

Not a Great Winner, but an Ordinary Loser

No un triunfador, sino un simple perdedor

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Abstract

This essay presents a characterization analysis of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Being aware of his underprivileged origin, Jay Gatsby spends his whole life amassing his fortune. By examining his behavior in the novel, it is feasible to acknowledge his level of ambition, corruption, alienation, and ultimately loss. In spite of Gatsby's apparent greatness, failure and decay govern his whole life. He was born not only with delusions of greatness but also with the ability of being corrupt; in his attempt of belonging to the aristocratic class, he loses both everything he has longed for and his own life. Thus, Gatsby's unreachable dream makes him an ordinary loser, who is only skilled at making money from dirty business.

Key words: Ambition; corruption; alienation; loss; decay; *The Great Gatsby*; bootlegging; hegemonic groups.

Resumen

Este ensayo presenta un análisis de caracterización de la novela *El Gran Gatsby* del autor F. Scott Fitzgerald. Al ser consciente de su desafortunado origen, Jay Gatsby dedica toda su vida a la acumulación de dinero. Al analizar su conducta en la novela, es posible identificar su nivel de ambición, corrupción, aislamiento y por ende pérdida. A pesar de su aparente grandeza, lo que gobierna su vida es el fracaso y la decadencia. Gatsby nació no sólo con delirios de grandeza sino

también con la habilidad de ser corrupto; en su intento de pertenecer a la clase aristocrática, pierde todo por lo que ha luchado y hasta su propia vida. De esta manera, el sueño inalcanzable de Gatsby lo convierte en un perdedor ordinario, quien tiene la habilidad solamente para hacer dinero proveniente de negocios oscuros.

Palabras clave: Ambición; corrupción; aislamiento; pérdida; decadencia; *El Gran Gatsby*; contrabando de licores; grupos hegemónicos.

Socrates, who significantly influenced not only ancient but also modern philosophy, was rightly assertive in expressing that “[t]he greatest way to live with honor in this world is to be what we pretend to be.” This statement is ironically bound to Jay Gatsby’s life. Gatsby, born James Gatz, pretends to be someone who seeks to gain honor by showing the world his wrongly obtained wealthy life. He is a controversial character who belongs to the Roaring Twenties, featuring the Western society of this period. Mathew J. Bruccoli –an American professor and a prominent expert on Fitzgerald’s work— remarks that Fitzgerald gathered material for *The Great Gatsby* while living in Long Island after the war, and all its characters were taken compositely from life (6). This time of history, which is characterized by the economic, cultural and social development after World War I, flourished and offered people the opportunity to obtain superficial facilities that they could not afford in the past; they were even able to own cars which rapidly became a status symbol. Just as this period was a time of flourishing, so it was a time of decay. The decline of social morality was part of people’s everyday life. According to Churchwell “This is about the world that prompted F. Scott Fitzgerald to write *The Great Gatsby*, tracing the relationship between that world and the novel that it inspired, including the largely forgotten story of the brutal slaying of an adulterous couple, a murder mystery that held all of America spellbound at the end of 1922.”

Another characteristic of the 1920s was the prohibition of alcohol; this caused the growth of people’s illegal business, what was so-called criminal bootlegging: hidden origin of Gatsby’s fortune. Being born poor was a catastrophe for Gatsby because this was the abyss between his beloved Daisy and him. This brings the subject of two hegemonic groups exemplified by these two characters, where the aristocratic class –Daisy— has more power than the wealthy but not aristocratic class –Gatsby—. James Gatz is unsatisfied with his poorly life; he pursues money not only to gain Daisy’s love back but also to satisfy his inner desires. Thus, in the novel “The Great

Gatsby” by F. Scott Fitzgerald, Jay Gatsby finds himself in an unspoken battle between greatness and decline; however, Gatsby’s effort to succeed is doomed to failure.

