CULTURAL AND LITERARY CONTEXTS IN THE UNITED STATES AFTER THE GREAT WAR: THE CASE OF THE GREAT GATSBY

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ABSTRACT

In this project, it is going to be analysed the novel *The Great Gatsby*, published in 1925 by F. Scott Fitzgerald from a Socio-historical, Postcolonial and Deconstructive perspective. In doing so, it is necessary to first look at the historical and cultural background of the 1920s. Besides, there are some links between the 1920s culture and the novel written by F. Scott Fitzgerald. He epitomized the Jazz Age in *The Great Gatsby*. The main purpose of the project is to encourage students to “read between the lines” and see what ideologies lie behind the texts they read. There is more to be said than words can describe and Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* surely accomplishes to create a world of images, not a world of words.

RESUMEN

En este trabajo, se analizará la novela *The Great Gatsby*, publicada en 1925 por F.Scott Fitzgerald desde tres perspectivas diferente: Socio-histórica, Postconlonial y Deconstructiva. Para llevarlo a cabo, se hace necesario observar el entramado histórico y cultural de los años veinte en el que se percibe conexiones entre la cultura de los años veinte y la propia novela de Fitzgerald. El autor lo ejemplifica a través del Jazz en *The Great Gatsby*. El propósito principal de este proyecto es animar a los estudiantes a leer entre líneas y ver las ideologías que subyacen en los textos que leen. Se dice más de lo que las propias palabras describen y *The Great Gatsby* consigue crear un mundo de imágenes, no sólo de palabras.

KEY WORDS

1. Introduction

“‘You can’t repeat the past.’”

“‘Can’t repeat the past?’ he cried incredulously. ‘Why of course you can!’” (Fitzgerald & Tanner, p.106; ch. 6). I have decided to start my undergraduate thesis with this simple yet complex quote from the _The Great Gatsby_ (1925). I did so, because in this project what I have tired to do was: first, give the historical background of the 1920s, second talk about the cultural milieu and some cultural aspects found in the novel; finally I have continued with the biography of F. Scott Fitzgerald followed by the analysis of the novel _The Great Gatsby_ published in 1925. In the conclusion I will include my personal point of view regarding the novel. As above-mentioned, I have selected to start this project with Jay Gatsby’s “incredulously” cry “Can’t repeat the past?” I want to try to prove that today’s society is not very different from 1920s society. This is just one of the reasons why I choose the 1920s, the Roaring Twenties, the Booming Twenties, the Jazz Age. The economy “boomed”; people danced jazz all night in clubs like _The Cotton Club_, in the Harlem neighbourhood, New York; a new culture “roared” a period in which people defied politics and the Prohibition experiment; created new fashions of dancing and dressing, rejecting old traditions. The period witnessed the rise of a new culture and a new generation being born. The use of the automobile, telephone, radio, and electricity accelerated consumer demand, bringing significant changes in culture and lifestyle. The 1920s generation was a new generation, breaking off with the past, reacting rebelliously to old traditions, thus modernism emerged. The period following the World War I, saw progressive changes in culture, fashion, economics, woman’s suffrage and woman’s liberation in society; it also saw great changes in artistic expression from writers disillusioned by World War I. Due to the devastating effects of World War I, Europe was shattered; industry in the United States boomed due to worldwide demand. Money flowed from Europe into the United States banks because of the war, meaning that banks could lend more money. The standard of living started to rise. People were moving to the city in search of new jobs, seeking for a better future, seeking their own American Dream. It was the era in which woman got their right to vote, by passing the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution; women start doing things that were inconceivable in the 1920s. This was the generation of the flapper a young woman who bobbed her hair, hemmed her skirts exhibiting their contempt for the socially acceptable behaviour by wearing more makeup and driving automobiles; women start smoking, drinking alcohol and frequent speakeasies dancing all night with men they did not know. The flapper was more preoccupied
by her physical appearance and sexual freedom than by household chores. The flapper style was part of a social statement, a deliberate flouting of Victorian roles; they wanted to break the Victorian rules they were expected to fulfil, by emphasizing their freedom, hard work, and gender equality. The number of divorce increased drastically. Even though new appliances like the toaster, washing machine, the refrigerator and vacuum cleaners were invented meant to shorten the hours of housework, women had to work more hours, due to the new standards of cleanliness that were being established. A very important name to be remembered is Margaret Sanger, the pioneer of Planned Parenthood and the birth control era. She created the American Birth Control League and many clinics were women could get useful information about birth control and contraception.

The consumer society grew in the 1920s. The material abundance of the period generated an increase in salaries for the urban middle-class and tremendous profits for wealthy investors. Middle-class people embraced the idea of purchasing more and more goods, in a desire to climb the social ladder. They purchased more than was necessary just for the sake of luxury and fashion. In a capitalist society, the consumer is required to consume more and more goods, so corporations can made huge profits. In order to prosper, a capitalist society needs an increase in consumption. Instalment buying made possible the acquisition of automobiles and electric appliances. The consumer was their most important target for the selling process. Advertisement and marketing allowed corporations to update the public about their newest products ready to be bought. Ads influenced the symbols and icons of the era. Through magazines, radio, newspapers, television, cinema, people were transformed into consumers. Radio was one of the best vehicles when it comes to advertising. Now, people around the country from urban areas to rural areas listened to the same programmes and the same ads trying to sell one specific product. It provided not only a source of information but also a source of entertainment. Soon, the radio transformed from a luxury to a necessity. Consumers are told what to eat, how to dress, how to behave, how to talk and how to look, where to live and what type of car to drive. Driving a certain type of car can give you a high status and place you amongst the elite. The “benefits” of capitalism can be seen everywhere. Developments in education, technology, medicine and quality of life all can be attributed to capitalism. Yet, we have to remember that not all people “enjoy” the same “benefits”.

Consumerism is at the cornerstone of the American Dream. Consumerism is an ideology that says, “I’m only as good as what I buy” (Tyson, 60). We are not “exempt” from the capitalist

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effects, as Gatsby was “exempt” from Nick’s “unaffected scorn” (p.8; ch.1). Today we live in a capitalist society and we are the “greedy” consumers that produce huge benefits for large corporations. Today’s society is not very different from what happened in the 1920s, maybe fashionably speaking, or technologically speaking, we are more “advanced” than they were. For the first time in history, people from the 1920s enjoyed life, so to speak, from a material perspective. People spent and spent, taking advantage of the instalment credit; they lived for the moment, “buy today, pay tomorrow” and they failed to see the days that were expecting them when Wall Street crashed in the 1930s. People were unaware of the “repercussion” of consumer goods. The Great Depression in 1929 caught America out of guard. Thousands were now starving; immense breadlines and sickness were just some of the effects of a capitalist society. I have decided thus to analyse *The Great Gatsby* from a Marxist perspective; “difference in socioeconomic class divide people in ways that are much more significant than differences in religion, race, ethnicity or gender” (Tyson, 54). However, I have tried not to analyse the novel from a single perspective. Apart from a Marxist perspective, I have tried to introduce some other perspectives such as Postcolonial Criticism or Deconstructive Criticism. Today we are consumed by capitalism. Year by year, multinational companies promote and sell new products. We can look at the automobile companies which each year introduce new models. They have a great variety of products and their prices are not accessible to the common people. However, they know that people are willing to pay a little bit more for fashion, performance and status. Their marketing agents are amongst the best in their field, being able to “place and sell” the product everywhere around the globe. The automobile *sign-exchange value*\(^2\) is all that counts for its consumers. Big corporations know our insecurities and they know how to attract us into their advantage, buying more and more of their goods. This happened also in the 1920s, with the boom of advertisement and marketing. They used ads in order to make people buy more of their products. They were advertising products that were meant to “fix” our insecurities; insecurities introduced by magazines and celebrities. Thus, they created competition amongst citizens and made use of celebrities and magazines to promote their “fix-all products”. Back in the 1920s, it was common to have “shred fat-soaps”, physicians advertising cigarettes, families drinking Coca-Cola in the countryside; cigars were advertised as “torches of freedom for women” (Boyer, 704). Nowadays advertising on television, internet and billboards do not

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\(^2\) For Marxism, a commodity’s value lies not in what it can do (*use value*) but in the money or other commodities for which it can be traded (*exchange value*) or in the social status it confers on its owner (*sign-exchange value*) (Tyson, p. 62)
fell short on “fixing” people’s insecurities and even create more: whiter teeth, more voluminous hair, wrinkles faces, turbo vacuum cleaners, silent washing machines and so on. They use the same basic notions in advertising and marketing as they used in the 1920s. How many celebrities engage in advertising? They try to sell products they do not even use, because they use ones that are more expensive and of a better quality; but advertising affordable shampoos or moisturizers that can be used by regular people, not only increases their popularity but also their income and the company’s revenue. We are ready to accept everything they sell no matter the quality or its “use value” as long as celebrity X uses it I will use it. That is our mentality today. Alfred Sloan, the director of General Motors, knew his costumers desires. He understood from the beginning the effects of marketing and advertisement; for him it was not sufficient to manufacture only a “functional car”, he knew the public was ready to pay more for fashion, new assets and colour in a car. He even created a programme in which you could trade in your old car for a new one: faster, more fashionable, and in the colour of your choice, paying just a hundred of dollars more, which would compensate for its colour and assets. Same thing today, we want more of what is new and dispose of what is old, for the sake of a new colour or button.

I do not think it is necessary to “repeat” the past; we actually live in the “past”. Things have improved: from a technological, medical and educational point of view, we are more advanced than in 1920, but the system is the same. The system knows our “insecurities” and that our “desires” have changed, so in turn they change their tactics.

2. Historical aspects of the decade

The World War I was not a catastrophe for the United States as it was for Europe. The war did not leave the country impoverished, shattered or destroyed. Americans were eager to forget the war and move on with their lives. Yet, the war had traumatic effects. The mood of disillusionment influenced people’s attitudes not only to the outside world, but also towards the social, cultural and political life. From the late 1918, until the end of the decade, the American people passed through an abrupt change of mood, from the solemnity of war years to self-satisfaction, high living and challenging of social order. The decade to come after the war was unexpected, a time of deep cultural conflicts and exciting social changes. The most obvious signs of change were the growth of cities, the rise of a consumer-oriented economy, noticeable in the spread of cars, electric appliances, electricity and the spread of mass entertainment, such as radio broadcasts and the movies. For many Americans, mainly urbanites, these changes were more than welcomed, representing liberation from the
restrictions and limitations of the country’s Victorian past. On the contrary, especially for those living in the rural areas, morals seemed to be crumbling and the United States seemed to be changing in objectionable ways.

