

“You can’t repeat the past”: *The Great Gatsby* as Metanarrative of Failure

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Abstract

Fitzgerald’s novel *The Great Gatsby* was a product of 1920s American society, celebrating the contemporary culture of excess (buoyed by economic boom) besides the carefree breaking down of social barriers. In retrospect, both proved to be unsustainable. The present paper thoroughly analyzes the frustration resulting from this disillusionment in the connected lives of characters forming the crux of *Gatsby*. An analysis of Fitzgerald’s narrative method has been undertaken, to reveal the connections between the novelist’s presentation of the perception of time and the evocation of nostalgia by the novel as a whole.

Key Words: Past, Present, Nostalgia, Metanarrative, Failure.

Lionel Trilling aptly points out in his book *The Liberal Imagination* (1950) that Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald (1846-1940)’s paradigmatic book *The Great Gatsby* (1925) owes its lineage to the novelistic tradition involving the rags to riches fairytale; but it simultaneously deviates from this tradition by depicting how much harder it is to gain acceptance among the rich than working one’s way up the social ladder. In this regard *Gatsby* follows the footsteps of Horatio Alger’s works, such as *Sink or Swim* (1870) or *Strong and Steady* (1871), to the extent that the impoverished son of North Dakota farmers, James Gatz uses his perseverance and his “Platonic conception of himself” (Fitzgerald 63) as “son of God” (Fitzgerald 63) to haul himself up to the status of Jay Gatsby, the millionaire of West Egg who throws grand parties. From this perspective, *Gatsby* continues and sharpens Fitzgerald’s forays into similar themes in earlier short stories such as ‘Winter Dreams’ or ‘The Sensible Thing’.

However, to classify *Gatsby* as simply an early twentieth century rags to riches novel would mean overlooking key criteria that have helped cement its place as one of the masterpieces of American prose fiction. Fitzgerald’s fiction was admittedly woven from his life and times:

Mostly, we authors repeat ourselves (...) We have two or three great and moving experiences in our lives-experiences so great and moving that it doesn’t seem at the time that anyone else has been

so caught up and pounded and dazzled and astonished (...)

Then we learn our trade (...) and we tell our two or three stories- each time in a new disguise- maybe ten times, maybe a hundred, as long as people will listen

(*Afternoon of an Author* 132)

While commissioned at Camp Sheridan as Second Lieutenant in 1918, Fitzgerald met and fell in love with Zelda Sayre, daughter of Alabama Supreme Court Justice. But Fitzgerald's meagre means posed an obstacle in the way of marriage, removed only after the successful publication of *This Side of Paradise* (1920). Fitzgerald tried in vain for the next few years to build on this success, with him and Zelda often shifting from Long Island to Europe (the French Riviera and Rome) and back. Fitzgerald wrote numerous short stories during the 1922 to 1924 period for financial reasons, concentrating on the composition of his magnum opus that was to come in the form of *Gatsby*.

The novel begins with the homodiegetic narrator Nick's careful "turning over in [his] mind" of an advice given by his father years ago. A person prone to reserving his judgments and thereby "privy to the secret griefs of wild, unknown men" (Fitzgerald 4), scion of a well-to-do family in the mid-west and a veteran of the Great War, Nick Carraway follows the trail of successful young men of his era in coming to New York and joining the bond business. Putting up at a "weather-beaten cardboard bungalow at eighty a month" (Fitzgerald 4) among the nouveaux riches West Egg, he unwittingly becomes the neighbour of millionaire Jay Gatsby from whose mansion, lawns and private beaches floated "music (...) through the summer nights" (Fitzgerald 26). It is interesting to note his repeated mention of fast-paced life in the modern American city, accentuated by the favourable weather (Fitzgerald 5) and his resolve to capitalize on the lucrative economic prospects of the 1920's economic boom.

Nick identifies his visit to Buchanan residence in old-moneyed East Egg as the beginning of the "history of the summer" (Fitzgerald 6). Readers, intimated of the narrator's intentions early on, form a pattern of expectation of the course of events to follow. However they quickly find their expectations frustrated, as Nick proves false to his own claim of being reserved in his judgments (Fitzgerald 3). From bodies-Tom Buchanan's as "cruel" (Fitzgerald 7), Miss Baker's as "jaunty" (Fitzgerald 9) to the claret he is offered as "corky" (Fitzgerald 10), Nick proves himself not just as perceptive, but highly judgmental. Such a failure to remain true to his promises makes Nick unreliable as narrator, forcing readers to take him with a pinch of salt.

Allusions to *Gatsby*, the eponymous character begin, couched in romantic suspense when his name being brought up by Miss Baker elicits a concerned reaction by Daisy Buchanan, only to be stifled by the announcement of dinner. The aura is mystified when Nick returns home to find the supposed proprietor of Gatsby mansion standing alone, emotionally worked up (Fitzgerald

16) on his dock, extending his arm towards a green light, before vanishing abruptly. Even later, when he is invited to Gatsby's party (Fitzgerald 27) Nick tries to search for his elusive host in vain, acquainting himself with many of the fantastical rumours about the man, before meeting the man himself—"an elegant roughneck a year or two over thirty, whose elaborate formality of speech just missed being absurd" (Fitzgerald 32). Nick's expectation of finding a man advanced in years at the helm of affairs was visibly frustrated at this discovery, forcing him to take stock of the situation anew.

