

The great gatsby is a  
story of infatuation



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

“ The Great Gatsby is a story of infatuation and disenchantment”. How far and in what ways do you agree with this view of The Great Gatsby and one other novel you have read. The Great Gatsby is a novel that, superficially, seems like the tragic story of infatuation and misunderstanding. However, set in 1920s America, it can be read in a number of different ways. This post-war period was a time of economic boom and rapid change in technological advances led to fashionable, more affluent and carefree lives.

Alcohol was banned as a direct response to hedonism of the time but ironically it encouraged corruption and a black market. The speed of change and modernity was both exciting and overwhelming. Thus we see that this was a time of glamour and corruption, excitement and emptiness, infatuation and disenchantment. The novel satirises the hedonistic society of the past, explores the futile search for the American Dream (the idea that any person can achieve material success and therefore “ happiness” through hard work) and reveals the comparisons between glittering illusion and harsh reality.

The Reluctant Fundamentalist by Mohsin Hamid also explores the themes of enchantment and disillusionment. Changez tells of how he became infatuated with America/ Erica and then grew disappointed and disillusioned by them. This mirrors Gatsby and Nick’s pursuit of individual dreams that fascinate at first but then prove to be unattainable and improbable i. e. initial infatuation giving way to disenchantment.

The story of Gatsby explores the rags-to-riches tale (from poor James Gatz to glamorous Jay Gatsby), appearing to demonstrate the possibility of achieving the American Dream. However, the dream is shown to be unattainable;

Gatsby's materialistic achievements are empty; he fails to win Daisy and after his death he is revealed as isolated and his dream as deluded. The style of Gatsby is distinct; romantic and sensual. This dreamy, Keatsian prose suggests the enchantment of the American Dream.

For example, the description of Daisy and Tom's house suggests the romantic and magical lives they seem to lead; the windows are "gleaming white against the fresh grass", the ceiling is like "frosted wedding-cake" and the two glamorous women are "in white... their dresses rippling and fluttering..." Nick's narration draws the reader in; mirroring the way the American Dream lured past immigrants in; the initial enchantment giving way to a bleak reality of loneliness, corruption and greed. Gatsby's structure is also very individual and symbolic of the illusion and disenchantment in America.

It is set through a series of parties and events, starting with the vivid rumours; "he killed a man", surrounding Gatsby. Nick's infatuated narration suggests to the reader that he is something of a "gorgeous", idealised hero even though he achieved his wealth through corrupted means. The reader shares Nick's attraction for Gatsby, based on the energy and vitality of his romantic vision. The reader learns the truth of Gatsby's origins at the end of the novel and the futility of his efforts and emptiness of his dream make the ending all the more poignant. The Reluctant Fundamentalist is a conversation structured as one-sided.

By continually switching from the past to the present ("Yes, I was happy in that moment"), Hamid raises and maintains interest and tension through

specific events and the personal meanings gained from them. The style mirrors Gatsby with the dreamy, poetic language used e. g. “ houses twinkling in the distance... waves whispering”. It has the quality of nostalgia i. e. by the fond references of the past (“ the city of my birth”); it is also a romantic and dreamy piece with descriptive and emotional language, seen prominently through descriptions of Erica’s thoughts- “ remarks... register only indirectly...like shadows of clouds gliding ...on a lake”.

However the underlying reality is darker and more sinister as the reader realises the tensions between Changez and the listener. The settings of Gatsby also explore the illusory nature of the American Dream. New York, the main setting, symbolises excitement, glitter and a “ racy, adventurous feel” but overshadowing this, there is the increasing sense of loneliness and isolation; Nick talks of feeling a “ haunting loneliness”. West Egg, “ the less fashionable of the two” is the home of Gatsby, his parties and Nick.

It is symbolised by fake wealth, illegal dealings and vivid, lively events but appears strangely insubstantial and surreal “ The groups change more swiftly... dissolve and form in the same breath”. The lives of the West Eggers are revealed as empty and meaningless “ A sudden emptiness seemed to flow now from the windows and great doors”. In contrast, East Egg is seemingly respectable and decent, the alluring facade masks the fact that their lives are also meaningless, Jordan’s eyes show an “ absence of all desire”, and Daisy’s cry “ what do people plan? ” reveal the emptiness of their lives.

Nick's first meeting with Daisy and Tom shows the initial seductive appeal of their wealthy lives e. g. "rosy-coloured porch" and "cool white dresses" but as "the glow faded" (the use of pathetic fallacy here shows the negative turn of events), Nick realises that their lives are not perfect after all; Tom is unfaithful and Daisy is childish, selfish and spoilt. This further demonstrates the disenchantment i. e. by the illusory first impressions giving way to a flawed nature. It is significant that *Great Gatsby* starts in spring, a time symbolic of new life and growth; "bursts of leaves growing... life was beginning" and ends in autumn; a time reminiscent of death and loss. By the end of the novel, Nick has become disenchanted with New York and its superficial illusion; this infatuation is over and he returns to the Mid-West and the traditional values associated with it. Changez's early description of New York and Princeton e. g. "Dream come true...I was the star, everything was possible" also suggest initial infatuation with the glitter and enchantment of the setting. Later, he too, becomes disenchanted.

Despite the intense glamour and alluring atmosphere of contemporary New York (and the romantic feel that accompanies the surroundings e. g. *Gatsby's* "silver pepper of stars"), underneath the facade, is the disillusion; a seedy, tainted atmosphere that represents the truth of America at this time i. e. where the worst of humanity is, in a sense, dumped. This is portrayed through the description of the Valley of the Ashes; a place in which people literally and metaphorically pass by to get to other places. Fitzgerald describes the Valley of the Ashes in terms of rotting dust and death and suggests a hazy cloud obscuring the vision.