In the 1920s Americans were the first to play electric phonographs, use vacuum cleaners, listen to commercial radio broadcasts, wear ready-made clothes, drive cars and drink fresh juices all year round. The 1920s saw the transformation of American life, at least in the urban area. The majority moved now to the city leaving behind the rural areas. They wanted to prosper and they wanted to profit from the social changes they were experiencing. The United States soon became an urban society. The cities attracted large numbers of immigrants not only from southern and eastern Europe, but also from the South. The old-stock Americans found these waves of immigration offensive. Many African Americans moved towards the North in cities like Chicago, Philadelphia and New York. Competition for jobs and housing became a major problem (Martin, 644). Americans were haunted by the fear that their society was being crashed. They were alarmed by the beliefs and customs that were being established, so they yearned to go back in time. Hence, the distrustful, prejudiced displeasure, which they manifested in such phenomena as immigration restriction, the Ku Klux Klan, religion fundamentalism and the Prohibition experiment. They feared that immigrants and blacks would stain their white American supremacy; many newspaper editors and writers wrote about how America’s old-stock was in danger by masses of new immigrants. In 1921, Congress passed an Emergency Quota Act, restricting immigration, meaning a drastic reduction in the number of immigrants. They tried to reduce the number of southern and eastern European immigrants as much as possible, but the Western Hemisphere was exempted from such restriction, chiefly due to the powerful Southwestern economic interests dependent on Mexican labour. In 1924, Congress adopted the National Origins Quota Act, limiting to 150,000 European immigrants per year. Most of the available slots were allocated to immigrants from Germany, Great Britain, Ireland, and Scandinavia; and banned all Asian immigrants. The National Origins Quota Act was passed with overwhelming support from rural and provincial areas. The restrictive legislation endured until 1960s, being the most lasting success of rural counterattack, enforcing a racist bias that excluded Asians and limited the immigration of Italians, Poles, and Greeks.

The impact of modernism on lifestyle and intellectual life was widespread during the 1920s. Many Americans neither accepted the changes that it represented nor welcomed the degeneration of traditional values and morals. World War I represented a turning point in
American history. After 1920, strong movements arose rejecting modernism and reaffirming traditional values. Mainly on the rural areas, people reinforced the authority of the Bible, positioning the importance of religion as central in the heart of American culture. Antimodernism was also directed towards all kind of changes, such as new immigrants, blacks, and spreaders of a new morality. One of the most important and prominent manifestation of the antimodernist mind-set was Protestant fundamentalism. Fundamentalism merged as a united social movement during the World War I. Modernists began to challenge conservatives, and the war years marked the beginning of fundamentalism in the American cultural politics. Fundamentalists worked on two main fronts. Conservatives paid campaigns to destroy modernist theology and reaffirm absolute Biblical dominance. On the other hand, fundamentalists struggled to prevent the teachings of Charles Darwin’s evolutionist theories. William Jennings Bryan, the representative of the rural, Protestant America, took leadership in a movement that drew many of its followers and recruits from the provincial areas. For Bryan, the spread of scientific materialism and the belief in the material origins of man represented a challenge. He was convinced that students would lose faith and repudiate Christianity. In 1921, Bryan began a fight to remove evolution from public schools; he found great support from the South. By 1925, the antievolutionists experienced great success in Florida, North Carolina and Texas. In Tennessee, he had triumphed. The University of Tennessee dismissed a professor of genetics and other five ones for teaching evolutionist theories. An antievolution bill was introduced in Tennessee, reinforcing a measure forbidding any teacher in the state to teach any theory contradicting the Biblical version of creation or sustaining that man had evolved from animals. The intellectual and moral harbour between the old America and the new was defined in the famous Scopes ‘Monkey Trial’ at Dayton, Tennessee in 1925. The American Civil Liberties Union⁷ offered to finance defence of any Tennessee teacher who would put at test the new antievolutionist bill. John Thomas Scopes, a biology teacher, volunteered and a test case began in May 1925. Thomas Scopes was to be defended in court by the famed trial lawyer Clarence Darrow while Bryan joyfully joined the prosecution counsel. When the trial started, Bryan was welcomed by huge crowds and he responded by promising a campaign to amend the Constitution to prohibit antievolutionist theories anywhere in the United States. It was soon clear that Scopes had violated the law and he was fined 100$. What gave the trial its drama was the verbal combat between Clarence and

⁷ ACLU-it is the guardian of liberty, working in courts, legislatures, and communities to defend and preserve the individual rights and liberties that the Constitution and the laws of the United States guarantee everyone in this country. (ACLU, 2015)
Bryan, and the opposite images of America they represented. A few days later, Bryan died believing he had carried the day. However, his opponents proclaimed the Scopes trial a victory for academic freedom (Martin, 657).

Social and ethnic tensions explained the dramatic rise of the Ku Klux Klan. The revived organization soon became national, professing to stand for Americanism, morality and Christianity. Many were attracted to the clan by its ceremonies, secret grips and passwords. Although the Klan promoted its “innocence”, in nature it was negative and high-class. Only “native born, white American citizens, who believe in the tenets of the Christian religion, and who owe no allegiance... to any foreign government or institution, religious or political” (Jones,439-0) were permitted to join “the Invisible Empire, Knights of the Ku Klux Klan” (Divine, 601). Membership remained modest until Colonel William Joseph Simmons, the leader of the secret organization, hired two advertising experts, Edwards Young Clarke and Elizabeth Tyler, to market the Klan across the nation. Clarke and Elizabeth hired an army to sell membership in the Klan. By 1921, the Klan had become a national organization and enjoyed astonishing success, claiming a membership of five million people. The Klan enjoyed stronger support in the South, but also in the Southeast, the Far West and the Midwest. Most members were not from the countryside, but from small cities and towns as well as larger cities like Detroit and Chicago. The Klan’s members were highly suspicious of anything foreign or different and responded devotedly to grandiloquent expressions of patriotism. They also allowed their members to wear white robes and hoods; any person could pay ten dollars and wear the white robes, and become a glorious “knight” of the Ku Klux Klan. The Klan controlled politics in a number of Western states. Its strength came from fast-growing cities like Los Angeles, Indianapolis, Detroit, Denver and Dallas, whose neighbourhoods were being transformed by European immigrants and Southern blacks. The Klan had a huge support from old-stock Americans, victims of declining status such as clerks, small professionals, blue-collars and businessmen who were being replaced by the newcomers. In some areas, the Klan resorted to mutilation, murder, and church-burnings in order to terrorize people who were seen as immoral or un-American. The Klan sought to intimidate individuals, using public beatings, lynching and cross burnings as forms of correction. The Klan also lashed out against drunkards, bootleggers, gamblers and wife-beaters, anyone who violated the standards of morality. By 1930, the cross burnings and the white sheets had vanished due to several sex scandals in which Klan leaders were involved; some were signalled for corruption.
Another bitter controversy was the Prohibition experiment. Major discrepancies in the 1920s did nothing more than separating people in classes. “Drys” versus “wets” was another area of continuing incongruities of the era. The Prohibition reflected and exposed deep fissures in American society, a “utopian faith” (Jones, 441) that alcohol could be eliminated by legislation. The Eighteenth Amendment, effective in January 16, 1920, and the Volstead Act of 1919, passed to eradicate alcohol, proved impossible to enforce. At first, prohibition seemed a success by eliminating thousands of illicit stills, by destroying millions of gallons of wine and spirits and by closing distilleries and breweries. Arrests for drunkenness dropped and alcohol related-deaths all but disappeared. A noticeable minority, including both the very rich and the immigrant working class, viewed Prohibition as an unbearable violation of personal liberty and simply rebelled against it. Evasion took creative forms. “Bootleggers” smuggled liquor from the Bahamas, West Indies and across the Canadian and Mexican borders. Individuals redistilled and transformed alcohol into synthetic gin and whiskey, some of which was highly poisonous, even lethal; thousands died because of these illegal concoctions. In rural areas and in the country drinking declined severely. However, in the communities that opposed Prohibition, flouted the law with impunity. “Speakeasies” and nightclubs flourished in the great cities. The number of illicit saloons or speakeasies doubles during the Prohibition experiment. Moreover, the great consequence of Prohibition was organized crime. The huge profits made by selling illicit alcohol attracted criminals, bootleggers and gangs. Gangs owned their own distilleries, breweries and distribution networks, intimidated competitors and blackmailed speakeasies proprietors. After building liquor monopolies, they branched out into businesses like gambling, prostitution and narcotics. Gangs made corrupt alliances with politicians, police officers and judges, enabling them to dominate certain city governments. Bootlegging turned out to be a gold mine for racketeers. It was the “take-off point” for crime in America and continued after the Twenty-First Amendment, which ended Prohibition in 1933. From the outset, sceptics doubted the Prohibition could be enforced. A reform created to improve public morality turned citizens into mobsters and lawbreakers into celebrities. They were right. In large cities, people defied the law and in New York City, from 7000 arrests for liquor law violation only 17 ended in convictions (Martin, 656). In 1923, New York was the first city to abolish its enforcement law. The evident failure of the Eighteenth Amendment produced a demand for repeal. However, the “dry” forces strong among the rural fundamentalists, remained devoted to what

4 “drys”; “wets” terms gathered from (Boyer, 736)
Herbert Hoover described in 1928 as “a great social and economic experiment, noble in motive and far-reaching in purpose” (Jones, 442). Congress repealed Prohibition in 1933, after a presidential commission reported that this law could no longer be enforced. Challenging Prohibition, as one college student stated, embodied “the natural reaction of youth to rules and regulation” (Boyer, 736). The “drys” usually native-born Protestants praised Prohibition, while the “wets”- liberals, Jazz Age rebels and immigrants contemplated it as moralistic intrusive. The imposition of Prohibition, and its eventual failure, perfectly exemplifies a number of significant aspects in American history. First, it shows the belief of American people that utopia can be achieved in the here-and-now. Second, it indicates a similar belief that law can achieve “Americanization”. Thirdly, it leads attention to a weakness in American public opinion and policy “a tendency to will the end without willing the means” (Johnson, p. 680). In less than a few months, the liquor gangsters controlled more governments and resources than the law. The speed at which the distribution of liquor, the manufacture and sale transferred from legitimate to criminal forces was characteristic of American dynamism. Socially it was a catastrophe for the United States.

