

F. scott fitzgerald as a representior of roaring twenties

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Documenting a time period through literature: Fitzgerald in the Roaring Twenties

The “ Roaring Twenties” had a significant impact on works of literature written during that time period. Between major cultural changes and economic prosperity in major cities, societal customs changed drastically and had an effect on societies literature. When an author writes a novel, their writing paints a portrait of the events and atmosphere in that time period whether they do it intentionally or unintentionally. Their work is automatically influenced by social factors of that time. F. Scott Fitzgerald documents the Roaring Twenties through Marxist literary criticism in his works of literature, *The Great Gatsby* and *This Side of Paradise* by using specific settings and character developments. Marxist literary criticism can be viewed through materialism, socialism, social stratification and economic prosperity because it analyzes a struggle of power that determines a text’s historical meaning.

Social classes and customs that people took part in defined who they were in The Roaring Twenties. The upper class influenced the 1920’s and the way in which the era progressed. Economic prosperity was brought upon people inheriting old monies and others acquiring new monies that sometimes were not obtained truthfully. Jay Gatsby obtained his fortune through criminal activity with the intention of winning back his fairy-tale love with Daisy Buchanan, whom he shared a relationship with as an under privileged boy. His character defined what a new money individual was like during the 1920’s. “...it was also the time of deep disillusionment, the era of “ the lost generation.” (Brick) Due to everyone living through the twenties letting go, <https://assignbuster.com/f-scott-fitzgerald-as-a-representior-of-roaring-twenties/>

specifically morals and values, people were known to be delusional, not having a care in the world what they were doing. The era also brought upon different Marxist literary criticism theories such as materialism, idealism, social classes and economic prosperity. The time period was known as a materialistic era due to individuals worrying only about the pricy items they possessed and the social status that they were a part of. "The expose of American materialism - the irresponsible behaviors of the wealthy class, the corruption in business practice - there remains a conservatism, a resistance to change..." (Giltrow and Stouck 2) The way that the upper class of the 1920's dressed was characterized through the time period. "One's house, one's clothes: they do express one's self, and no one more than Jay Gatsby...." "An Oxford man!" [Tom] was incredulous 'Like hell he is! He wears a pink suit." Yes, and for tea a white flannel suit with silver shirt and gold tie." (Bloom 122) Tom criticized Gatsby on his clothing because he felt he wasn't "blood" enough to be wealthy and enjoy the perks of being a part of wealth. Bloom describes how Tom and most of the old money class people felt about Gatsby and the new money class; "His clothes, his car, his house, his parties all brand him as newly rich, unschooled in the social graces and sense of superiority..." (Donaldson 188) The two classes had such a divider between them that was faced with both despise and jealousy. The way that the newly rich identified themselves disgusted the inherited rich.

The Great Gatsby (TGG) was set on Long Island in the early 1920's when the Roaring Twenties were just starting to commence. In the novel, there are three societal dividers that defined who a person was, who they associated themselves with, and what they were meant to do in life. There was East

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Egg, where residents were born into wealthy families and knew how to control their fortune. Everyone here cares only about their social standards; which parties they have to attend, who they have to be seen with to gain a better social standing, and nothing else. Fitzgerald pens this idea as “the less fashionable of the two”, while West Egg that “glittered along the water” (Fitzgerald 12-13) consists of people who have just automatically become wealthy because they are born into this economic status. Success has been gained mostly through crime. For instance, there is Jay Gatsby, who takes advantage of others’ wealth. Their views on social standards are the same but extremely worse in the sense. People don’t have a care in the world about anything besides their wealth, putting them in a vulnerable mindset. Another example is the “Valley of Ashes” that completes the divider, literally, being the only place in between the two eggs. It is a relatively dark place where the lower class resides. Fitzgerald describes this place as “where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and finally, with a transcendent effort, of men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air.” (Fitzgerald 28) The Valley of Ashes represents everything that the two eggs are not. While people in the ashes are suffering and are never going to amount to anything, the people in the eggs don’t have any worries and are living a fantasy that can’t end until their money does.