When Gatsby comes calling on Nick and they subsequently drive to New York in Gatsby's "gorgeous car", Gatsby plainly tells Nick the details of his life, corroborating his claims with authentic-looking artifacts. Nick gets the feeling of "skimming hastily through a dozen magazines" (Fitzgerald 43), "with an effort managing to restrain (...) incredulous laughter" (Fitzgerald 42). When Meyer Wolfsheim at a 42nd Street cellar testifies to Gatsby's being "a man of fine breeding" (Fitzgerald 47) he chooses the very same words as Gatsby himself had done, thereby heightening the sense of suspicion to a level of disbelief, notwithstanding the seeming authenticity of the Oxford photograph Gatsby had adduced in favour of his history. When a visibly irritated Nick meets Miss Jordan Baker and learns of Gatsby's past (and his affair with Daisy) he is dumbfounded by "the modesty" (Fitzgerald 51) of Gatsby's demand. The fact that Miss Baker had come across Gatsby the soldier (and Daisy's lover) in Louisville reinstates Gatsby's position to Nick partially, but the balance is always precarious, since Gatsby can never furnish adequate explanation regarding the source of his fascinating wealth.

Nick perpetually feels at a loss, while trying to fathom the essence of Daisy's beauty, like his inability to comprehend Gatsby completely. Surprisingly Gatsby comes to his aid at the party at the Buchanans' when he characterises Daisy's voice as "full of money" (Fitzgerald 76) and Nick feels this to be the fact that has long eluded him. He goes on to elaborate the idea by likening her to the spotless princesses of folklore, resplendent in their lavishness (Fitzgerald 99). Gatsby succeeds in identifying the secret behind the charm in Daisy's voice because he had been acutely aware of his own lack of wealth, even before he met Daisy. And it was this gulf that he had set out to fill. With his illegally earned millions, Gatsby silently moved closer to Daisy, acquiring a mansion exactly across the bay from her, expecting her to walk into one of his gaudy parties. When with the help of Nick and Jordan they begin corresponding once again, Gatsby tries to wean Daisy away from Tom, severing her marital ties, returning to Jay Gatsby as in her Louisville days. Considering the immense pressure this would force Daisy into, Nick reminds him of the impossibility of recreating the past. To this Gatsby replied: "Can't repeat the past? (...) Why of course you can!" (Fitzgerald 70)

The lines which describe Gatsby explicitly voicing his "extraordinary gift for hope" simultaneously suggest the impending fall, as Gatsby "broke off and began to walk up and down the desolate path of fruit rinds and discarded favours and crushed flowers (Fitzgerald 70). While the path that Gatsby walked had always been desolate and murky on account of his shadowy businesses, the 'discarded favours' and 'crushed favours' foreshadow the destruction of the long-nurtured dream. It is the sheer weight of Gatsby's dream that checks its flight,

bringing it down to ground and shatters it to pieces. Tom Buchanan serves as the representative of that class of traditionally rich men (like Braddock Washington of 'The Diamond as Big as the Ritz' or Anson Hunter of 'The Rich Boy') who feel insecure and suffocated as social climbers share the platform of social exclusivity guaranteed by wealth with them. His objective thesis of civilization "going to pieces" (Fitzgerald 10) ironically thrives when he discovers his wife expressing love to one of his abhorred social climbers, who claims she never loved Tom at all (Fitzgerald). When Daisy accidentally kills Myrtle Wilson while driving Gatsby's car (which Myrtle's wife Wilson, recognizes), Tom finds a way to incite the emotionally unstable Wilson to serve his end. When Tom and Daisy leave for a vacation without corresponding or even sending a word of condolence, Nick sums up his description of the Buchanans as "careless people", who "smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness" (Fitzgerald 114).

Nick comes to the belated realization that both Tom and Daisy care only for deriving the maximum entertainment from the present, their success in doing so being guaranteed by their families' prestigious socio- economic clout. In the case of Tom this enjoins with his awareness of this illustriousness, culminating in his sneering upon anyone or anything that falls short of maintaining adequate decorum. Daisy on the other hand cherishes the memory of love and humanity transcending class boundaries. But in the end, she proves herself to be the "beautiful fool" (Fitzgerald 13) too engrossed with comfort to take a bold leap of faith. Jordan Baker, to Nick's disgust, is found to be equally vacuous and of a piece with Tom, Daisy and "the whole damn bunch put together" (Fitzgerald 98).

