

American culture in the novel "the great gatsby" term paper

[Literature](#), [American Literature](#)



Written by F. Scott Fitzgerald and first published in 1925, the setting of *The Great Gatsby* is an island, which is dominated by prosperous, wealthy, and poor communities of East Egg and West Egg. Nick Caraway, a native of Minnesota and an advocate of Midwestern values, narrates it in the first person. In the novel, he later relocates to New York where he gets involved in bond business. In the era of writing *The Great Gatsby*, cultural conventions, which were perceived as out of date died to usher new ones from 1920 to 1930s. Women were granted the right to participate in voting. This provision made them perceive themselves as equal to men.

They even went to the extent of assimilating masculine ways and fashions into their lifestyles. In *The Great Gatsby*, Scott Fitzgerald documents these changes through an in-depth exploration of cultural changes such as the rise in consumerism, materialism, greed for wealth, and the culture of loosening morals in the 1920s American society. This paper discusses these aspects as essential constituents of 1920s American culture as revealed in *The Great Gatsby*.

Scott Fitzgerald uses symbols sufficiently to give the novel a more vivid description of the American culture. Such symbols reflect social challenges such as corruption that arose from the emergence of materialist and capitalist cultures. For instance, East Egg depicts places where Buchanans live. In real life, this represents aristocracy, which took a long time to establish. Symbolically, the author denotes aristocrats as “old money” (Fitzgerald and Brucoli 54). They are conventionally characterized by corruption. They are highly materialistic in nature. West Egg residents or “

new money" (Fitzgerald and Brucoli 54) are perceived by East Egg counterparts as upstart outsiders. Nick and Gatsby live in this community. A close look at these two distinct societies gives an image of a future fictional American society culture, which is free from corruption and largely not driven by individualism.

Scott Fitzgerald criticizes the culture of materialism and greed amongst people in the higher social classes. Samkanashvili reckons that Scott Fitzgerald's novel has the lesson of the need to subscribe to a firm belief that people must work hard to achieve their goals of becoming rich and prosperous, rather than following short-cut routes that often prompt corruption to take place (73). Materialistic nature of the characters in the novel validates this claim. Many of them cannot proactively grasp the concept of working hard to build their material wealth base. No people in *The Great Gatsby* get rich by working hard. Jordan does not understand the concerns of the need to work hard and genuinely. Although she is a famous player of golf, she can do anything on the loose to have her right always. In fact, Nick says,

" Jordan is " incurably dishonest. She was not able to endure " being at a disadvantage, and given this unwillingness, supposedly she had begun dealing in subterfuges when she was unusually young in order to keep that fresh insolent smile turned to the world, and yet satisfy the demands of her hard jaunty body" (Fitzgerald and Brucoli 63).

Being dishonest makes her (Jordan) incredibly uncomfortable with life. She has it exceptionally clear in her mind that her success is not honestly acquired, and that it can depart from her any time. Unlike Jordan, Myrtle possesses little material items. Although her husband is immensely loyal to her, she possesses a strong desire to have everything else. She indeed admires East Egg's people with mega envy together with intense animosity. She fails to comprehend why East Egg's people live materially well while she, together with her husband, still remain engulfed in "the valley of ashes" (Fitzgerald and Brucoli 76).

She thinks that she deserves to be with Tom whose money, influence, and power provide answers to her (Myrtle) problems of poverty. Indeed, Tom Buchanan believes that he needs additional power and influence despite being already powerful and blessed with a beautiful daughter and wife. Fitzgerald and Brucoli reckon, "Tom would drift on forever seeking a little wistfully for the dramatic turbulence of some irrecoverable football game" (10). He is guided by a culture of gathering more wealth for individualistic gains than he already has (Zeit 13). One woman is not just adequate. His desire entails acquiring all that is available at disposal.

Daisy is coercive and manipulative. She is conversant with her possession of the charm that she uses maximally to maintain security for her lifestyles. Similar to other characters in *The Great Gatsby*, she has an intense greed for money (Leader 13). Gatsby admits this fact (Fitzgerald and Brucoli 127). Daisy and Tom have similar traits, which support materialist culture that was prevalent in the 1920s American society as portrayed in *The Great Gatsby*.

They have an immense belief in the capacity of money to make them look superior to other people who are short of it. Fitzgerald and Bruccoli write, 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” (187-188). This claim implies that they thought that money could make them more authoritative than other people. Thus, possession of material wealth was important for the placement of people in a given social class and status.

The Great Gatsby reflects the emergence of a culture of increased consumerism that is driven by increased economic prosperity. According to Zeitz, 1920s marked an era in which Americans began to reap from the benefits of increased consumerism (21). Unfortunately, the depression of 1929 led to a loss of such gains (Romer 598). The novel’s narrator illustrates well the increased consumerist culture. Gatsby’s house that was located in the seashore was characterized by immense lavishness and luxury. He also threw parties now and then, which were equally characterized by high consumptions.

When describing Gatsby’s parties, Caraways says that there was frequent musical noise emanating for his neighbor’s house throughout all nights in summer (Zeitz 22). He further states that people who came to the party in Gatsby’s house arrived and left in the fashion of months. The sheer number of the party participants implies that the 1920s American culture was characterized by indiscriminate spending in an increasing number of products that were availed for sale by the rising manufacturing capacity of

the nation. This situation is well supported by the fact that after the party and with additional of extra workers, Gatsby's gardeners "toiled all day with mops and scrubbing-brushes and hammers and garden shears, repairing the ravages of the night before" (Fitzgerald and Brucoli 121). These gardeners cleaned the leftovers of the products that had been consumed during Gatsby's parties that were dominated by haphazard expenses.