Sight is a recurring motif with connotations of moral vision or blindness. The Valley is described as “ a fantastic farm” but this wholesome comparison is tainted by the continuation of the sentence; “ where ashes grow like wheat... and grotesque gardens” suggesting nothing is alive in a selfish, unspiritual society. Images of “ ash gray men” who “ stir up an impenetrable cloud... screens their obscure operations from sight” continue the motif of blinding forces that at first enchant but soon, create a dark and confusing tone and mood.

In stark contrast to the glamorous lifestyle of West and East Egg, the Valley of the Ashes reveals the human waste and despair of a society that only values money. The references to dust and ashes suggest a spiritual death amid the glitter and gaiety; “ silver slippers shuffled the... dust”, and echo the sense of despair and emptiness conveyed in T. S Elliot’s *The Wasteland*. The post-war generation is seen as “ drifting” without purpose or belief. This poem of disenchantment influenced Fitzgerald, as it did other writers at the time, and the settings and themes in the novel reflect this e. g. the ominous Valley of the Ashes and the way Daisy’s feeble lines- “ What shall we do with ourselves...” are reminiscent of T. S. Elliot’s lines “ What shall we ever do? “. The eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg, presented as an alternative to an absent God, symbolically looks down on the Valley of the Ashes but his eyes are unseeing; “ eternal blindness” and essentially “ non-existent”. The eyes suggest the new god is money. Under the facade of enchantment of 1920’s America, lies a careless, desolate society suggesting that to succeed they must abandon all morals and seek refuge under the new god of affluence and riches.

The Reluctant Fundamentalist also explores the worship of material success and the consequences of this. This mirrors Changez's dream of wealth ("Underwood Sampson had the power to transform my life... making concerns about money and status things of the... past"), and uses romance to describe the infatuation he feels for America. This juxtaposition of the excitement of the Jazz Age and the emptiness of the post-war mood conveys the twin themes of infatuation and disenchantment. Gertrude Stein, a member of a modernist literary movement coined the phrase "lost generation" to sum up the decadence and emptiness of this time.

This post-war generation were haunted by memories of the destruction of the Great War. The hedonistic lifestyles (accompanied by infatuation) often veiled a sadness and despair, leading inevitably to disillusion. Despite Gatsby's flaws and artifice e. g. the pretence of upper class- "old sport" and his involvement with illegal dealings, he pursues his vision with an intensity that is almost religious ("following of a grail"). However, this dream has been corrupted by the pursuit of material wealth. Gatsby is attracted to Daisy for her riches and status.

Gatsby notices "Daisy gleaming like silver, safe and proud above the hot struggles of the poor", and even claims "her voice is full of money". Daisy's voice, we are told, is her most seductive quality, inferring that Daisy's appeal lies in her wealth and not any real romance. Daisy and Erica are both living embodiments of the American Dream; they represent the alluring dream for Changez and Gatsby. Both women are described in terms of light and wealth, for example; Erica is "shimmering" "in the foreground", much like the way Daisy is "gleaming like silver".

Daisy and Erica are metaphors for the relationships that the protagonists have with America. Changez and Gatsby are infatuated with the American Dream and blinded by 'promise of' its dazzling, material wealth. Both novels thereafter describe the disillusionment with the American Dream. Erica's problems; " she was utterly detached, lost" and her refusal to let Chris go, means she could never accept Changez (or ' changes'). He realises the futility of pursuing the dream, remarking " she had not chosen to be part of my story... I had... to leave".

Nick also imagines the pain of Gatsby's realisation that his dream was dead; the world seems painfully raw; " what a grotesque thing a rose is". The new world is false " material without being real". Gatsby had no real friends or admirers; at his funeral, none of Gatsby's guests (or Daisy) came to pay last respects, " nobody came". The only person who appeared was the anonymous " owl-eyed man" who, guessing correctly at Gatsby's origins (" he's a regular Belasco" i. e. fake) felt sympathy for Gatsby and his failed life; " the poor son-of-a-bitch".

Nick eventually returns to the Mid-West, a place he believes to have traditional, spiritual values. In the same way, Changez returns home to Pakistan, which represents for him, truth and a real connection with the past, not a mythologized nostalgia. In Gatsby, Fitzgerald brings to life the excitement and new found modernity of the Jazz Age with unique, sensuous descriptions but also foretells its demise. As Mark Schorer<sup>1</sup> in " Major Writers of America" states; Fitzgerald " make(s) us feel, along with him, the Cicean charm, glamour and romance of the careless world of the very rich; and at the same time to judge it".



Thus the reader, and Nick, is infatuated and disenchanted by the 1920's America described. <sup>2</sup>Fitzgerald himself says in " The Jazz Age: ' It was borrowed time anyhow'" describes the people of the 20's as living on " borrowed time", hinting the impending disaster they would face i. e. through the economic depression and threat of another war. The great American critic Lionel Trilling<sup>3</sup> suggested that " Gatsby is America and represents both its greatness and its folly" and like Nick, we find ourselves in turn enthralled and enchanted but ultimately disillusioned by the world Fitzgerald describes.

Word Count (no quotes): 1, 687 Bibliography 1 Mark Schorer in " Major Writers of America" (New York, 1962), P157. 2 F. Scott Fitzgerald in " The Jazz Age: ' It was borrowed time anyhow'" from " Critical Studies: ' The Great Gatsby'", Page 12. 3 Lionel Trilling in " F. Scott Fitzgerald" (New York, 1953).  
Sources Read: -F. Scott Fitzgerald, The Great Gatsby, Oxford World Classics - Mohsin Hamid, The Reluctant Fundamentalist, Penguin Fiction -Sarah Churchwell, The Vision that made Gatsby Great, Times Newspaper, October 1, 2009