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Literature, American Literature



Barry Ann Jie Xun 6. 17 10/1/13 English Essay " The characters of a novel can only be individualized if they are set in a background of a particularized time and place. " How important is the setting of a particular time and/or place to the development of the characters? The setting of a particular time and place is integral to the development of the characters. This can be seen through the book, " The Great Gatsby". The book was written in the 1920s America. It was the post World War 1 period and the time of extreme wealth and promise. It was also a Jazz Age, where women enjoyed a much less restricted lifestyle with newfound freedom. There was a legal ban on intoxicating drinks and homemade alcohol from bathtubs was of poor quality so there was a huge market for organized crime. The criminals acquired the name of bootleggers and made a fortune selling alcohol, which were also known as the Newly Rich. The 1920s saw the crumbling of America, as America's powerful optimism, vitality, and individualism become subordinated to the amoral pursuit of wealth. Fitzgerald, the author of The Great Gatsby, criticizes the materialism of the generation of the 1920's; they were influenced by wealth, an easy life and material luxury. This can be seen through Daisy and Dr T. J Eckleberg. Daisy, an example of the obsession with money and consumerism, was especially influenced by these material possessions when she was shown round Gatsby's house, " I've never seen so many beautiful shirts". She notices the expensive things about his house, suggesting that she is interested in having an affair because of his money and the status it gives him. Daisy and Gatsby were together in the past and before she hears Jordan mention his name she doesn't appear to have shown any interest in contacting him. She is also hesitant to go to Gatsby's house

without Nick, who she then allows to leave after she's been shown around and seen what wealth Gatsby has. Gatsby associates wealth with Daisy, "Her voice is full of money". This suggests that Daisy produces a sense that she has always been provided for, and educated around rich people, so she speaks as they would, in a carefree manner that those who do not have a lot of money don't have. Thus making Daisy representative of money in the 1920s. On the other hand, Dr Eckleburg's eyes represent the negative effect Consumerism had on 1920's society. "His eyes, dimmed a little by many pointless days under sun and rain, brood on over the solemn dumping ground." It has been argued that Dr Eckleburg represents God because of his omniscient eyes, however because these eyes are fading it could be argued that Eckleburg actually represents fading morality, how the American Dream is becoming more and more unattainable and ultimately how Consumerism has become 1920's society's God, leading them down the wrong path of short-lived materialistic happiness. Class conflict during the 1920s is also explored in *The Great Gatsby*, where the lower classes want to break into the upper class escaping from their lower classes. In particular, this leads to the development of Jay Gatsby in wanting to break into the upper class due to his idealism, his belief in life's possibilities. Gatsby wants to better himself; hence he "reads one improving book or magazine per week". Since Gatsby isn't of the same social status as Daisy, this suggests that he doesn't feel worthy enough to win her back and so must change himself to become what society wants. Gatsby doesn't know who Daisy is now as she changed since they last met. However, he knows what she is from his newspaper cuttings. This signifies that Gatsby has been influenced by the media and has been

convinced that Daisy, her lifestyle and her status is what he wants. This translates to his extravagant parties and lifestyle, that was designed to make himself feel worthy of having Daisy. Fitzgerald also criticizes the treatment of women in the 1920's, a social environment that, to a significant degree, does not appreciate intelligence in women. Daisy is a key example of the treatment and social standing of women in the 1920's; she is all gesture over substance. This can be seen through " I'll hope she'll be a fool-that's the best thing a girl can be in this world, a beautiful little fool". Daisy while not a fool herself realizes that women in the 1920's were not respected, instead treated as more of a material being, like being owned by someone, like Tom 'owns' Daisy. The thoughts of women in the 1920s also differ in the book where, the older generation values subservience and docility in females, whilst the younger generation values careless giddiness and pleasure seeking. Daisy illustrates her own monotony with life and gives the impression that a girl can have more pleasure if she is beautiful and simplistic. For example, she " took a carefree lifestyle" as stated by Nick Caraway. Hence, Daisy herself often tries to play such a part; she conforms to the conventional social standing of American femininity in the 1920's in order to evade such tension-filled subjects as her eternal love for Gatsby. In conclusion, although a very romantic time it was an era of much corruption and crime, The Great Gatsby provides a detail image of life in the Jazz age,. Fitzgerald criticizes the social changes occurring in the 1920's, the values of the people and the development of the American cultural identity. Therefore, it is integral to set a background of a particularized time and place in order to effectively understand the development of the characters.