This Side of Paradise (TSOP), while conveyed as a positive setting just by the title, actually doesn’t stay positive throughout the novel. Fitzgerald sets the novel throughout states in the Northeastern United States. Amory Blaine, the main character, is molded into a perfect, wealthy young man from his

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mother Beatrice, although she cares for her son more than anything in the world. Because of this wealth that he was born into, he of course attends St. Regis Prep School because of his mother's wishes for him to fulfill certain societal expectations and for her own as his mother. After high school, he attends Princeton University. The choice to set the novel mostly with Amory at school suggested that education was important to the wealthy in society. In the 1920's, the percentage of those who were fortunate enough to be able to afford college and attended rose exponentially. " The percentage of eighteen- to twenty one-year-olds attending college doubled from 8 to almost 16 percent..." (Kyvig 148) After many events take place, he loses control of himself and takes part of the actions of many in the Roaring Twenties by finding a friend in alcohol, sending his wealth down the toilet along with everyone he ever cared about. He realizes at the end of the novel that because of his bad decisions, everything he has ever known is gone. The hotel room that Amory wakes up in symbolizes his fall in wealth. As he awakes, house detectives are banging on the door and the people in the hotel room with him are in danger of being charged for an adultery crime. It is a very distressed atmosphere and Amory realizes that there is so much more to the room than what meets the eye. It is described as having " a moonbeam, tainted as stale, weak wine, yet a horror diffusively brooding already over the three of them...stirring curtains stood something else, featureless and indistinguishable, yet strangely familiar." (Fitzgerald 229) He was once a boy filled with striving dreams who lost everything because of a few bad decisions. This shows how easily it was to lose wealth in the 1920's, whether it was old money or new money that one had.

Fitzgerald develops his characters in his novels from beginning to end thoroughly. The narrator in a novel is usually outside of the storyline but this in this case he isn't. Nick Carraway, who narrates *TGG*, is a part of the story, and a crucial part actually, who is brought in as a secondary character. All of the events that occur are filtered through his eyes. He is introduced at the beginning of the novel as wanting nothing more than to move to New York and experience all it had to offer. He thinks, "I had that familiar conviction that life was beginning over again with the summer," (Fitzgerald 11) foreshadowing something great that was going to happen. Nick wanted to know what it was like to attend the parties and be a part of something. He starts to experience this when he visits Tom and Daisy's home in East Egg. Fitzgerald uses phrases such as "cheerful red", "glowing with reflected gold", "bright, rosy colored space" and "toward the frosted wedding cake of the ceiling...making a shadow on it as wind does the sea," (Fitzgerald 12-14) to convey the positive and captivating feelings that Nick was sensing. After attending one of Gatsby's parties, he gets the feel of the "new money" wealth, how the parties were hosted, with little actually being invited and people just attending because it was a party to attend. As the novel continues, many events take place that shape Nick's views of the people in the East and West eggs. They show him the disgusting truths to wealth such as Tom and Daisy's falling relationship as well as Tom and Myrtle's unfaithful relationship and how love isn't real in the wealthy world. Gatsby's funeral is another event that shows Nick what the real wealthy life is like. The fact that Gatsby was such a wealthy socialite who threw extravagant parties in which hundreds of people have attended and no one showed up to his funeral

proved something to Nick. Fitzgerald writes, “ I took him aside and asked him to wait for a half an hour. But it wasn’t any use. Nobody came,” (Fitzgerald 163) to show how Nick genuinely cared for Gatsby, probably one of the few people who did. The events showed Nick that one could be extremely wealthy and seem satisfied with their life from the outside, but that didn’t mean that they were content on the inside. He realized how filthy being wealthy actually was; “ I went over and looked at that huge incoherent failure of a house once more.” (Fitzgerald 168) and how although Gatsby embodied the American Dream, he never actually lived a dream.

Although Nick Carraway develops throughout the course of the novel, it is ironic that he is in fact that only character in the text to make a change. One can say that every one of the other characters live in their own little world, with their feelings bottled up inside of them and everything hidden beneath the surface. Not the main character, Gatsby, nor Daisy, the love interest Gatsby is pursuing, or even Daisy’s husband who faces the reality that his wife is practically in love with Gatsby, makes changes as the summer goes on. With Gatsby, he is so bottled up with his materialistic behavior that comes along with pursuing Daisy. All he wants to strive for in life is money and parties, aside from his romantic dream of being with Daisy. She could actually symbolize materialism in a whole. In Chapter 7, while Nick is describing Daisy’s voice as indiscreet, Gatsby cuts in and says that her voice is full of money. While Gatsby is in love with Daisy, he seems to also be in love with the way she handles herself and her money. (Fitzgerald 113) Daisy’s need for love and money, together in a sense, show how obsessed she is with being wealthy. She is perceived, as a very innocent character

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when in fact is the complete opposite. She is in denial and unsure of her feelings for both Gatsby and Tom. Daisy and Tom are the same in the sense that they run away from their problems and issues instead of facing them. In the end of the novel, after Myrtle and Gatsby were killed, the problematic married couple moved away to escape the troubles.