In the era of writing *The Great Gatsby* (1920s), America had experienced an immense economic growth. Therefore, it is not surprising that the consumerist culture, which Scott Fitzgerald criticizes, had emerged. In 1921 to 1924, the American GDP grew from \$ 69 billion to about 93 billion (Woods 213). The aggregate wages had also risen from \$36. 4 billion to the tunes of 51. 5 billion (Woods 213). The public benefited from this increased success. Hence, consumer spending increased tremendously since more people gained access to the well-paying job opportunities. Tracing historical development in the US, Scherer and Ross inform that only 16 percent of homes in America had electricity by 1912 (82).

In 1920s, this figure rose to more than 75 percent. This implied that people had substituted responsibilities that were done by hand such as maintenance with technology such as vacuum cleaners and washing gadgets. Before the end of 1930, 12 million homes in the US had already bought radio cassettes while the numbers of those who were connected with telephones increased by 50 percent (10. 5 million in 1915 to more than 20 million by the end of 1930) (Scherer and Ross 93). All these developments illustrated increased consumer spending as noted by Scott Fitzgerald in *The Great Gatsby*.

Increased availability of products for purchasing in the free market led to the widening of the gaps between people of different social economic classes. Scherer and Ross remark that Americans purchased durable goods in the 1920s, thus increasing their spending on clothes and various mass-produced items (105). The availability of mass-produced items among majority Americans led to the erosion of the existing mechanisms of differentiating people based on their social economic classes. In this sense, better economic fortunes in America, together with the rising mass production in the 1920s normalized the culture of consumption so that products that were consumed by the wealthy members of the society became now affordable to persons in the lower social economic classes.

The jazz age was born during the 1920s era in the American history. As Caraway describes the nature of Gatsby's parties, it is clear that even though Americans enjoyed prosperity that was associated with the jazz age, they also feared its social implications. Zeitz remarks, taking advantage of prosperity that was experienced in a decade, youths threw lucrative parties, got excessively drunk in illegal liquor, and used sexually arousing dancing styles in the vast number of established jazz clubs (23). Scott Fitzgerald mentions in her novel an incident of prohibition of sale and the production of liquor to tame youths who had become overindulged in alcoholism. However, drawing from her work, these prohibitions seemed to have little implications (Zeitz 23). The overindulgence is perhaps well reflected in *The Great Gatsby* in Gatsby's parties that are analogous to those that were thrown by the American youths in the 1920s.

Flappers emerged in 1920s. Women who were never contented with pleasure wore knee-length skirts, overly long draping necklaces, and rolled stockings (Leader 14). Despite the fact that only few women precisely fitted this description of 1920s flapper, such a description was common in the media. The aim was to provide a vivid description of the rebelliousness that is associated with the youths of the time. Characters such as George and Tom's wives exemplify the rebellion that is characterized by dwindling moral standards. Nick laments, " I stared at (Wilson) and then at Tom, who had made a parallel discovery less than an hour before-and it occurred to me that there was no difference between men" (Fitzgerald and Bruccoli 158).

In this phrase, Nick talks about Tom and George upon realizing that their wives are cheating on them and that they had a sort of terminal sickness. In this context, *The Great Gatsby*, which is a novel about the 1920s lifestyles, portrays the American culture as one that eroded the traditional morals and social norms such as denouncing the moral responsibility to remain faithful in marriage. Upon noting the degradation of morality among youths in the 1920s, Samkanashvil claims that the American youths were incredibly concerned with nobility (75). This claim suggests that 1920s were marked by the coming out of an impatient society that was led by the adolescents who opposed honorable margins that were constant in the previous age group.

The rising immorality also explains the cultures of loosening morals in *The Great Gatsby*. Arnold Schwarzenegger admitted having sired a child with a house help, even though he was still married. Gatsby and his associates such as Wolfsheim engage in illegal dealings (Silver Para. 2). For instance, rumors

exist that Gatsby is involved in the importation and ferrying of illegal liquor amid the existing ban. This revelation marks a society that embraces and protects a culture of impunity that is driven by both greed and erosion of social morals in the 1920 American society. Economic and social immoralities in *The Great Gatsby* reveal the lost American dream.

The concept of the American dream as developed in chapter nine of *The Great Gatsby* revolves around the concepts of moral values that have been used to pursue happiness. However, the quest for contentment changed with time to become the search for wealth through excessive insatiability. This situation resulted in corruption of the ideal American dream. Upon renouncing his parents, Gatsby is considered a child of a supernatural being (Fitzgerald and Brucoli 98), with the only thing that he believes in being money. In this context, Gatsby is a representation of a fallen American dream due to the rising immorality that characterizes the culture of the 1920s America.

Colonizers arrived in the US with similar dreams of a healthier life for all people. The aftermath of this desire was the American dream that entailed the search for riches, equal opportunity, independence, and devotion. Unfortunately, with regard to *The Great Gatsby*, this dream dwindled, as materialism, consumerism, and the culture of loosening social morals became the order of the day in the 1920s America. The outcome of these cultures was the decaying American dream. A new version of the dream emerged. Materialism led to the increased corruption and breakage of the law at will among the rich in pursuit of money.

This situation created opportunities to satisfy the undying appetite for consumption, opulence, and immorality. Youths challenged the existing social norms since they got jazzed (drunk) with illegal liquor while at the same time engaging in sexual immorality. These practices gave rise to a culture of immorality, which opposed the traditional moral and social norms of the past generations.

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