Ambition is what merely leads Gatsby to his ultimate destruction. Gatsby is determined to obtain everything he has always longed for since the first moment he is conscious he does not have the advantages wealthy people have. In accordance with Djohar “Gatsby’s obsessions for the products of a growing industrial society are an accurate depiction of cultural history of the 1920s” (299). At one point of his life he realizes he has to leave his family behind to fulfill his dreams. This is not truly a problem, for he is nothing but ashamed of his origin, which is embodied by his parents. “His parents were shiftless and unsuccessful farm people — his imagination had never really accepted them as his parents at all” (Fitzgerald 104). Being Jay Gatsby is an enormous responsibility so that shiftlessness and failure have no place in Gatsby’s mind. In the wake of his economic position in society, he cannot stop considering his own life worthless. When Dan Cody, a wealthy and successful man, interrogates Gatsby, “his brand new name” comes to light and Cody finds that “he was quick, and extravagantly ambitious” (Fitzgerald 106). Although Dan Cody was a heavy drinker, he represents the luxury Gatsby wants for himself; consequently, Gatsby stays with him for five years both taking care of him and learning about the wonders of a wealthy life inside Cody’s extravagant yacht. Thus, Cody inherits Gatsby twenty-five million dollars; however, he never receives this money, for Cody’s mistress claims to be the only heiress. As a result, Gatsby’s path to become a millionaire starts from here. He tries to cover his real intentions when he shows he is deeply in love; however, his actions are not moved by love, they are stained by money and the rewards attached to it, rewards exemplified by Nick’s description of Gatsby’s house: “The one on my right was a colossal affair by any standard... It was Gatsby’s mansion” (Fitzgerald 9).

Being tired of belonging to second class, he uses firstly this mansion to impress Daisy and those who belong to “old money.” In Gatsby’s mind the idea of not having Daisy back is just a masquerade to hide his true purpose. Daisy is merely a prize he knows he can buy, “I want you and Daisy to come over to my house,” he said. “I’d like to show her around” (Fitzgerald 95). Now, Daisy is part of somebody else’s life, and Gatsby’s ambition springs out to obtain Tom Buchanan’s precious trophy. In words of Djohar “Gatsby has passions for achieving his power, practicing his revenge towards Tom to win his love back by showing off his great success, and

feeling superior over people both in East and West Egg” (302). Gatsby holds he gets all his money with the unique purpose of getting Daisy’s love back; nevertheless, his longing for being an “old money” man has always remained as his true love. In fact, one way he sells this image is his constant use of the term “old sport” and his constant urging in making people believe he is an “Oxford man” conveying he is included in this privileged part of society. In the end, ambition does not stand alone; it requires corruption to complete the equation.

Gatsby’s awareness that money eliminates the difference between the social strata leads him to surpass the limits of any ambitious person by hastening his illegal actions into corruption. Gatsby is a corrupted and self-interested man who under pressure shows that his passion about money is deeply rooted. From the beginning of the novel, mystery is all around pertaining to Gatsby. He, actually, remains an enigma for all the people who attend his fancy parties. Although, it is not explicitly stated, the novel strongly suggests the idea that Gatsby makes his mysterious and abundant fortune from bootlegging. Evenly, Brucoli states that Gatsby’s money does not “smell” right—however explicitly or tacitly condoned by the denizens of Gatsby’s world, illegal and shifting means (bootlegging, stolen securities) have been used to make that wealth (10). He has been involved with Meyer Wolfsheim, a dark and suspicious man, selling alcohol for many years. Wolfshiem is a powerful man, and this is evidenced when Gatsby tells Nick “...he’s a gambler...He’s the man who fixed the World’s Series Back in 1919” (Fitzgerald 78).