3. Cultural aspects of the decade

The period can be seen as a second Industrial Revolution. The first Industrial Revolution in the late nineteenth century had propelled the United States into the front line among the world’s affluent and most highly developed nations. With the onset of the new consumer goods industries, the American people enjoyed the topmost standard of living. After a brief post-war depression, a new era had begun; the 1920s saw the beginning of a prosperous era, which pinnacle in 1927 and lasted until 1929. In this short period, American industrial productivity nearly doubled. Most of this boom took place in industries producing consumer goods, such as automobiles, furniture, electric appliances and clothing. Most important, mass production subsided to a consumer goods innovation. Factories produced a flood of automobiles, electric appliances and other items that made life easier for Americans. The result was the creation of a uniquely modern America, marked by material wealth, characterizing America ever since. This was the decade of the triumphant skyscrapers, automobiles and Charleston. The Empire State Building, 1,248 feet high, was the symbol of American life (Brogan, 490). The nature of the consumer goods modernization can be seen in the automobile industry, which became the nation’s greatest innovation. In 1920, twenty-six millions cars were on the roads out of ten million. Thanks to Henry Ford, a farm boy, the motorcar era had begun. The Model T was the best-selling automobile. Ford greatest
competitor, General Motors had copied and surpassed Ford’s Model T; General Motors neither subscribed to any conservative business attitudes, nor to the celebrated motto “You can have any colour you like, so long as it’s black” (Brogan, 493). Ford revolutionized American manufacturing production by introducing the automated assembly line. Ford’s assembly-line techniques influenced employees’ behaviour (Boyer, 710). Workers stood in place, performing repetitive task as chains carried the vehicles parts past them. He demonstrated the logic of mass production; he increased the number of products sold by expanding production and reducing cost and higher salaries permitting workers to buy more products. Fordism became a synonym for assembly-line manufacturing, mass-production techniques having a global effect. The automobile opened vast regions for housing, giving people various possibilities about where to live. The other automobile giant Alfred Sloan, the president of General Motors, built his company not by refining the manufacture process but by implementing new tactics such as advertising and marketing. Alfred Sloan stated, “The primary object of the corporation was to make money, not just make cars” (Martin, 647).

Unlike Henry Ford, who wanted to produce an inexpensive, functional car, Sloan was convinced that Americans were ready to pay additional costs for extravagance and prestige. He publicized his cars as symbols of wealth and rank. Sloan introduced new car models, convincing buyers to trade in old models for newer ones with gaudy designing. He also designed a series of car divisions that were differentiated by status, price and level of luxury; Chevrolets were less expensive than Buicks or Cadillacs for example. In order to make his car affordable for the large public, Sloan set up the first nation’s consumer credit agency in 1919.

While Henry Ford demonstrated the effectiveness of mass production, Alfred Sloan flaunts the importance of marketing in a modern consumer society. Car manufacturers and banks stimulated the citizens to buy cars on credit, and thus the car revolutionized the American lifestyle. Car admirers claimed that the automobile promoted family intimacy, through picnics, evening rides and weekend trips. However, critics denounced the idea that the use of the automobile was the reason of an apparent decline in church attendance; worst of all, they said, cars gave freedom and privacy to young people, serving as “portable bedrooms” (Martin, 648). Additionally, the car transformed the American landscape. During the 1920s, the building of roads and highways increased. However, the car brought with it pollution, overcrowding and thousands of traffic deaths. The automobile industry proved to be a terrific impulse for the national economy. It stimulated the growth of glass, rubber and steel industries, along with hotdog stands, campgrounds and gasoline stations that dotted the nation’s roads. The car itself was changing every year, encouraging technological innovation.
Concrete producers and road-builders profited. A new profession had emerged, that of a car-dealer. Perhaps the social changes were even more impressive than the economic ones. The car broke down the frontier between town and country. The movement began with the flourishing middle class citizens living in the city, anxious for a holiday in the rural areas, far away from New York. This movement brought with itself the building of thousands of motels and wayside restaurants serving drinks and hot meals. The cheap Model T enabled the working class to travel in search of a better work or even for pleasure. Apparently, even the poor rural people could own cars, so many of them attained to depart to the cities or to the West; thus the greatest migration in the American history had begun. Most important was the impact that the car produced on their daily lives. It was used for all kind of short trips, from work to the shops and back home. It created a new pattern of living; suburbs began to spread and the building industry made a great profit out of it. The carefree motorist was the central driving force of the twenties, not only a symbol (Brogan, 495). Another important industry was the radio. The first broadcasting station in the United States, KDKA in East Pittsburgh, began normal services on November 2, 1920, with the presidential-election returns (Jones, 445). Commercial broadcasting companies dominated the field. The National Broadcasting Company (NBC) set up the first national radio system in 1926. Colombia Broadcasting System (CBS) created another system the following year. By 1927, when the number of radio station had increased, Congress established a supervisory commission to license stations and assign wavelengths. Soon, the radio became a household accessory. The radio drew the nation together, for the first time people from all over the country listened to the same news and laughed at the same jokes. Radio brought entertainment and advertisements to millions of households. Other emblems of the consumer society were electricity and the telephone. As more and more Americans received electricity at home, new appliances followed, such as refrigerators, vacuum cleaners, washing machines, and toasters. Advertisers took advantage and claimed that these new appliances will ease the physical labour of housework. However, it did not shorten the housewife workweek. Women had to do more because the norm of cleanliness was rising. Social pressure increased household chores to keep in pace with the new technology. Everything was changing, even the eating habits underwent specific shifts; they consumed more fruits and sugar and less starches. The most striking process was the growth of processed foods. Manufacturers learned to can and freeze foods. Advertising further stimulated the consumer society. Corporations spent nearly $2 billion on radio, newspaper, billboard and magazine ads (Martin, 648-0). Advertisers made promises of social
success. Ads portrayed a world of fantasy and elegance that advertisers sworn to achieve. In 1925, one critic described the advertisers’ world

Smiling faces, shining teeth, schoolgirls complexions, cornless feet, perfect fitting underwear, distinguished collars, wrinkleless pans, odourless breath, regularized bowels,… charging motors, punctureless tires, perfect busts, shimmering shanks, self-washing dished, backs behind which the moon was meant to rise. (Boyer, 703)

Advertisers claimed that buying more and more goods fulfilled the “pursuit of happiness” promised in the Declaration of Independence. The first million-dollar advertising campaign was for Uneeda Biscuits (Martin, 649) and its patented waterproof box. Advertising companies hired psychologists to design campaigns. They built name-brand identification, creating outstanding slogans and manipulated endorsements by celebrities and doctors, tempting to consumers’ appetite for prestige. The new consumer society put emphasis on spending and borrowing, in contrast to a Victorian society that had placed great emphasis on saving. Banks offered the first country’s mortgages, allowing customers to pay everything from cars to toasters “on time”. The use of instalment credit soared in the 1920s. The American families spent a great proportion of their income on recreation, electric appliances and other new consumer goods. Industries such as automobiles, processed foods, chemicals, aviation and entertainment advanced at a higher pace. Mass-circularization magazines boomed. The Saturday Evening Post, covered fiction featuring small-town life, was specialized in nostalgia. The Reader’s Digest, founded in 1921, presented shortened versions of articles first published elsewhere. The phonograph had also a great importance in the decade. The popularity of jazz, blues and “hillbilly” music powered the phonograph blast. This was truly jazz’s golden age. Louis Armstrong popularized “scat” (singing meaningless syllables) while Fletcher Henderson pioneered big band jazz. “Hillbilly” music had its appeal; it was not limited only to the rural South, but city people, too, listened to country songs, filled by nostalgia, reflecting on a simpler past. (Martin, 649). However, the single most significant form of mass entertainment was the movies. Like advertising, movies created a dream world. Ads and movies created fantasies and shaped the behaviour and ideals of the young. Going to the cinema became a nationwide custom. People had more money and more leisure time than ever. Movie attendance soared between 1920 and 1929. During the late 1920s, the film industry took its modern shape. At the beginning, the cinema industry was based in New York, by the 1920s, the industry moved to Hollywood, attracted by cheap land and the ideal climate all year round. The diverse scenery and cheap labour was another factor that
contributed to choosing Hollywood as the new centre of filming. Soon, Hollywood dominated the worldwide film production, releasing about 700 movies each year. Small companies controlled the film industry and they created the “studio system”. Paramount, Fox, MGM, 20th-Century had their own studios and production facilities, controlling theatre chains and run their own distribution networks worldwide. Additionally, they kept certain actors and directors. The popularity of the movies grew featuring glamour, sex appeal and sophistication. New kinds of stars appeared such as the mysterious goddess Greta Garbo and the “passionate hot-blooded lover” personified by Rudolph Valentino; and the flapper, with short skirts and bobbed hair (Martin, 650). Different type of movies genres also debuted including urbane comedies, tales of new sexual freedom and heroic adventures. Movies created a new popular culture, with common behaviour, heroes, dresses and speech. Movies tried to reach out to all sort of social classes, and migrated from comedies based on immigrants and other minorities towards elegant palaces and high-class scenery. Nevertheless, movies reinforced not only racial stereotypes but also conservative ideas. The Ten Commandments (1923), a religious epic movie, directed by Cecil B. DeMille, warned people against breaking ethical taboos, while actress Mary Pickford, with her fragile look, played the role of innocent girls in need of protection, supporting traditional gender values that many women were critical of (Martin, 650). Year by year, directors were using new technological innovations, introducing sound in the movie The Jazz Singer (1927) directed by Al Jonson. Moreover, in 1928, Walt Disney introduced Mickey Mouse showing the potential of animation. Corporations such as Warner Brothers, Colombia and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer sought overseas markets, relying on standard plots and typecast stars. Hollywood also exploited the flapper type in films such as Flaming Youth (1923), It (1927) and Our Dancing Daughters (1928). Millions consumed the flapper films. Hollywood has exploited its “star system” creating mythical types that the audience can follow. Film stars competed with each other and each of them promoted different types of behaviour; some remained conservative in nature. However, the audience tried to imitate their favourite actors’ lives, dreaming of a better life, aspiring to climb the social class ladder. The movies were yet another social product, in a consumer society that was eager to devour new forms of life. They needed new icons and celebrities to admire apart from their beloved actors, which were filling their leisure time. Sports attracted vast audiences; they yearned for national heroes in a progressively objective, bureaucratic society. Sports became a national mania; golf boomed with nearly two million women and men playing across the green fields while box drew crowds to see fighters such as Jack Dempsey, who became a national idol. Spectator sports drew even more attention as baseball attendance soared. In 1927, the year
that George Herman (“Babe”) Ruth became a national hero by hitting sixty home runs, more than two million people attended the games. “Babe” Ruth was the undisputable sports’ superstar; his recorded stoop up until 1961. George Herman Ruth was a national figure, considered bigger than Dempsey the boxer, Jones the golfer and Tilden the tennis player (Brogan, 491). Ruth was an urban figure, who once killed a fan by hitting a homer; the fan in his excitement suffered a heart attack. Sports and cinema were the main preoccupation of the twenties. A period in which the quest for happiness, “normalcy” and a good time, led the young who had more money, to turn their backs on more serious issues such as politics and work. They did as much as possible to seek salvation in the fugacious times. “It was foolish—it was fun. So everybody Charlestoned” (Brogan, 491). The popularity of jazz grew incredibly fast. Jazz was a creation of New Orleans black musicians, which expanded its local roots after 1917, quickly spreading to Kansas City, Chicago and New York. New Orleans jazz style survived in the bands of King Oliver and in the work of Louis Armstrong, but the new style did not get socially acceptable until white orchestras, mainly Paul Whiteman’s adapted it. However, many older people condemned jazz as a means to degenerate moral values. The dance forms that jazz inspired were considered amoral. Charleston and the “black bottom” with frenetic embraces and crazy dance movements were a proof to conservatives that the standards of sexual morality were collapsing. Even if pleasure seeking and materialism was characteristic of the twenties so was revolt and protest. Around 1922, according to F. Scott Fitzgerald, the adults embraced the rebelliousness of the young. However, in the years of Fitzgerald, many American conservatives adhered to traditional values, rejecting wild parties and alcohol. Farmers, immigrants, blacks, industrial workers and Hispanics found economic burdens more urgent than the latest fashions.