Amory Blaine, the protagonist of TSOP, was born into wealth. Similar to the residents of East Egg in TGG, Amory had his life set up for him. His mother was wealthy and traveled the world and took him with her until he was enrolled in St. Regis Prep School. After attending prep school, he attended Princeton University. He gets kicked out of Princeton and starts to lose his wealth. Due to his poor choices, he is referred to as a victim of “poverty” and therefore, he cannot marry Rosalind because she is from wealth. Also because of his poor choices and self-centered attitude, Amory eventually pushes everyone away from him. After this, he has no one and only knows himself. The novel ends with Amory stating the words, “I know myself, but that is all”. (Fitzgerald 261) He has only focused on himself for his entire life, being self-centered which is why he really only knows himself. These words were a significant piece of the novel because it shows everything one has lost if they make the wrong decisions. Throughout the novel, he is often referred to as an “egotist” because he is extremely confident in achieving what he wants. He is set on proving everyone wrong and thinking he can do anything with a result of success. “He went all wrong at the start, was generally considered both conceited and arrogant, and universally detested...he picked a battle with another boy very much bigger, from which he emerged badly beaten, but rather proud of himself.” (Fitzgerald 27) To his

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friends and everyone around him, he was known as someone who cared how he was perceived and always wanted to out-do someone. This isn't the case at the end of the novel, as he loses everything he's ever had. When he finally realizes this, it's too late and he now knows that thinking only about yourself and not everyone around you will hurt one in the end. "Yes - I was perhaps an egotist in youth, but I soon found it made me morbid to think too much about myself." (Fitzgerald 243) Even though he didn't necessarily develop in a good way, Amory's attitude and change of character is proof that he transitioned tremendously from the beginning of the novel.

Marxist literary criticism can be identified in the novels in numerous examples through materialism, socialism, social stratification and economic prosperity. Materialism can be identified as a theory that presents the ideas that objects one possesses are greater goods than life itself. From the extravagant parties to the social climbing standards, the youth in the 1920's were molded to believe that money and social classes were everything that mattered. Social stratification is the hierarchical development and organization of different social classes. The arrangement of these classes is determined by social standards and the amount of wealth one has. The Roaring Twenties brought upon many different series of social stratification with the terms new and old money. During this time, the rich were even wealthier than they would have been before World War 1 due to Wall Street's huge successes. Many people from all around the country flocked to New York City and its surrounding areas to invest and try to make a fortune, similar to the intentions of Nick Carraway. Although there has always been a gap between the rich and the poor in society, the 1920's brought an even

bigger gap. One was either extremely rich, or extremely poor. Economic prosperity can be depicted as the positive gain of wealth that influences a society. The idea of new money and old money is present through the two eggs in TGG. While it is apparent that East Egg residents are part of the old money class, the West Egg class obtained their money in different ways. Jay Gatsby came into possession of his fortune through criminal activity with the intention of winning back his fairy-tale love with Daisy, whom he shared a relationship with as an underprivileged individual. His only means of being wealthy is so he can win her back, which could be an example of idealism. "It is the struggle I have already suggested, between wealth as fluid income and wealth as an inherited and solid possession - or rather, since Fitzgerald is not an essayist but a story-teller, it is between a man and a woman as representatives of the new and old moneyed classes." (Bloom 66)

Fitzgerald's work was also influenced from the upper class women during the 1920's, specifically his wife, Zelda Fitzgerald. She embodied how a woman of that time period acted, dressed and lived. Fitzgerald bases several of his characters either about her or partially about her. They had a relationship while they were very young, falling deeply in love. But as their relationship turned into a marriage, Zelda became a popularity figure. "By 1921, she was happily becoming the embodiment of that period her husband called, "The Jazz Age." Zelda drank too much, spent way too much, wore skirts that were too short..." (Harmon 87) Her actions allowed women to follow in her footsteps and embody what she was. Fitzgerald labeled her as the first "female flapper", a phrase used to describe the careless, yet socially acceptable women of the Roaring Twenties. Daisy seems to resemble Zelda

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partially, half in her younger years when her and Fitzgerald first fell in love, and half in her careless years, being a national figure. Daisy is a character who when faced with an issue or problem, becomes too overwhelmed and wants to run away from everything. Fitzgerald displays this in her choice to move away with Tom and her young daughter after Myrtle and Gatsby have been killed. Although it may seem that she is running away because there are just too many memories in the town of West Egg, she is running away from her feelings and her actually killing Myrtle instead of Gatsby who was blamed and killed for it.