Gatsby, on the contrary, had built himself up into the romantic persona that he exuded, based on a firm belief of his own worth and unflinching hard work. All along, he had employed his present and planned his future in order that he may replicate the summer and autumn of 1917, when he and Daisy became lovers in Louisville. Apart from the workings of Gatsby's mind, readers of Fitzgerald's novel gain access to this cherished past through the narration of Jordan Baker. But her description of this period is also couched in distinctly romantic terms, for instance the dominance of pristine white in descriptions of Daisy Fay (her "white" dresses, "little white roadster", their "white girlhood", etc). Told in flashbacks, the narrative purposefully allows an idea of the past to shrink into a foreshortened background, while this background is brought up again and again in newer situations (Iser 111) in the present. What Jordan Baker reports is her memory of Daisy and Jay Gatsby in Louisville in the summer and autumn of 1917. But it is strikingly similar to the way in which Gatsby uses his memory to complete what was left unfinished under the pressure of past compulsions. Moreover, this is the history of the unfinished Gatsby-Daisy affair which Nick comes to learn and in turn to pass on to readers. Gatsby serves to bring the affair to its consummation; Nick records the attempt and readers are consequently told about the culmination.

Gatsby's "incorruptible dream" (Fitzgerald 98), enlivened in his re-telling the events of his life to Nick on the last night of his life to win back Daisy elicits from Nick the only explicit compliment he ever gave Gatsby. But that dream had been dreamt and the future of his dreams

constructed intensely within the confines of his psyche, so that its revelation in front of others proves harmful to the dream itself. Suggestions to this end become apparent when Daisy accompanies Nick and Gatsby to the latter's mansion for the first time:

I saw that the expression of bewilderment had come back into Gatsby's face, as though a faint doubt had occurred to him as to the quality of his present happiness. Almost five years! There must have been moments even that afternoon when Daisy tumbled short of his dreams - not through her own fault, but because of the colossal vitality of his illusion. It had gone beyond her, beyond everything. He had thrown himself into it with a creative passion, adding to it all the time, decking it out with every bright feather that drifted his way. No amount of fire or freshness can challenge what a man can store up in his ghostly heart.

(Fitzgerald 61-62)

Even the symbolic power of the green light burning at the end of the Buchanans' dock seemingly diminishes once he has mentioned it to Daisy, as if "his count of enchanted objects had diminished by one". Quite perceptibly, thus, Fitzgerald weaves an imminence of doom into the narrative in the second half of the novel, preparing the way for Wilson's mistaken retribution and the tragic fall of Gatsby. In spite of Gatsby's dubious 'gongnegtions', there were some who believed in the general virtue of his character and endeavours, not least among whom was Gatsby's own father-Mr. Henry C. Gatz, who brings along with him a copy of *Hopalong Cassidy* on which the young James Gatz had inscribed the details of his daily schedule, reflecting his high regard for the value of time, besides the focus on an all-round development of brain and brawn (Fitzgerald 110). While Gatsby's industriousness till the end of his days captivated Nick, his moral degeneration concurrent with social ascent served as a cruel parody to the supposed idealism of Gatsby's youth. Moreover, Gatsby's schedule itself (written on the back cover of a sensationalist dime-novel) becomes a parody of Benjamin Franklin's 'Scheme of Employment for the Twenty-Four Hours of a Natural Day', outlined in Franklin's 1791 *Autobiography*. In a final estimation, Gatsby therefore remains a failure in spite of his heroic endeavour- he fails to win acceptance among the rich (who attend his gala parties but spread rumours about him), he fails to convince them of his goodwill (none other than Nick, not even Meyer Wolfsheim, attend his funeral) and most importantly he fails to unite with Daisy in his lifetime.

Nick, who began the novel with an intention of recounting the "history of the summer" (Fitzgerald 6), tells us a lot about himself in the process. His narration of the story is ineluctably shrouded in his romantic view of Gatsby, his view of the promising summer offered by the East that changes course into a "haunted" place, "distorted between (...) power of correction (Fitzgerald 112)." The elaborate plans he had made, of making himself a "well rounded" man (Fitzgerald 7) at the beginning of the summer vapourize after Gatsby's death, leaving him with the agonizing awareness of being thirty, with a "a decade of loneliness, a

thinning list of single men to know, a thinning briefcase of enthusiasm, thinning hair” (Fitzgerald 87) staring him at the face.

From the narratological point of view, Nick, who had begun with the view that “reserving judgments is a matter of finite hope (Fitzgerald 3)”, is so ruffled by the events of the summer that on his last night in the deserted Gatsby mansion he is reminded of the Dutch pioneers’ frustrated dream of a New World, replaying itself out once more in the form of Gatsby and his unfulfilled dream, one that paradoxically seemed “so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it” yet simultaneously “already behind him” (Fitzgerald 115). Fitzgerald’s manner of historicizing consciously deviates from that of traditional historical novelists. The events narrated by Nick in *The Great Gatsby* are strongly rooted in the immediate present even though the characters keep looking back at the radiant possibilities of the past, thereby setting the tone for the present scheme of events (Rohrkemper 153). The narrator Nick, who had set out to reserve his judgments and record the joys and sorrows of others, tells a parallel story about himself, a Westerner, fundamentally unsuited to the lifestyle of the East in the final analysis. His story, that promised to set out towards the future, harks back, like Gatsby’s, “boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past. (Fitzgerald 115)”

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