The younger generation condemned traditional codes of behaviour; Puritanism and Victorianism turned out to be pejoratives terms. The image of the women was a publicized aspect of the revolt against Victorianism. Women used more cosmetics, wore shorter skirts and stopped using corsets. They started to challenge Victorianism restrictions and the traditional values that were imposed on their behaviour and aspect. Women defied their “innocent and pure” figure by freely drinking and smoking in public. Many of them claimed the same sexual freedom as men. It was a period of women’s liberation. Margaret Sanger played a major role in “liberating” women from the burdens of large families. She was convinced that large families represented an economic burden for the poor. She regarded “family planning” as the upmost issue of her day, making abortion avoidable. Sanger decided to make birth control her priority in life. She dedicated all her life to “planned parenthood”
and played a leading role in the development of “the pill”. Her American Birth Control League and some other organizations established numerous clinics where women could get inexpensive birth control devices and obtain useful information about contraceptive methods.

From 1914 to 1937, she fought to make contraceptives morally acceptable. However, even more striking was the changing image of women: the flapper was the most powerful symbol of the Twenties society and culture. The flapper\(^5\) personified the “new woman” wearing shorter skirts, cutting her hair shorter and smoking cigarettes. The “new woman” was different in shape and attitude from her Victorian maternal figure. They experienced sexual and personal freedom. Still, they lived in an economically and politically male dominated society, and such freedom could prove a delusion for women. Although Margaret Sanger was convinced that birth control could free poor women from poverty and illness, many of them still lacked access to contraceptive forms. On the contrary, a large proportion of middle-class couples admitted to be using some form of contraception and by the end of the decade, sex became a pleasure, not a duty. For the first time female death rate decreased and women’s health improved. Divorce rate increased; some demanded that the institution of family should change and adapt to the changing times. The dynamics of marriage altered; more emphasis was put on the emotional rather than on the financial bond. For women, these changes proved liberating. Their sexuality was accepted by the society. Many young women, rejecting traditional values, shaped their appearance according to standards ruled by fashion magazines and contests. In 1921, Atlantic City sponsors launched a bathing beauty contest called Miss America Pageant. Young women, uncertain about society’s expectations, beauty pageants and magazines offered one ideal to follow and aspire to. Advertisers and movies also played a major role on moulding women’s beauty standards. They encouraged women to purchase cosmetics, silk stockings, colourful dresses in order to pursue a fashionable and trendy lifestyle.

After seventy-two years, in 1920 women received the right to vote with the passing of the Nineteenth Amendment. However, women did not win equal rights. They were still discriminated at work and their status in society was challenged. Their main occupation was still domestic service, although there were eight million women in the American workforce.

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\(^5\) The flappers were northern, urban, single, young, middle-class women. Flappers engaged in the active city nightlife. They frequented jazz clubs. Speakeasies were a common destination, as the new woman of the twenties adopted the same carefree attitude toward prohibition as her male counterpart. Ironically, more young women consumed alcohol in the decade it was illegal than ever before. Many women celebrated the age of the flapper as a female declaration of independence. Experimentation with new looks, jobs, and lifestyles seemed liberating compared with the socially silenced woman in the Victorian Age. (entirely cited from [http://www.ushistory.org/us/46d.asp](http://www.ushistory.org/us/46d.asp))
Many held positions such as clerks, secretaries and typists, all low-paying jobs. The American Federation of Labour remained hostile towards women because they did not want females competing for men’s jobs. Male politicians were against women’s right to vote but agreed on the women’s right to serve on juries. Congress passed legislation to establish a national system of women’s and children health care clinics. They also passed a bill prohibiting child labour, a cause supported by many women’s groups. Child labour declined also due to the end of immigrant child labour. Education was now seen as a children right; younger people stayed in educational institutions for longer periods due to the declining birth rate. Every state passed compulsory attendance laws. Children were being divided by age due to the large number of students attending class. These changes affected the family, there being more conflicts between parents and children. Day by day, the authority of the family weakened, while that of peer groups increased. There was also a decline in the values of motherhood. Children became more involved in extra-curricular activities such as social clubs and sports teams.

The enormous achievements of the American novel in the Twenties were partly triggered by the war, which became a symbol for the limit of the past. For F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway the literary modernism of the Twenties was the start of a new age. In comparison to European writers that were preoccupied to understand the struggle between war, capitalism and state power, American writers were concerned with the relations between the self and the validation of the artist. The artist’s relation to the modern society became an artistic issue. For British authors, such as Rupert Brooke, Wilfred Owen and Isaac Rosenberg, the war meant the loss of friends and even their own death. The war marked the war-surviving authors and influenced their writing style. However, for Americans the war was merely a symbolic event. It was an opportunity to explore personal freedom and courage. The war released new energies that inspired American writers. Still, the literary war was incomplete and filled with unreal experiences in comparison with the British war literature of the period. The World War I gave a sense of impetus and a feeling of general separation. Some American writers expressed their alienation by moving to Europe, especially to Paris. Twenties expatriated writers abandoned New York and moved to a sexually liberated, bohemian and avant-garde Paris. An experimental Paris that was ready to accommodate the most rebellious American writers. These alienated writers did not use French language for their works. They went abroad to publish in small magazines and editorials, and joined English speaking groups. For example, the Fitzgeralds joined a crowd of English speaking tourists, drinking and living a bohemian life, profiting from the superiority of American economic boom. There was a hunger for new styles of art and life and many Americans were
eager for these new forms to be explained. Literature has the ability to explain and give meaning to the social events. Through literature, many novelists portrayed the American lifestyle as it was. Some were highly critical of the modern society and some satirised it. However, a new type of cultural radicalism began during World War I. Critics were analytical of the fundamental assumptions of the American culture. Many of these rebels were alienated by the hypocrisy and low cultural level of American life. Young intellectuals objected to the perversities and immoralities of American lifestyle. Various critics were denouncing the anti-intellectual newspapers that gave more space to sports and celebrities culture than to the theatre and high culture. The intellectuals of the period felt rejected and misunderstood by a society that only cared about drinking, parting and jazz. Some moved to Greenwich Village, inhabited by a small colony of bohemians, while others with an independent income flew to Paris to find cultural and personal freedom together with other expatriates. One of the most widely read critic was the journalist Henry Louis Mencken, a native of Baltimore. He illustrated the magnitude of this cultural rebellion. Mencken was disapproving of the American cultural weaknesses. He contributed to American culture; in 1919, he published The American Language, in which he tried to bring together examples of American idioms and expressions. He became a literary critic for a small magazine The Smart Set, an urban magazine highly influential in the growth of American Literature. Later, H.L. Mencken began the monthly publication of American Mercury in 1922, addressed to like-minded protestors. American Mercury became the bible of the cultural radicals. Mencken ridiculed democracy, organized religion, prohibition, ignorance, idealism along with the mass of humankind. In his opinion, “morality and Christian marriage were absurdities; patriotism imbecilic; the American people were mainly a vast collection of peasants, boobs, and hillbillies” (Link, 219). In literature, he fought for the acknowledgment of outstanding newcomers like Theodore Dreiser and Sinclair Lewis. Mencken was not alone in depicting a pessimist vision about American society; other writers identified themselves as part of a growing group of modernists. Various novelists used the war as a setting. Some wrote about the war, depicting the misery of trench warfare and its spiritual bankruptcy. The first American to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, Sinclair Lewis wrote about types of middle-class Americans. His Main Street (1920) was a satirical portrait of small-town America, while Babbitt (1922) caricatured the materialistic businessman. Lewis was harsh in his depiction of small-town provincialism, sham morals and the materialism of his time. He achieved worldwide recognition with the publication of Main Street (1920), the story of a young girl married to a doctor who tries to bring culture and creativity to an empty, narrow-minded small-town.
Following, Lewis focused on the sham businessman in *Babbitt* (1922), considered by many his greatest work. In *Babbitt*, Lewis purposely ignored formal plot structure and wrote in a fantastic way. The greatest accomplishment of Lewis is the creation of George Babbitt, a man weak in morals and intellectually empty. Through his novels, Sinclair Lewis attacks the narrow-minded, mediocre small-town America. Lewis social satire shocked American readers in 1920. Before his publication of *Main Street*, America viewed the small-town idealistically, inhabited by the last good people; a place where traditions, values and morals remained untouched in the midst of the changing society. However, in *Main Street*, Lewis exposed the myth of the goodness of small-town life as a fib. He portrays the small-town with its lack of intellectual success and its interest of material goods. Lewis satirized small-town prototypes. In *Babbitt*, he wants to point out some of the biggest faults of capitalism. George F. Babbitt cheats people out of money and he is the first to point out the mistakes of others. The novelist shows Babbitt’s hypocrisy and how contradictory his ideas and morals are when it comes to business practices. Another important literary figure of the period was Ernest Hemingway. In 1918, Hemingway moved to Europe to serve in World War I as an ambulance driver in the Italian Army. There he met a woman that accepted his marriage proposal but later abandoned him for another man. This situation marked the writer but provided him with great material for his works. During the Twenties, he became a member of the expatriate writers in Paris. *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) portrays the lives of the members of the Lost Generation, a group whose adulthood was marked by the war. The war shattered people’s belief in the values of love, faith and humanity. Without love, hope, and faith the members of the group that worked in the war, suffered psychological and moral loss. They wondered aimlessly in a futile world. The character’s loss of hope, morality and love made their lives empty. As their lives had no meaning, they filled their time with drinking, dancing and other escapist activities. Nevertheless, these activities were superficial, and deep down they never found happiness. Equally successful was his novel *A Farewell to Arms* (1929). The novel offers remarkable descriptions of the life during and after the war. It tells the story of an ambulance officer’s disillusionment in the war. The novel’s primary concern is the process by which Fredric Henry removes himself from war. The majority of the characters are uncertain about the war, doubtful of the glory it brings. Hemingway liked to portray soldiers and hunters, people whose bravery and honesty are set against a modern society, and who in this confrontation lose faith. Even though, authors like Sinclair Lewis and Ernest Hemingway criticized wartime deception, they remained American at heart, motivated to create a more original national culture. While some authors embraced the changing society, others were disappointed about it
and struggled to understand the passing of time. Preoccupation with sex was characteristic of all writers, but some authors glorified sex as the “primal drive”. Although all writers wrote about sex, there was a difference in emphasis. Others wrote about moral confusion and hypocrisy in American life. Author Sherwood Anderson in works as *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), *Poor White* (1920) and *Many Marriages* (1923), tried to expose the perversities of the small-town Middle West. A new talent, William Faulkner, had little in common with the group of “Lost Generation” writers. He tried to investigate the meaning of human existence. Faulkner focused on the dissolution of traditional values. In his works, the novelist used symbolic and complex, stream-of-consciousness style that confused many readers. Faulkner wrote about the decline of the South, due to its fatal error, the sin of slavery. He disagrees with the modern civilization, which he feels has destroyed the goodness of man. The mechanization of society has destroyed the environment while dehumanizing the individual. Faulkner feels that the slaves and their descendants have inherited the South because they have worked the land. Sometimes, Faulkner is considered a pioneering environmentalist. He sees the man as evil because he has exploited nature. For him, God is in nature, a vision inherited from the Transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau. Faulkner uses complex time references and many of his narratives take the reader into a dimension free of time and space through the use of fragmented voices and incomprehensible non-chronological structures, broken down by flashbacks and flash forwards. William Faulkner’s most celebrated novels include *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and *As I Lay Dying* (1930). Along with *The Sound and The Fury*, *As I Lay Dying* secures Faulkner’s position as a forerunner of stream-of-consciousness techniques. His novels focus on controversial problems concerning class, race and sex. In 1926, he published *Soldier’s Pay*, an ambitious novel whose modernist techniques set the basis for later works. The novel narrates the tragic decline of Lieutenant Donald Mahon, a returning pilot from World War I and his struggle to regain his old life; his condition weakens and he realizes that his beloved fellows are giving up on him. His masterpiece *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) marks the declining of the aristocratic Compson family. The novel is divided into four sections, narrated from four perspectives. It is a tale of true suffering, whose subject confronts themes of incest and suicide. Meanwhile, the poetic revival begun before World War I has not lost its vivacity. The permanent figure in poetry and in criticism is T.S Eliot. He was born in St. Louis, Missouri; later he became a British subject. Eliot together with Ezra Pound shared the leadership in a movement that broke with the stereotype of romantic nineteen-century verse. *The Waste Land* (1922), his long, allegorical poem, laments the misery of modern life. The poem had become a classic overnight In *The Waste Land*, Eliot
uses fragmentation to demonstrate the frenzied state of modern life. In Eliot’s view, World War I has shattered humanity’s psyche. He filled his poems with religious rituals and references, myths and well-known historic allusions. Eliot puts a major emphasis on religious symbols and myths. *The Waste Land* contrasts fragments of several elements of literary and mythic traditions with sounds and scenes from modern life.