Moreover, Wolfshiem’s questionable actions are revealed when he confuses Nick with a criminal who is after a business relation, “I understand that you’re looking for a business gonnection” (Fitzgerald 75). Straight away, Gatsby sheds light on Wolfsheim’s confusion and on his own murky activities when he answers, “This is just a friend. I told you we’d talk about that some other time” (Fitzgerald 75). On the other hand, at one time Gatsby himself offers Nick the opportunity to earn some money without any significant effort, “Well, this would interest you. It wouldn’t take up much of your time and you might pick up a nice bit of money. It happens to be a rather confidential sort of thing” (Fitzgerald 84). Gatsby never says how he makes his money; in fact, when Nick asks him about “what business he was in,” his straight reply is “That’s my affair” (Fitzgerald 95). Definitely, Gatsby generates his fortune from his dirty business; nevertheless, his corrupt actions merge from other directions, as well. For instance, the truth about Oxford is brought out when Tom confronts Gatsby. Even though, Gatsby tries hard to

convince everyone he is an Oxford man, being there is just an opportunity he has as a war officer for five months. Corruption takes place also when he tries to get Daisy back without giving any importance to the consequences. Gatsby has an inherent talent to be corrupt and selfish; therefore, it is not relevant if Daisy is a wife and a mother; he has to own her no matter what. Finally, Gatsby accompanies Daisy when she ends up killing Myrtle Wilson. Whereas Gatsby's attitude about the accident could be seen as an act of love, what really lies beneath the surface is Gatsby's true self; he is willing to do any corrupt action to achieve his goals. Gatsby's ambition and corruption govern his life; as a result, his struggle to seek power shows him he is just a lonely man holding nothing. Comparatively, Brucoli claims that Gatsby does not see that the corruption at the base of his fortune in effect compromises his vision of life with Daisy (52).

On the other hand, Gatsby's alienation from reality leads him to his inevitable downfall. Gatsby devotes himself to amass a fortune, which evidently provides him with a delusional realm. His sight is distorted as he tries to break the bridge that keeps him miles away from his distant and intangible dream; as a result, he is trapped in complete isolation. "Gatsby embraces isolation" (Clarici 8). From the very beginning Nick perceives Gatsby as a solitary man who enjoys solitude. One night, Nick returns home and sees that Gatsby is standing alone staring at the 'single green light' at the end of Daisy's dock. Just as the 'green light' is single, so is Gatsby's life. He alienates himself and experiences his own 'unquiet darkness.'

But I didn't call to him for he gave a sudden intimation that he was content to be alone—he stretched out his arms toward the dark water in a curious way, and far as I was from him I could have sworn he was trembling. Involuntarily I glanced seaward—and distinguishing nothing except a single green light, minute and far way, that might have been the end of a dock. When I looked once more for Gatsby he had vanished, and I was alone in the unquiet darkness.

(Fitzgerald 20-21)

Even though he truly believes his money will position him as an honorable man of East Egg, the truth is that the distance between East Egg and West Egg is not only physical but also social. He actually remains alienated inside West Egg, where wealthy men show they merely own money. Clarici states that "East Egg and West Egg is an example of distance: the two eggs represent Gatsby's world and Daisy's, their physical and metaphorical distance, and above all their alienation from each other" (4). The juxtaposition of Daisy's and Gatsby's lives make them

representatives of the upper class following two different and distant directions. “He craves to be with her, and yet he cannot override the distance that separates her from him” (Clarici 6). Daisy is rooted as a wealthy woman whose fortune comes from former generations together with that air of aristocracy, whereas Gatsby, living alienated from reality, unfolds his abandonment and doubtful fortune. Moreover, regardless of his lifestyle, Gatsby resembles the Valley of Ashes in that both convey desolation and isolation. In the Valley of Ashes human lives hang in the balance, and so does Gatsby’s. Thus, alienation keeps Gatsby living constantly near the edge of a cliff since his vision of the world is altered by the gloom of his foggy feelings. At long last, Gatsby lives all alone in his fancy mansion; he is not interested in having any relationship with his relatives. He throws large parties for lots of people he does not even know; however, he remains invisible. “[A] sudden emptiness seemed to flow from the windows and the great doors, endowing with complete isolation the figure of the host” (Fitzgerald 59). No wonder why he, trying to make sense of his life, ultimately fails mired in powerlessness.

