



## THE GREAT GATSBY - A ROMANTIC AMERICAN TRAGEDY A REVIEW

**Dr.B. THIRUKUMARAN**  
**M.A., Ph. D.**

Assistant Professor of English  
SG Govt Degree College  
Piler, (Chittoor Dist)  
btkkarthik@gmail.com

### **Abstract**

*The Great Gatsby*, the magnum opus of Scott Fitzgerald, was a master piece and better than any other American work of fiction since Golden Bowl. *The Great Gatsby* has drawn a universal human characteristic like William Shakespeare, who called life a stage and all men and women the players. In the novel Fitzgerald successfully depicted the representative image of American life of 20<sup>th</sup> century and it is one of the most concise and compressed great novels in any language. T.S. Eliot commented "I am not in the least influenced by your remark about myself when I say it has interested and excited me more than any new novel I have seen, either English or American, for a number of years. In fact it seems to me to be the first step that American fiction has taken since Henry James".

### **Keywords:**

*The Great Gatsby- Magnum Opus- Universal Characterization- American Life of 20 th Century-Contemporary Society Morality- American Literature – Precisely Presented Plot-One of itsmaster piece- It is, by all odds- Fitzgerald's most perfect novel.*

### **Introduction**

**The Great Gatsby.** The Chief narrator of the entire novel is Nick Carraway, the neighbor of Gatsby; Jay Gatsby meets his ex-beloved Daisy Buchanan in a Party hosted by himself. She is married to a rich person Tom Buchanan, who keeps a mistress – Myrtle. Myrtle's husband has a garage and they live in the valley of Ashes. After seeing Daisy, Gatsby revives his old love affair; when he was serving in military and due to his financial status, he could not get Daisy. Now he has amassed wealth; hence he wants to possess Daisy who is not happy with her married life. Nick, who is a distant cousin to Daisy, arranges a meeting of Daisy and Gatsby at his house. From where Gatsby acquired so much of wealth, is a mystery. His attachment to Wolfsheim and some mysterious phone calls hint at his engagement in bootlegging business. One day Daisy, Gatsby, Nick and Tom go to New York city. Gatsby drives Tom's car accompanying daisy and Tom drives Gatsby's car with Nick. They return in the night and Daisy takes the driving seat now. While crossing the Valley of Ashes suddenly a figure comes in front of the car confusing Daisy and an accident occurs. That figure is killed and now Gatsby takes over to wheel from the stunned Daisy at once and starts for home. That figure killed was Myrtle, who seeing the car of Tom with a lady, comes out of jealousy and by the ill fate of Gatsby, thinks Tom in the dark of night. Tom in Gatsby's car was behind and he stops for gas at Wilson's garage. There he sees the accident and thus clearing himself out of it consoles bereaved Wilson, Myrtle's husband. Next day an angry Wilson, who is full of revenge, reaches Tom's house and enquire about the murderer.



And as pre-planned, Tom tells him the name of Gatsby to save Daisy. Now Wilson goes to Gatsby's house and after killing him shoots himself too. In the last chapter the funeral takes place and Nick returns to his home town, undertaking his family business. The story is organized around a series of parties which serve as vehicles that allow the imagery and relationships of characters to present the ideas – the evaluation of materials – that Fitzgerald wished to offer.

In an early review H.L. Mencken appraised the plot as “no more than a glorified anecdote, and not too probable at that. But beyond the simple, melodramatic narrative of *The Great Gatsby* are larger levels of meanings that derive from its intricate thematic and symbolic patterns. A contributing feature to the multiple interpretations to which the novel lends itself is the ambiguity surrounding the character of Gatsby. Fitzgerald makes use of “platonic conception” to indicate the most rarefied form of ideality. In his short story, “The Diamond as Big as the Ritz,” he describes “a room that was like a platonic conception of the ultimate prison- ceiling, floor, and all, it was lined with an unbroken mass of diamonds... until... it dazzled the eyes with a whiteness that could be compared only with itself, beyond human wish or dream”.

**The Great Gatsby** is not a melodrama about Jay Gatsby but a definition of the senses in which Nick understands the word “great”. Its subject is an American morality. It is explored historically through the conflict between the surviving puritan morality of the west and the post – war hedonism of the East; Fitzgerald's most celebrated novel, **The Great Gatsby**, dramatizes the ribaldry of the Jazz age. The most apparent symbol of the Jazz age is the party that captures the mood of carnival. Significantly, the action of the novel takes place in some important parties to index the riches of the wealthy, to reveal the frustration of the poor and to expose the boredom, fear and inevitable crack-up the post-war generation.