Modernism transformed American intellectual life. The awareness of modern world and the revulsion against traditional values united the intellectuals of the decade. Alienation and the loss of certainty led intellectuals towards experimentalism and innovation.

4. *The Great Gatsby*

4.1 Biography

Francis Scott Fitzgerald was born September 24, 1896 in St. Paul, Minnesota. His mother Mary (Mollie) McQuillan was the daughter of an Irish self-made millionaire and his father Edward was a salesman. Fitzgerald was proud to be named after his second cousin Francis Scott Key, the composer of “The Star-Spangled Banner”. Edward Fitzgerald failed as a manufacturer of furniture and he became a salesman. The family’s limited means were based on his maternal grandfather’s success as a wholesale grocer in St. Paul. His parents married late and lost two daughters before Scott’s birth. However, he had a sister, Annabel, his only surviving sibling with whom he had little contact. His father, Edward, was unable to support his family financially. After a short period of being employed as a salesman he took his family in Buffalo and Syracuse. However, when he lost his job, the Fitzgeralds returned to St. Paul, where Scott spent his childhood. Scott studied at the local school, and after a couple of years, he was sent to a Catholic boarding school in New Jersey. Fitzgerald used his childhood and adolescence in St. Paul and New Jersey for fictional material. In 1911, he enrolled in the Newman School in New Jersey, where he met Father Fay, who encouraged him to develop his love for literature. Fitzgerald’s admission to Princeton was uncertain. However, after an interview, he was enrolled in the autumn of 1913. At Princeton, he joined the literary and dramatic clubs, publishing in some of the university’s magazines such as *Nassau Literary Magazine* and *Princeton Tiger*. In 1914, he met and fell in love with Ginevra King, who would become his inspiration for the unattainable female characters in his early short stories. This relation marked Fitzgerald’s life, but for Ginevra this affair was insignificant. His grades however, were not satisfactory and he was unlikely to graduate, so in
1917 Fitzgerald joined the army. While stationed in Alabama, Montgomery he met Zelda Sayre. The two became lovers, but Zelda would not marry him until he proved financial success. Later in 1920, they married after his first novel *This Side of Paradise* was published. The novel enjoyed an overwhelming success, and the young couple embarked on a life of parties, drinking and dancing; many regarded the couple as icons of the “Jazz Age”, a term that Fitzgerald used to describe the 1920s. Fitzgerald described the novel as a “quest novel”; *This Side of Paradise* traces the love disillusionments and career aspirations of Amory Blaine. The novel’s main character Amory Blaine is in fact a concealed Fitzgerald persona. Amory is sent to a boarding school (just as Fitzgerald himself is sent over to a boarding Catholic School); then he goes to Princeton (same university Fitzgerald attended); and goes into life with little knowledge about how he could earn a living and with few notions about how life must be lived. At surface, *This Side of Paradise* is not considered an innovative novel, but at the time, it was considered experimental because Fitzgerald included in it a play and poetry. In the novel, Fitzgerald associates Amory’s personal dilemma with that of a generation, a new generation “Here was a new generation, shouting the old cries, learning the old creed [...] a new generation dedicated more than the last to the fear of poverty and the worship of success; grown up to find all Gods dead, all wars fought, all faiths in man shaken...”¹⁶. This association made *This Side of Paradise* a popular novel for the generation to come at the beginning of the Roaring Twenties; this made critics see Fitzgerald as a novelist with potential. In 1921, Fitzgerald’s daughter Francis (Scottie) was born. For the next following years, the Fitzgeralds have moved to Great Neck, New York and travelled twice to the French Riviera. In 1922, he published his second novel *The Beautiful and the Damned*, a novel that focused on the damaging effects of greediness. The story represented minor improvement in his career as a novelist. The novelist’s goals were undetermined by the market of the 1920s. His reputation as a drinker gave the impression that he was a negligent writer, so the literary market was reluctant to accord full credit to Fitzgerald as a writer. In the spring of 1924, the Fitzgeralds went to France. He completed his masterpiece *The Great Gatsby* (1925) while on France. There was much discussion centred on the means by which Fitzgerald made the artistic jump essential to write his best novel *The Great Gatsby*. H.L Mencken stated, “In Fitzgerald’s first days it seemed almost unimaginable that he would ever show such qualities. His writing then was extraordinarily slipshod — at times almost illiterate” (Mencken, 1925). In a relatively short novel of nine chapters, Fitzgerald tells the story of self-made millionaire Jay Gatsby and

¹⁶ Fitzgerald, F. Scott, *This side of Paradise*, Book 2, Ch.5
his quest to conquer the rich Daisy Buchanan. *The Great Gatsby* becomes a credible story, not only for the desolation of the American Dream but also for the quest of love, truth and beauty. Through the first person narrator, Nick Carraway, we can both participate and criticize Gatsby’s dream of having Daisy. Nick Carraway is the only one who absorbs the truth of Gatsby’s story “Gatsby turned out all right in the end; it was what preyed on Gatsby, what foul dust floated in the wake of his dreams [...]” (Fitzgerald & Tanner, p. 8). To dream is the highest end of man, but corruption threatens to destroy this idealistic vision. Even though Fitzgerald received good critics for the novel, the sales of *The Great Gatsby* were disappointing; people did not want to read the same kind of story again, about people drinking and dancing happily, while society was going to ruins, they were eager to read something more serious that dealt with the issues of the period. The Fitzgerallds remained in Paris until 1926 when they returned to America in order to escape from the bohemian lifestyle they were having in France. However, in 1929 they returned to Paris after Fitzgerald failed as a screenwriter in Hollywood. In 1930, Zelda suffered her first breakdown; her intense ballet work damaged her mental and physical health. Fitzgerald’s novel writing was suspended as he wrote mainly short stories to pay for his wife’s psychiatric treatment. He was not one of the best-paid writers and he was unable to manage his finances; he spent more than he earned. He spent much of his money on his wife’s treatments; after 1932, Zelda spent the rest of her life as a sanatorium resident. *Tender is the Night* (1943) is Fitzgerald’s most ambitious novel. It narrates the story of the deterioration of Dick Diver, the novel’s main character and his ability to solve complicated problems using psychoanalytical theory. However, his excess of charm leaves him vulnerable to anyone; this leads him to emotional and moral bankruptcy. Fitzgerald experiments with viewpoint and inversion of chronological sequence. The story of Dick Diver it told first from the point of view of a young movie star, Rosemary Hoyt, who observes him at the peak of his career and charm. He is married to a mentally ill woman named Nicole, who triumphantly overcomes her illness. Several critics have found *Tender is the Night* as a success, while some condemned its chronological inversion as confusing. After several years of heavy drinking and writer’s block, he tried to revive his career as a screenwriter and freelancer in Hollywood. He received modest financial success, so he started to work on another novel *The Love of the Last Tycoon*, in 1939. He managed to complete half of the manuscript when he died of a heart attack on December 21, 1940, in Hollywood *The Love of the Last Tycoon* was published posthumously in 1941. He died at the age of 44 thinking himself a failure. While alive, none of his works received anything than small commercial or critical success. Even though Fitzgerald’s writing style and language is not
idiosyncratic as that of Hemmingway or Faulkner, his fiction is easily recognizable by its romantic vision, lyric style, settings, social issues and characters. Although Fitzgerald is known for his two major works *The Great Gatsby* and *Tender is the Night*, he wrote more than 160 short stories. He thought himself a novelist; his short stories not only provided him with the income that supported his family, but allowed him to write his novels. The short stories he wrote served as fictional practice in which Fitzgerald developed his themes and style further to be developed in his novels.\(^7\)

