor family and worked their way up to being wealthy by working hard to achieve the American Dream. Firstly, the narrator admits that while East Egg is more " fashionable" there is a certain diversity between the two. For instance, the narrator explains " I lived at West Egg, the - well, the less fashionable of the two, though this is a most superficial tag to express the bizarre and not a little sinister contrast between them" (Fitzgerald 10). The narrator recognizes that the West Egg may not be as luxurious as the East Egg however, he does recognize that the people living in West Egg are self-made and less " bizarre." To add, Nick mentions " That's my middle west... the street lamps and sleigh bells in the frosty dark... I see now that this has been a story of the West, after all - Tom and Gatsby, Daisy and Jordan and I, were all Westerners, and perhaps we possessed some deficiency in common which made us subtly unadaptable to Eastern life"

(Fitzgerald 248). He realizes the traditional moral system that the East seems to lack and believes that the East has shaped Tom and Daisy into unlikeable personalities. Also, Gatsby's car is another representation of his wealth and how it reflects social class in this time period. Nick begins to describe his car, " It was a rich cream color, bright and there in its monstrous length with triumphant hat-boxes and supper-boxes and tool-boxes, and terraced with a labyrinth of wind-shield that mirrored a dozen suns" (Fitzgerald 89). This reflects the idea in this time period that the cream and nickel colors represent gold and power which was greatly valued at the time immediately depicting Gatsby's wealth and social class.

The author mentions the area between the East Egg and the West Egg known as ' The Valley of Ashes.' This area is described as a " desolate area of land" which represents the lower class and the people left behind in the pursuit of the American Dream. Nick describes this area as " a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens; where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke... with a transcendent effort, of ash-grey men, who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air" (Fitzgerald 34). This portrays the hopelessness of the setting as the author depicts the lower class during this time period of the Roaring Twenties and their daily struggle to simply get by. In addition, George and Myrtle Wilson are among the people who live in The Valley of Ashes and they are clearly looked down upon by the upper class - specifically Tom. When Tom visits Wilson's garage, he is disrespectful to Wilson because he feels superior to him because of his social status and therefore mistreats him to make himself feel powerful. To add to the point,

Wilson's garage is symbolic of the isolation of the people who lived in this area as well as the selfishness of the upper class. While their isolation is a product of the East Egg, Tom makes no effort to be kind and generous to them as he continues to look down upon the lower class because of their social status. Therefore, Fitzgerald's connection between the Valley of Ashes and social class further illustrates the attitudes toward life during this time period.

To conclude, the author makes various connections between the central idea of social class in the novel and the various settings discussed. Fitzgerald illustrated the different behaviours and attitudes from the different social classes presented in the novel - East Egg, West Egg and The Valley of Ashes to describe how people were seen in the Roaring Twenties based on their social class.

## **Work Cited**

- Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. E-Book, Wildside Press LLC, 2013.