At another level, which seems more acceptable, *The Great Gatsby* arrests a particular moment from the flux of life during the years of social change in America. The tragedy of Gatsby is enacted against the background of social change during the Twenties. Unlike the allegorical artists, who tend to resolve the complexities of social life into polarities, Fitzgerald has tried to dramatize the complexities of post World-War-I life by relying on objective social observation. In his attempt to transfuse all the three realms of meaning, Fitzgerald has raised the novel to the level of a great work of art.

Whatever faults one may find is Fitzgerald's early work, with the publication of **The Great Gatsby** he fulfilled his highest promise and gave to American literature one of its master works. On the surface, of course the novel is much a part of its age as a brilliant dramatization of the social and economic corruptions of the jazz Age, marked by prohibition, gangsterism, blazer flappers, and uproot dress. American morality was marked by questionable business ethics, commercial criteria for success, and ultra-conservatism in social and political thinking. Historians like Charles Beard were insisting that materialistic and economic factors rather than idealistic motives had determined the course of American history. Through character and theme, Fitzgerald dealt in one way or another with all these historic factors with such a sensitivity that one can even intuit in the text slight prophetic reverberations of the stock market crash in 1929 and the great depression in the offing.

Beyond these surface concerns, the novel deals symbolically with the failure of the American dream of success which in Fitzgerald's time was still best known through the



Horatio Alger novels. A second significant thematic concern of the novel relates to its symbolic use of Midwest as a contrast with the east. In his nostalgic reverse on the Midwest near the end of the novel, Nick Carraway concludes, "I see now that this has been a story of the west, after all – Tom and Gatsby, Daisy, Jordan, and I, were all westerners and perhaps we possessed some deficiency in common which made us subtly inadaptable to Eastern life".

Adopting a modified first person narrative from Conrad, Fitzgerald unfolds Gatsby's tragedy for us through the eyes of the Chief narrator Nick Carraway what we learn through Nick is that pure will power divorced from rationality and decency leads to destruction, and that a merely selfish dream or notion is insufficient to justify that enormous amount of energy and life expended by Gatsby. It is a lesson that this nation would not learn for almost another fifty years, and a suggestion that Fitzgerald's prophetic vision saw farther into the future than the depression years.

When Gatsby is viewed against the moral decadence and cowardly conduct of the Buchannan's – "You are worth the whole damn bunch put together". Nick tells him – his unassailable romanticism makes him appear heroic. As an individual, then, who dreams, higher than he can achieve, whose reach exceeds his grasp, Gatsby is at the heart of the tragic condition and thus shares certain characteristics with **Oedipus, Hamlet**, and other tragic heroes of western literature. Unlike Arthur Miller's modern tragic figure, Willy Loman, Gatsby doesn't evoke mere pity and disgust at the end, as he faithfully waits for a phone call that will never come.

Aside from its concern the social and moral questions of continuing consequence, **The Great Gatsby** is one of the most carefully constructed and precisely written novels in American literature. The subtle complexity of the language, the calculated use of colors, references, and connotations, the striking configurations of verbal patterns and repetitions – all lead the reader to read and reread sentences time and time again to catch the multi-level nuances of meaning. The style is poetic and repays the application of the techniques of studied explication. **The Great Gatsby** is one of the four important works to come out of contemporary American literature. Fitzgerald's third novel is a work of art which, like good wine, seems to get better with age. John Dos Passos has said in his note on Fitzgerald: "It's the quality of detaching itself from its period that marks a piece of work as good." Judged by this rigorous standard, **The Great Gatsby** is very good indeed. It is one of the most compressed and concise of the great novels in any language. It can be compared in this respect to Turgenev's master piece Fathers and Sons with which Fitzgerald's book has much in common. Aside from similarity of length, they are both representative of a whole civilization at a critical point in its history.

The sheer efficiency with which this little novel works upon the mind of the reader gives rise to the increasing respect it inspires. Within its strict confines, the writer has succeeded in capturing and giving form to his impressions of a vast and chaotic world. No American prose work of the twentieth century better exemplifies the epigram from the Great Anthology. "Out of the jewel, grass is grown." Out of the two hundred pages of Gatsby spring the turbulent 1920s in America with the same liveliness and spontaneity with which Proust's rural Combray sprang out of his cup of tea.