In 1932, Fitzgerald began planning *The Great Gatsby*, inspired by the parties he had attended while visiting Long Island’s north shore. In June 1932, he wrote to Maxwell Perkins, his editor, saying, “I want to write something new-something extraordinary and beautiful and simple and intricately patterned”. (The New York Times) The Fitzgeralds’ own life served as a great amount of material for his novel he was working on. They moved to Great Neck, Long Island, across the bay from where old millionaire families had their summer homes. There is a correspondence to the fictional locations of West Egg, where Nick Carraway and Jay Gatsby live, and East Egg where the Buchanans’ mansion is. In the 1920s, many of the houses located on Great Neck where inhabited by celebrities, newspapermen, musicians, songwriters along with some rich bootleggers. The Fitzgeralds themselves participated to many parties, sometimes lasting for several days. It was a period when corruption was widespread. One “famous” figure that reign the underworld was Arnold Rothstein, whose life is somehow similar to the fictional character of Meyer Wolfshiem in *The Great Gatsby*. One of Rothstein’s friends was Herman Rosenthal, who had betrayed his police connections to the press; he was later murdered. Becker, a police lieutenant was executed for the crime, as Wolfshiem recalls, “they shot him three times in his full belly [...] ‘Four of them were electrocuted,’ [...]’Five, with Becker’”. (Fitzgerald & Tanner, p. 69) In the novel, there are many allusions to Gatsby being a bootlegger; his friendship with Wolfshiem and his understanding with the police commissioner, are only some hints to Gatsby’s occupation. Tom is the one to put an emphasis on Gatsby’s job “He and this Wolfshiem bought up a lot of side-street drug-stores here and in Chicago and sold grain alcohol over the counter” (Fitzgerald & Tanner, p. 127). Fitzgerald found sufficient material in the years 1922-1924 in preparing his novel. Another source of material is one of Fitzgerald’s neighbours in Great Neck, Edward fuller, a stockbroker. Edward has come into prominence in 1921 as being a

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leading figure in the stockbroker market; he owned a casino, and a newspaper. He also had great influence on the police, just as Gatsby has in the novel “‘Right you are,’ agreed the policeman […] ‘Know you next time, Mr Gatsby. Excuse me!’” (Fitzgerald & Tanner, p. 67) Fitzgerald was very interested on Edward Fuller’s persona and followed closely his case on the newspaper reports. (Fitzgerald & Parkinson, p. 14)

4.2 Summary

_The Great Gatsby_ is the story narrated from the point of view of the first person narrator Nick Carraway. It is a story about an eccentric millionaire Jay Gatsby and the pursuit of a “corrupted dream”. Nick becomes curious about his neighbour that lives in the adjacent mansion in West Egg. Jay Gatsby is widely known for his parties and Nick is the only one to ever been invited to one of his parties. One evening, Nick drives out to Easy Egg to have dinner with his cousin, Daisy Buchanan and her husband Tom. Daisy introduces Nick to Jordan Baker, a young professional golfer, with whom Nick begins a romantic relationship. At the dinner, Nick learns about Tom’s affair with Myrtle Wilson. Not long after this revelation, Tom invites Nick to New York to meet his mistress. As the summer progresses, the narrator attends one of Gatsby’s parties where he meet Jordan Baker and Gatsby himself. Gatsby speaks with Jordan alone and through her Nick learns about Gatsby’s love for Daisy and their romantic relationship back in 1917. Gatsby’s extravagant parties and lifestyle are simply an effort to impress Daisy. Nick finds out that Jay Gatsby abandoned his old identity, as the poor farm boy James Gatz, and encountered Meyer Wolfshiem, amassing a huge fortune. Nick invites Daisy over for tea where she “accidentally” meets Gatsby. After an initially awkward reunion, Gatsby and Daisy retake their love connexion. Gatsby and Daisy start to see each other frequently. Nick and Gatsby also become close, as Nick is the only one to support Gatsby despite the criminal rumours that surround him. At a luncheon at the Buchanan’s house, Gatsby looks passionately at Daisy and Tom realizes that Gatsby is in love with her. Tom eventually confronts Gatsby at Plaza Hotel, in New York, and the two argue over Daisy’s love. She claims to love them both, but after finding out Gatsby is a bootlegger, she realizes that her commitment is to Tom. Contemptuously, Tom sends her back to East Egg with Gatsby, being sure he no longer represents a threat. Daisy drives Gatsby’s car, but she accidentally kills a woman in the valley of ashes; it turns out to be Myrtle Wilson, Tom’s mistress. The next day Tom tells George Wilson, Myrtle’s husband, that Gatsby was the driver of the car that hit Myrtle. Her husband goes to Gatsby’s mansion, shoots him death, and then kills himself. Nick arranges a small funeral for Gatsby, ends his relation with Jordan
Baker and moves back to the Midwest. Almost no one attends Gatsby’s funeral. The people surrounding Gatsby disgust Nick. He is sickened by the emptiness and moral decay of life among the wealthiest. Nick realizes that Gatsby’s dream of Daisy was corrupted by dishonesty and money.

4.3 Cultural aspects from the 1920s represented in the novel The Great Gatsby

Briefly, in this paragraph I want to select some quotation from the novel that would serve as identification with the 1920s society. Throughout the novel there are a series of cultural references that not only help us understand the novel better but help us visualize the cultural background of a period. From the beginning of the novel, we can see that this is going to be a story about “rich people” high society and a certain Jay Gatsby, which “turned all right in the end”. Even the narrator comes from a “well-to-do-family”, so we must bear in mind that the story will be narrated from the perspective of a first person narrator and that he is not poor. This status will allow him to mingle amongst the high elite without problems, giving us an insight about their lives and parties. In the novel, there are some characters, which “unsuccessfully” try to climb the social ladder, namely Jay Gatsby and Myrtle Wilson. The characters are either very rich like the Buchanans and Jay Gatsby, which both lived in Long Island, or very poor, like the Wilson family that live on the Valley of ashes. The Buchanans live in “the white palaces of fashionable East Egg” (p.11; ch.1) and Gatsby lives on West Egg in a mansion “Hotel de Ville in Normandy” (p.11; ch.1). Everything that surrounds the wealthier is described in a luxurious vocabulary giving an account of their infinite wealth. On the contrary, the middle-class is described in a decadent way, they live in the Valley of ashes where nothing is prosperous and nothing will ever change “the waste land”; “unprosperous and bare”; “desolate area of land”; “dismal scenery” (p.26-7; ch.2). The contrast is very strong but it is clear that there were strong differences back in the 1920s, when the majority moved to the city and partied all day enjoying the booming economy. Still, there were poor people, struggling to survive in the “valley of ashes” of the society. This was exactly what happened in the 1920s, the rich got incredibly wealthy and the poor remained poor. There are references in the novel to the new consumer goods such as “electric stove” (p. 9; ch.1), telephones, moving-picture magazines, scandal magazines, perfumes, photos, a collar for the dog, fruit squeezer and ashtrays, etc. They could enjoy all these goods thanks to the boom in economy and industry. But, what is a novel representing the 1920s culture without jazz? However, the novel erases the real background of jazz, the African Americans, reinforcing the white superiority. The novel fails short to represent a minority so iconic of the period, the African
Americans with their home in Harlem, New York and all their cultural productions like The Cotton Club, where jazz attracted the wealthy whites. The Great Gatsby is considered as a representation of the Jazz Age, a term coined by Fitzgerald, but the black Americans who invented it are absent from the story. At Gatsby’s parties there is no black jazz band instead they have “Vladimir Tostoff’s Jazz History of the World!” (p.51; ch.3) Jazz has been allocated to the merit of whites, disregarding the credit of the blacks. Tom Buchanan’s attitudes and behaviour set him as the “white superior”. He is associated with the colonialist psychology, paraphrasing the racist The Rise of the Coloured Empires by Goddard. Tom goes on telling Nick “Civilization’s going pieces.” [...] the white race will be – utterly submerged [...] these other races will have control of things [...] we’re Nordics” (p.18; ch.1).

We are fully aware of the revival of the Ku Klux Klan back in the 1920s. Fitzgerald through Tom’s voice presents the ideological preoccupation with “these other races”. We might consider Tom is one of the “knights” of the Klan, having all the characteristics needed to belong in such a racist group. We know that this was the period of the Prohibition experiment. There are certain allusions to Gatsby being a bootlegger but is never specifically mentioned by the narrator. Yet, there are facts of his belonging to the underworld of the 1920s: his partnership with Meyer Wolfshiem (a gambler), his constant phone calls from Chicago, his relations with policemen and senators, and the “obscure” source of his money (we latter learn his money were not inherited from his now “all dead” family).

4.4 Analysis

Fitzgerald creates ambiguity for the reader by means of the narrative organization. This uncertainty is mirrored by Nick’s own dilemma and mixed feelings. The ambivalent figure of Gatsby is the centre of interest to Nick. Our opinion about Gatsby changes by the light that Nick throws over him. In the end, Nick is capable to create a coherent image of Gatsby. The chain of events is minor until the three violent deaths of Myrtle, Gatsby and Wilson bring them to climax. The focus is psychological; Nick reflects on aspects of Gatsby’s nature and in the process of analysing him, Nick confronts his own ethical self. Fitzgerald fractures time in the novel by using reminiscences by Daisy, Gatsby, Jordan, Mr Gatz or Wolfshiem. Fitzgerald jumps from one event to another, therefore excluding unnecessary events, concentrating more on Gatsby’s feelings and Nick’s response to them. This “jump” in the narration adds to the novel its intensity and drama. By excluding inessential detail,

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8 The Rise of the Coloured Empires- the allusion is to The Rising Tide of Color by Lothrop Stoddard (New York, Scribners, 1920) (Fitzgerald & Tanner, 173)
Fitzgerald manages to keep the novel’s pace. Moreover, he uses juxtaposition to put into evidence major differences between societies and individuals. He compares East Egg and West Egg, so that the reader can better understand the class difference. “I live at West Egg, the well, the less fashionable” (p.10; ch.1); “Across the courtesy bay the white palaces of fashionable East Egg glittered along the water” (p.11; ch.1). In addition, he describes the Valley of ashes a “desolate area of land” (p.26; ch.2), comparing the wealthy to the poor “ash-grey men, who move dimly” (p.26; ch.2). This area is strategically located between the two Eggs and New York. Here is where the first death of a poor girl is going to take place; she is crushed between her own dreams. It is a “waste land”, people die under the grey land of “bleak dust” (p.26). However, everyone needs to “stare at the dismal scene” (p.26; ch.2) while travelling from the Eggs to New York. The Valley of ashes is a reminder to the wealthy that there are still poor people living in unacceptable conditions, yet the rich do not care, and somehow they feel forced to look at the depressing scenery. As mentioned earlier, there is a big difference between West and East Egg. Nick and Gatsby live on West Egg, while the Buchanans live on East Egg. In the novel, Nick describes a pair of eggs. This description may seem strange for the reader, but a deep analysis of the “two unusual formations” “a pair of enormous eggs” (p.10; ch1) can give us a closer look on the characters of the novel and even on the society.