Fitzgerald also bases Rosalind, Amory's love interest on Zelda, or the women of the 1920's. Rosalind's character is intensely shown through her choice to marry a wealthy man instead of Amory after he loses his fortune and starts to make a fool out of himself. Her choices not only reflect those of women of that time period and Zelda but also Daisy in TGG. Before the Twenties, it was a disgrace for a woman to marry against her parents knowing or for a man and woman to commit adultery. Zelda, one of the many women of that time period that had an influence over a generation, was in the spotlight not only for being Fitzgerald's wife but also for being herself and the actions that she took. "...southern belle Zelda Sayre, who agreed to marry the middle-class Fitzgerald only after he had become famous with the publication of his first novel, *This Side of Paradise*." (Krstovic 229) The fact that she only married Fitzgerald because of his successes showed the public eye how scandalous yet money-hungry she was, something that most women already possessed. Originally from the south, she moved with Fitzgerald to be in a city setting. When she took in the city life, her actions became even more scandalous.

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She dressed the way the upper class dressed, acted the way they did and spent her money on useless items. After years of a marriage revolving around constant conflict, Zelda entered a treatment facility and Fitzgerald began a relationship with another woman without the consent or knowing of his sick wife. Throughout the problems, their relationship was an extremely unhealthy one that Fitzgerald based most of his novels and characters in his novels on. Reflecting on Zelda's scandalous behaviors, Fitzgerald based Daisy's actions in TGG partially on Zelda. In the novel, Daisy cherishes her relationship with Gatsby, one that they share for a short time together, but then long distance as he goes off to war. Instead of keeping to her promise to wait for the unfortunate but striving Gatsby, she chooses to marry Tom Buchanan, a man who possesses a rich fortune through blood relatives. It is ironic how Zelda married Fitzgerald solely off of his newly found fame and fortune and Daisy mimics the same actions in marrying Tom because she wants to marry wealthy.

“ The American dream consisted of the belief that people of talent in this land of opportunity and plenty could reasonably aspire to material success if they adhered to a fairly well-defined set of behavioral rules-rules set forth in a relatively comprehensive form as long ago as the eighteenth century by Benjamin Franklin.” (Trask 197) The Declaration of Independence states that “ The American Dream” consists of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, but is that really what Fitzgerald portrayed of Amory and Gatsby?

Fitzgerald's work influenced how people viewed this dream with both TSOP and TGG. Amory already held the dream of being born into a wealthy family and having the privileges of being able to obtain an education and being

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fortunate enough to travel and gain opportunities. Towards the middle of the novel, to impress Rosalind, he gets a job at an advertising company to prove to her that he can support her through marriage even though he lost most of his fortune. This didn't suffice for Rosalind, so she marries a man who is already wealthy and can support her better. His dream was crushed, but realizes at the end of the novel that he can only rely on himself. On the other hand, Gatsby achieved the dream by participating in criminal activity with the sole intentions of winning back a girl. Did Gatsby really live out "The American Dream" if he never won the girl and was murdered in the end? He aspired to materialistic success only after realizing that what he wanted most in the world was Daisy. His successes in life didn't mean anything if his intentions were all wrong.

The Roaring Twenties were a time of social dividers that defined a society, social customs that changed over the course of a decade and literature that documented all of the above. The post-war time period featured a materialistic society due to the booming of economy. Fitzgerald documented the decade through his two novels, *TSOP* and *TGG* that became huge successes. He ends *TSOP* with the line, "I know myself, but that is all," coming from Amory who experienced different events that led him to believe that you can only rely on yourself. The same goes for Nick, who experienced all that the twenties had to offer only to be let down and disgusted at the end. Fitzgerald proves through his works of literature that with certain choices in life come consequences and learning experiences that define a decade.