Regarding **The Great Gatsby** the critics were not alone in sensing a certain lack in the novel, Fitzgerald himself felt it, was uncomfortable about it, tried to explain it away even though there is evidence that he always regarded **The Great Gatsby** as his greatest piece of



work. No one agreed, however, about what the lack was. Fitzgerald could not define it consistently; in a letter to John Peale Bishop post marked August 9, 1925, he calls **The Great Gatsby** “blurred and patchy” and adds: “I never at any one time saw him clear myself – for he started out as one man I knew and then changed into myself the amalgam was never complete in my mind. In a letter written the same year to Edmund Wilson, however, he shifts his ground: “The worst fault in **The Great Gatsby** I think is a “BIG FAULT”. I gave no account and had no feeling about or knowledge of the emotional relations between Gatsby and Daisy from the time of their reunion to the Catastrophe.” Later in the same letter Fitzgerald calls this “BIG FAULT” by a still different, through cognate, terms:” ..... The lack of any emotional backbone at the very height of it i.e. .... the Gatsby story”

Fitzgerald was considered to be a social reformer, who realized the vices of this class distinction of the society and put the mirror before the people to reflect those evils through his writings. Like Mark Twin, he saw only chaos all around him and tried to find an ordered cosmos in his own terms. The autobiographical material his love affairs with Ginerva King and Zelda Sayre – is used in this novel too as in his earlier works. Unlike Lord Jim, it is a study of carelessness, not of illusion and integrity. Its theme is the American dream Fitzgerald presents a severe criticism of the American dream and at last by this book he stands in the line of great masters of American prose. **The Great Gatsby** has a double virtue. In the novel we possess the best picture of the age in which it was written and it also achieves a sort of moral permanence. Fitzgerald's story of the innocent murdered suitor for wealth is a compendious fable of the 1920s that will survive as a legend for other times.

**The Great Gatsby** is showered by adverse criticism too. In the opinion of the New York times review the book was “curious mystical and glamorous”. The Herald Tribune stated it as” negligible, uncurbed melodrama a tragedy with the flavour of skim milk.” L.P. Hartley severely criticized the book in his review “**The Great Gatsby** is an absurd story, whether considered as a romance, melodrama on plain record of New York high life.” Another Critic Commented that “**The Great Gatsby** is evidently not a satire, but one would like to think that Mr. Fitzgerald's heart is not in it, that it is a piece of mere naughtiness.

In spite of all these, **The Great Gatsby** is about the American issues and is a version of the new social world feared by the tradition of American moralists from William James to John Dewey. The novel deals with a world of broken relationships, a world of money and success rather than of social responsibility; a world in which individuals are all too free to determine their morel destinies. Fitzgerald has brought together the American dream and the American disillusion in this novel. It is not only brilliant in its characterization, individual scenes and dialogues but also in its general effects. The characters are depicted in such a manner that the reader may measure them on a scale of social values. The high quality of this best work and most certainly the striking achievement in **The Great Gatsby**, has brought his work the esteem which eluded Fitzgerald himself during his own life time. It is, by all odds. Fitzgerald's most perfect novel.

#### References

- 1) *John Berryman – F. Scott Fitzgerald – The Kenyan Review* (Columbia University Press. New York – 1946). P. 103-122.
- 2) *The Letters of F. Scott Fitzgerald. Ed. With introduction by Andrew (Turnbull. Scribners, New York). 1936. P. 342.*



- 3) *Ibid.*, P. 310.
- 4) F. Scott Fitzgerald – *The Great Gatsby in Kazin* – (Scribners, New York. 1926).P. 88.
- 5) *Letters*, P. 358.
- 6) F. Scott Fitzgerald. *The Tales of the Jazz Age – Metropolitan Magazine*. (New York. October, 1920). P. 116.
- 7) F. Scott Fitzgerald – *Handle with Care. The Crack – Up Ed. With introduction – By Edmund Wilson*. (New Directions, New York). P.84.
- 8) Mizener – *The Far Side of Paradise*. Houghton Mifflin, (Borton, 1951). P. 307.
- 9) *Letters* - P.173.
- 10) *Echoes of the Jazz Age* – (Scribner's Magazine New York, February 8, 1930). PP.13-15.
- 11) *Letters*, P.173.
- 12) E. Macpherc. Laurence. *The Great Gatsby's Romance of Motoring: (Modern Fiction Studies, New York, 1972) PP.207-212*.
- 13) *Ibid*, P. 134.
- 14) Robert Emmet Long –*The Achieving of The Great Gatsby* – (Bucknell University Press, Lewishurg, 1979). P.8.
- 15) Henry Dan Piper - *F. Scott Fitzgerald: A Critical Portrait*. (Holt. Rinehart & Winston, New York. 1965). P. 298.
- 16) *Letters* – P. 120.
- 17) J. Thomas. Stavola - *F. Scott Fitzgerald: Crisis in an American Identity*. (Barners & Noble New York – 1979). P. 134.
- 18) *Ibid.*, P. 270.
- 19) *F. Scott Fitzgerald in His Own Time*. Ed. By M.J. Bruccoli and Jackon R. Bryer. (The Kent State University Press, New York – 1971). P. 362-63.