A pair of enormous eggs, identical in contour and separated only by a courtesy bay, jut out into the most domesticated body of salt water in the Western hemisphere, the great wet barnyard of Long Island Sound. They are not perfect ovals—like the egg in the Columbus story, they are both crushed flat at the contact end—but their physical resemblance must be a source of perpetual confusion to the gulls that fly overhead. To the wingless a more arresting phenomenon is their dissimilarity in every particular except shape and size. (p.10; ch.1)

The quote highlights the fact that this is going to be a social novel, concerned with the distinction between rich and poor. A distinction dictated not only by their social status but also by their behaviour. The eggs represent the opposition between old money Tom Buchanan and new money Jay Gatsby. They are dissimilar but no one can distinguish them, only if they stop and analyse their behaviour. They are both rich, but the nature of their fortune is very different. Tom represents the aristocratic power, the wealthy American who inherited his fortune from his ancestors; he belongs to a superior breed. Nick also mentions the egg in the Columbus story, recalling the founding of America “fresh, green beast of a new world” (p.171; ch 9). On the contrary, Jay Gatsby represents new money, the “working class” or poor people who aspire to a better life. He is one of the luckiest in acquire such a fortune, but he
wears the stigma of “bootlegging”. It was typical of the period that immigrants and poor people engage in such affairs as bootlegging, selling illicit alcohol over the counter making a fortune. In the novel, it is not stated explicitly that Gatsby is a bootlegger, but his business partner certainly is. Meyer Wolfshiem’s use of language can give us a hint of his roots; he certainly belongs to the immigrant class or to a lower class. He uses words such as “gonnegtion” (p.69; ch4), “Oggsford” (p.70; ch.4). This use of language seems to be Fitzgeralds way of criticizing the materialistic and snobbish 1920s’. Moreover, Wolfshiem is the one to acknowledge Gatsby’s “fine breeding”, but he knows this is not true. He is the one to possess Gatsby’s truth, but being corrupt himself he would not tell another story than the one projected by Gatsby. Additionally, Wolfshiem gives us some hints also about the 1920s society, being fully aware of their main preoccupations “discuss your sports and young ladies” (p.71; ch.4). As it had being mentioned before, spectator sports were a national hobby.

The major feature of the novel is time as its central theme. Events from the past keep on interrupting events from the present. Gatsby’s past is often evoked because of the moment in his past when out of his imagination he recreated himself “sprang from his Platonic conception of himself”, “to this conception he was faithful to the end” (p.95; ch.6). This imagination “sprung” from Gatsby’s desire to materialism; the materialism of the American Dream and its fulfillness, a dream to which Gatsby stays “faithful to the end”. The Platonic form of an object it is its perfection in form. Jay Gatsby has moulded himself on an idealized version of himself: all his gentlemanly gestures, his clothes and his speech are all artificial. He wears a certain style of clothes in trying to proclaim his wealth. When he was James Gatz, he worn “a torn jersey and a pair of canvas pants” (pp.94-5; ch.6). Now, he is so wealthy that he has a man in England to buy his clothes; he casts his “rich soft heap” (p. 89; ch.5) of shirts for Daisy’s benefit and inspection. She starts to cry when touching the shirts “It makes me sad because I’ve never seen such-such beautiful shirts before” (p.89; ch.5). We can see how superficial and materialistic Daisy is; she does not cry when she sees Gatsby after five year, but she cries at the touch of some shirts. Tom despises Gatsby’s style, all his clothes seem outrageous for him. He normally wears a pink suit, and Nick notices one night while he waits outside Daisy’s house “the luminosity of his pink suit under the moon” (p.136; ch.7). When bidding his last goodbye to Gatsby, Nick notices how “his gorgeous pink rag of a suit made a bright sport of colour against the white steps” (p.147; ch.8). However, there are some associations with Gatsby’s pink suit. “By associating moonlight and whiteness, the suit is no longer a mark of extravagance, but is made an attribute of the man who created a transcendent
dream, and by this token is turned into a mark of innocence and faith” (Fitzgerald & Parkinson, 102).

Reality plays a major role in the novel. For Gatsby, the reality of his wealth is becoming unreal when Daisy touches the brush of a “toilet set of dull gold”. Daisy, his dream girl has now materialized in the shape of a physical person. Gatsby’s real self is both a roughneck and a romantic, and the real Daisy is both Tom’s wife and the mother of a child. Gatsby, faithful to his dream, clings on the images of himself as a faithful lover to the radiant girl who he met back in 1917, in Louisville. Gatsby believes that by showing off his possessions he will win Daisy. He knows she will not accept a poor boy and Tom is the one to know her better. She will choose wealth over love. Daisy loves money and she will not trade her privileges over for a dream. Gatsby fails to understand that money do no show reality, but rather a more artificial layer of society; he can have all the money he wants, but it does not mean his life is perfect. He is wealthy, but his life is empty; he owns a fashionable mansion where he holds unforgettable parties, he has a sports car, and he has servants to wait on his every caprice, however, he fails at attaining his main goal, the girl of his dreams. It seems like the characters in the novel fail to grasp reality, or refuse to acknowledge it. Gatsby can easily accept Daisy’s marriage and her daughter, but he cannot accept the fact that she is not able to tell Tom she does not love him “Just tell him the truth – that you never loved him – and it is all whipped out forever” (p.125; ch.7). Gatsby is desperate about time, which is a central theme to the novel. He thinks he can erase Daisy’s four-five years of marriage just with words. He has the same mentality as he had when he reinvented himself, at the age of seventeen. He created an immature self-idealization. Gatsby’s ideal of himself is based on Daisy’s idealization. He is obsessed with reviving the past, he is not conscious that he must live in the present and look forward in life, not into the past “I’m going to fix everything just the way it was before” (p.106; ch.7). Gatsby cannot live in the past and gain Daisy. Many years have passed in which she married and moved forward, but Gatsby thinks she did so just because he was poor “She only married you because I was poor and she was tired of waiting for me” (p. 124; ch.7). When confronting Tom, Gatsby is the one to speak for Daisy; she does not have sufficient courage to renounce to her wealthy life style. Daisy is afraid of “feelings” and prefers to go on with her superficial past, and from the following quote, we can see how she managed to move on “I can’t help what’s past” (p.126; ch.7). Had he been rich Daisy would quickly marry him. Now he thinks he can erase her marriage and her daughter, go back to Louisville, and marry her, as it was 1917 “go back to Louisville and be married from her house – just as if it were five years ago” (p. 106; ch.7). However, one may question Gatsby’s
love for Daisy. Does he really love her? What exactly is that he loves about her? Is there something that can make us question this “faithful lover”? There are several fragments in the texts that are worth paying attention to. For example, when Gatsby talks about Daisy, he does not talk about her beauty or about her beliefs or even about her physic. When talking about Daisy, he describes her wealth, for him, even her voice is “full of money” (p.115; ch.7).

He found her excitingly desirable. […] It amazed him – he had never been in such beautiful house before […] a hint of bedrooms upstairs more beautiful and cool than other bedrooms”; “It excited him, too, that many men had already loved Daisy – it increased her value in his eyes. (p. 141; ch.8)

What can we understand by Gatsby’s affirmations about Daisy? There are no such fragments in the novel as to describe Daisy as a human being. Gatsby always describes her in terms of her possessions. He seems to be in love with her assets, not with Daisy the person she represents. Moreover, why would someone be “excited” by the fact some other men loved “his dream girl”. He necessarily wants to win her over the others. Therefore, he struggles more into winning her representation of the upper social class, objectifying her. We can see that materialism has become Gatsby’s central interest; it is no longer a race for love, but a race to acquire the ultimate stage of wealth, thus fulfilling his American Dream. Back in 1917, Gatsby knows he cannot have Daisy’s heart, or marry her, but he takes advantage of the moment. Before meeting Daisy, in my opinion he lived to the motto “carpe diem” “he made the most of his time” (p.141; ch.8). The narrator openly criticizes Gatsby’s actions “He took what he could get, ravenously and unscrupulously” “under false pretences” (p. 142; ch.8). This use of language is hardly associated with love. Rather it is the language associated with Gatsby’s friendship with Dan Cody. During his adolescence, he was used with women, and it was nothing new for him. Gatsby did something that was considered dishonourable back in 1920s. He “took” Daisy “unscrupulously”; in 1920s, it was a taboo for young couple to have intercourse before marriage. However, it was a period in which women experienced sexual freedom for the first time in history, and this is Fitzgerald’s way of criticizing it. Gatsby is not excused from the novel’s critical representation of the wealthy. The Great Gatsby’s representation of the American culture reveals the devastating effects of capitalism: Tom, Daisy (old money) and Gatsby (new money) are the leaders in a consumerist society, but there are failures such as George and Myrtle Wilson, those incapable to climb the social ladder. The novel’s most obvious flaw, from a Marxist point of view, it is the indifferent representation of George and Myrtle Wilson. They represent the lower class; George clings to his business, and Myrtle herself gives her body to the wealthy Tom Buchanan, hoping that
one day he will marry her. George and Myrtle are the victims of capitalism, the only way to succeed in a capitalist state is to succeed in the market; both of them fail to “sell themselves in the capitalist market” thus they are destined to the Valley of ashes. They are presented as negative stereotypes of the lower class, highly criticized because they were unable to attain the American dream. George Wilson fails to “pull himself by his own bootstraps”. In a capitalist society, the victims are blamed instead of blaming the system.

Nick is criticizing Gatsby’s gentlemanly gestures; his gestures describe him and every young woman seems to be fascinated by his gallant gestures. The girl at the party is highly impressed when Gatsby, without knowing her buys her a new dress “gas blue with lavender beads. Two hundred and sixty-five dollars” (p. 45; ch.3), and when Nick first meets him he puts special attention on Gatsby’s movements “he was picking his words with care” (he does the same thing in choosing his clothes) “He excused himself with a small bow” (p. 49; ch.3)

A lie Gatsby tells to himself, and the worst part is that he believes it and is ready to die for his dream. Gatsby is incapable of moving forward, every step he takes be towards the past; an idealized past he created. One of the themes is that Gatsby fails to understand that he cannot recapture the past, and this will lead him towards death in the end. Many will argue that his aspirations where to high, that is why he was killed. The fact is that, old money Tom was the one to “suggest” Wilson that the one to run over with the car over Myrtle was Gatsby.

Gatsby’s real self confuses Nick; his attitude towards him is ambivalent.