Eventually, the price Gatsby has to pay because of his insatiable craving for money and the past is loss. Gatsby acts out of selfishness, ambition, desire and corruption; in his mind every single step of his own justifies the end; however, all his money brings him nothing but loss, loneliness and tragedy. In addition, being deprived of freedom is a fatal state that limits Gatsby’s sanity because he is blind and obsessed with getting Daisy back. To this regard, Tate states “Gatsby believes in the promises of America, but his ambitions are undermined by and confused with his illusions about Daisy” (95). Thus, in his attempt to repeat the past, he is a man who loses his identity; he strives to build his status in society, the one that has been denied from the moment he is born. He is nobody; he is just known as someone who throws extravagant parties; as a consequence, he does not gain any status; his true self is instead exposed by Tom, “Jay Gatsby had broken up like glass against Tom’s hard malice and the long secret extravaganza was played out” (Fitzgerald 155). People at his parties trample his dignity when they gossip about Gatsby’s origin, “Someone told me they thought he killed a man once” (Fitzgerald 48). “It’s more that he was a German spy during the war” (Fitzgerald 48). Through his attempt to regain Daisy’s love he loses not only himself but also Daisy’s love. He is so obsessed with the past that he stops thinking about the present; consequently, he feels devastated when his hope becomes increasingly unattainable. As Djohar points out: “Although Gatsby has all money and persona, he remained lost and failed to compete against Tom, who has an aristocratic power” (303). His sense of living

vanishes as he witnesses his “green light” fading out of his reach, “...at this point, perhaps he no longer cared. If that was true he must have felt that he had lost the old warm world, paid a high price for living too long with a single dream” (Fitzgerald 169). Crossing the ethical boundaries does not offer Gatsby any happiness or love in his longed for “warm world”; it solely gives him a plentiful amount of money. Ultimately, Gatsby loses his life; nevertheless, his life had died out from the moment reality slaps his face. He, pretending to be somebody else, misses the only opportunity of living a life filled with joy, and rather he chooses to live as a ghost lost in the Valley of Ashes as it is reflected by his mansion at the end, “There was an inexplicable amount of dust everywhere and the rooms were musty as though they hadn’t been aired for many years” (Fitzgerald 155).

Gatsby’s greatness is reduced to dust, for he is nothing more than a corrupt and ambitious man who in the long run becomes a loser tinged with tragedy and abandonment. Firstly, deep inside Gatsby never sees himself as a man of the lower social class; he believes he deserves to be surrounded by powerful and wealthy people. As a result, his life revolves around money and all the rewards that emerge from it. Ambition can be a good feature as long as it is targeted to the right path; nevertheless, Gatsby’s ambition is narrow because he merely thinks of himself and leaves aside the aspirations and needs of others. However, not only does Gatsby long for material things, but also he corrupts his “green light.” Thus, corruption corrodes any good intention that might emanate from Gatsby’s mind since he does not measure the consequences while obtaining all the benefits to himself. Additionally, despite the large number of people that surrounds Gatsby, he remains alienated both physically and socially. An unbeatable barrier sets Gatsby apart from the social strata that he had always wanted to belong to. Gatsby, being corrupt and selfish, achieves to become the wealthy man he had always wanted to be; however, ambition, corruption and alienation are not the appropriate mixture for Gatsby. Everything he does turns to failure when he himself witnesses how he becomes nothing but a loser. He loses his freedom, his dignity, his forbidden love, and his life. Ironically, Gatsby acts out the scenes of a life beyond his own, pretending to live as an honorable man; eventually, he dies in a tragic way and fails, for he is easily forgotten as someone whose honor has been trampled. In the end, greatness only lies in Gatsby’s fantasy mind, and failure originates from his wrongly perceptions of the “green light.” This ray of light fades away in the darkness of Gatsby’s soul, who at the end of the day is just human. "That's the whole burden of this novel -- the loss of those illusions that give such color to

the world so that you don't care whether things are true or false as long as they partake of the magical glory" - F. Scott Fitzgerald- 1924, while working on *The Great Gatsby* (Brucoli 10).

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