He smiled understandingly-much more than understandingly. It was one of those rare smiles with a quality of eternal reassurance in it, that you may come across four or five times in life. It faced--or seemed to face--the whole eternal world for an instant, and then concentrated on you with an irresistible prejudice in your favor. It understood you just as far as you wanted to be understood, believed in you as you would like to believe in yourself, and assured you that it had precisely the impression of you that, at your best, you hoped to convey. (p.49; ch3)

Gatsby’s smile is another gesture he created for his new persona. All he does is controlled and studied. With this smile, he is wining Nick to his part. Nick sees in Gatsby’s smile a reassuring gesture that he is like just the way he desires to be liked. There is much more to understand from this fragment. Gatsby’s smile represents the American Dream. He himself somehow lives the American Dream, only to have it shattered by the wealthier. However, Nick realized that money does not complete the American Dream, something that for Gatsby is a necessity; he needs to acquire as much fortune as he can, the means are not
important here, in order to gain his dream girl. Materialism will cause the decline of the American Dream. Gatsby commits himself to “the following of a grail” (p.142; ch.8), the following of the American Dream. Gatsby’s American Dream is to acquire sufficient money to win Daisy back; he makes a fortune, but he never gets his dream girl. In the quest of winning her, he consumed all his life. Gatsby’s mimicry is part of this new self he created for himself, unique romantic gestures echoing the “chivalry of past ages” suitable to survive the shallow society in which he lives. However, it is the emptiness and broken morals that the Buchanans represent that vanquish Gatsby: when Daisy abandons him at the Plaza Hotel scene during his confrontation with Tom, his words seem “to bite physical into Gatsby” (p.126; ch.7).

There are passages in the novel that evoke an idyllic past, juxtaposed with the fast-paced society. These passages are meant to be regarded as a reminder of what America used to be and what has lost in its race for modernization and mechanization of society. Phrases such as “the winter night and the real snow, our snow”, “a sharp wild brace came suddenly into the air” (p.166; ch.9) are all to be found in Nick’s reminiscence of his youth in Midwest. All of these words evoke clean, white open spaces that revitalize the spirit as well as the body. It also suggests that life in the Midwest was far more real than life in the East. For Nick, the Midwest represented a safer and stable life, compared to his adulthood in the East. There is a sense of community that the East lacks, in contrast with the sense of permanence and personal connection between the communities in Wisconsin “dwellings are still called through decades by a family’s name” (p.167; ch.9). The novel is dotted with contrasts between innocence and decadence, between past and future, between West and East; this is heightened by the narrator’s description of his vision about East:

> Even when the East exited me most […] it had always for me a quality of distortion. West Egg still figures in my more fantastic dreams. […] Gravely the men turn in at a house – the wrong house. But no one knows the woman’s name, and no one cares. (p.167; ch.9)

In contrast with the “clean and white” Wisconsin places, the East is hostile and without a sense of identity. However, the novel’s evocation of an idyllic past in order to highlight the emptiness of modern America generates an opposition between past and present. The past was not idyllic for everyone, certainly not for Gatsby, who was just a farm boy with high aspirations. He found his past so undesirable that he had simply reinvented himself. He is so “ashamed” by his biological family that he invents a terrible story “My family all died and I came into a good deal of money […] collecting jewels […] hunting big game” (p. 64;
Gatsby’s ambition to “repeat the past” (p.106; ch.6) is really his purpose to escape the past. The past he wants to recreate is not his real past, but the past in which he first met Daisy; a past based on imaginations. Another problem is the contrast between innocence and decadence: the narrator’s attraction to Jordan Baker. She is not a good sports woman, as Gatsby believes, who would not do anything that was not right. In fact, Jordan is a dishonest woman and Nick knows it. However, he dismisses her behaviour, as it was not a serious flaw “Dishonesty in a woman is a thing you never blame deeply (p. 58-9; ch.3). Yet, “dishonesty” is what attracts Nick. He usually conceals the flaws of the characters for which he develops a liking. The narrator knows he should disapprove of Gatsby for the same reason he disapproves of the Buchanans, but from the first pages, it is clear that Gatsby charms Nick “There was something gorgeous about him […] an extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness (p.8; ch.1). Gatsby’s criminal past is concealed under Nick’s response of the emotional gestures Gatsby conveys “unbroken series of successful gestures” (p.8; ch.1). Nick is seduced by the American Dream Gatsby embodies, thus he romanticizes Gatsby is his narration, hiding the ways in which James Gats of North Dakota reinvented himself into the “unscrupulous” Jay Gatsby. Nick focuses on romantic images of Gatsby, the ambitious roughneck, the faithful lover, the brave soldier, the extravagant host, idealizing Gatsby. His criminal connections are acknowledged, however, because of Nick’s response to them, they do not influence his opinion about Gatsby “only Gatsby was exempt from my reaction” (p8; ch.1). The narrator also influences our perception of Gatsby by his own sentiments invested in all those events that put Gatsby into a good light. Despite what Nick knows about the criminal history of Gatsby’s wealth, for which he feels an “unaffected scorn” (p8; ch.1), Gatsby himself is “exempt” from Nick’s disapproval “Gatsby turned all right in the end; it is what preyed on Gatsby, that foul dust in the wake of his dreams” (p8; ch.1). The warm feelings with which Nick talks about Gatsby can easily influence the reader into liking Gatsby, despite his criminal relations with the underworld. In a way, Nick’s description of Gatsby as the idealized romantic, and faithful hero whose hope for the conquest of a dream is unimaginable, is because the narrator himself is seduced by Jay Gatsby’s vision. He believes in Gatsby’s dream, a dream that may come true even for himself. He can acquire the financial success he desires as Gatsby did, he can find the woman of his life, and be as optimistic and unstoppable as Gatsby is “Thirty - the promise of a decade of loneliness, a thinning list of single men to know, a thinning brief-case of enthusiasm” (p.129; ch.7). Nick conceals Gatsby’s criminal history and corruption, because he wants an optimistic world for himself; he conspires with Gatsby’s dream. Nick focuses on the generosity and chivalry that Gatsby
shows, creating a magical world around his person “his cocktails and his flowers”; however, all of Gatsby’s possessions were bought with money obtained from illicit funds. From a postcolonial perspective, the colonial subject, the cultural outsider wants only to be accepted by the cultural elite (Tyson, 439). Although Gatsby is white and wealthy to own a mansion in Long Island, he has more in common with an outsider. He aspires to be accepted by Daisy’s cultural elite, a culture which is not his own. In order to be accepted by its “colonist” Gatsby learns how to behave and dress, educates himself to talk and act like a gentleman. All this social codes are unfamiliar to him. Gatsby lacks the upbringing and proper bloodline for Daisy’s society. Gatsby’s has lied to her both when he was courting her in 1917, in Louisville and after their reunion “he let her believe that he was a person from much the same strata as herself” (p.142; ch.8). Gatsby is caught between to antagonist cultures, “that into which he was born and that to which he aspires” (Tyson,439 ). He is dominated by a never-ending struggle to forget about his roots and identity “My family all died and I came into a good deal of money” (p.64; ch.4). Gatsby would like to destroy his past and be accepted by Daisy’s social milieu. If he is accepted by Daisy “his grail” then he has a proof that he belongs to the cultural elite she embodies, erasing all his past, proving he is no longer a farm boy “Mr Nobody from Nowhere” (p.123; ch.7).

5. Conclusion

The novel The Great Gatsby, in just nine chapters manages to represent the 1920s ideology and society. Some critics argue that this is the best novel ever written and Jay Gatsby embodies the “romantic hero” never to be forgotten

Fitzgerald confronts no less a problem than what might be involved, what might be at stake, in trying to see, and write, America itself. The Great Gatsby is, I believe, the most perfectly crafter work of fiction to have come out of America. (Fitzgerald & Tanner, in the Introduction)

For others, like the journalist H.L Mencken is just an overrated novel “The Great Gatsby” is in form no more than a glorified anecdote” (Mencken 1925). The novel’s prose is lyric and very enjoyable when reading. The story itself from my point of view is not romantic. I have chosen the novel because it can be analysed from many perspectives and each of them gives you an insight about the 1920s society. From this approach I have enjoyed reading the novel and analysing it, but from the point of view of a love story, I my say I have not found a thing to be romantic. However, the narrator succesfully manages to put Gatsby into a good light, making him a lovable character. Gatsby’s real intentions are hidden behind Nick’s
voice. Nick Carraway deliberately conceals Gatsby’s flaws thus conspiring with his dream. From my point of view, Gatsby in not that “great”, Nick creates his “greatness”. Gatsby represents the self-made man, the pursuer of the American Dream. The novel’s structure is very rich and portraying complex characters carefully designed to depict the Roaring Twenties. The novel condemns the modern decadence; the innocent past was replaced with the morally decaying urban society. People like the Buchanans destroyed the traditional society “They were careless people[…] they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money […] and let other people clean up the mess they made” (p170; ch9). Even though Gatsby aspires to belong to the same culture, he is “exempt” from Nick’s “scorn”. One of the reasons why I disagree with Gatsby being a “hero” or “faithful lover” is because he is exactly like Daisy and Tom, but he is excused from all judgements because he eventually dies for a dream. I think there is no accurate interpretation of the novel, given the rich amount of information provided in such a short novel. From my perspective, based on a Marxist approach Gatsby’s American Dream was blinded by his own failure. He believes the American Dream rests on the acquisition of material wealthy; Daisy is merely the key to Gatsby’s goal. The novel can be seen as a chronicle of the American Dream. The 1920s was the point in which capitalism’s promise of economic chance appeared to be fulfilled. We can observe the mentality of the careless people that attended Gatsby’s lavish parties; they were confident that the food, the drinks and the fun would never miss from his parties, just as the nation’s natural resources will never be exhausted. The novel does not reveal the fulfilment of the American Dream but the fail to achieve it. The American Dream not only fails to fulfil its promise, but also contributes to the decay of personal values. The Great Gatsby stands as a critique of the American capitalist culture. Nick’s final statement is captivating “So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past” (p. 172; ch.9). The rhythm and the alliteration that Fitzgerald gave to the last sentences prove his powerful poetic quality. The use of plosive “b” in words like “boat”, “borne”, and “back” invites the reader to imagine a boat struggling to move forward, but which is violently “borne back”. There is a conflict, a collision between the past and the present. The use of “we” does not refer only to Gatsby, but Fitzgerald bids his audience to step back from the novel and reflect to his or her own life. We struggle to move forward, but any attempt at progress is futile.
6. **Works Cited**


Gatsby, 35 Years Later (s.f.). *The New York Times on the web*: Retrieved January 28, 2016 from [https://www.nytimes.com/books/00/12/24/specials/fitzgerald-gatsby60.html](https://www.nytimes.com/books/00/12/24/specials/fitzgerald-gatsby60.html)


