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IMAGES AND REALISM IN THE GREAT GATSBY

by Barna William Donovan

F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby is a novel that captures the attitude of the nation after World War I, revealing the motivation behind the sudden glamour and excitement. The Great War took the world into chaos and destruction that seemed to take away people's will to live. The peace that followed gave the nation a chance to live and enjoy life. Pleasure and enjoyment were what the World War I generation was looking for, but these people were created without a future and they could not live for any substantial goals. These people felt their lives didn't make much difference in any greater worldly purpose, and that their achievements didn't matter to them or anyone else. The story opens as Nick Caraway moves to the trendy east coast for business and tells the story of Jay Gatsby and the Buchanans. Their lives are an example of those who are trying to live in glamour and happiness, but their age has deprived them of the right to a meaningful existence. They linger in a life of ease and privilege, but their aimlessness stops them from caring about anything worthwhile, or from considering the consequences of their actions.

Upon his arrival in New York, Nick Caraway is led into the lives of people who exist in a world where outside forces exert little control. They are men and women who stop living when they reach a certain point of material abundance. They don't know how to enjoy what they have and they seem to

be suspended in a state of being without any fulfillment or joy. The most exact conclusion Nick can reach is that this jet-set crowd has a certain one-dimensional existence with nothing behind their image: a window dressing of sorts prepared with the finest details of money, glamour, and status, but nothing tangible beyond this idea.

Nick comes to understand through the family of his cousin, Daisy Buchanan, why his generation aspires to nothing more satisfying or meaningful than a well-polished image. This generation was predestined to live without a future and there was no point in their trying to create one. Those who had not died on the battlefields of the Great War had seen the ravaging of the civilized world, and that drastically altered their outlook on life. They were all war veterans who wanted nothing more than to be left alone. This is more vividly illustrated by Daisy and her husband Tom. Daisy lives her life by honestly believing that a woman should be dumb. Good looks are necessary for certain pleasures, but she doesn't care about anything besides these pleasures. She thinks that good looks are all a woman needs, and she herself is satisfied with a limited intellectual development. Tom Buchanan, meanwhile, views married life as nothing more than a partnership so that he and his wife have stability. However, he often had affairs with other women and feels no real love for Daisy. He lives with her so he can have a sense of family and a person he can always come back to.

A mythical, debonair Jay Gatsby soon enters the lives of the Buchanans, secretly returning to Daisy. Gatsby is the artistic contrast in the novel. He differs sharply from the others in personality and beliefs. He is a man driven by a definite goal until the end of the book. He lives for fortune and romance, and does it with the passion of someone who experienced little of either one in his lifetime. He is in control and careful about living the right life until his tie to the Buchanans begins to destroy him.

Gatsby comes to the high rolling east coast to get Daisy Buchanan, the girl he fell in love with when they were young and she was rich while he was poor. The novel slowly reveals that the force that brought Jay Gatsby to the top was his determination to get Daisy back. Because they were of different worlds, he could not have her before the war, so he changed himself to fit into her society.

Jay Gatsby climbed to the top, made money, and created a life similar to that of the idle rich of his age. He was a driven man with a goal that enabled him to create this life that seemed to be functioning according to a set of rules and plans. He had an ideal image of a man and he modeled himself after that image, trying even to change his past to fit the plans. He, however, soon put himself in the position to go against the social establishment of his time. He was different from those he wanted to live with and couldn't survive the world

that was so different from him. When he reached his goal after a lifetime's work and ambition, his only problem was the fact that he still loved Daisy. He had to love Daisy; otherwise, he couldn't be where he was. Although they were both rich, their lives and worlds were still different. While Gatsby was driven to succeed and change, Daisy was still a frivolous, carefree woman who had no desire to change her behavior. Gatsby could never completely have Daisy, because she didn't want him. She was incapable of loving anyone with the devotion Gatsby gave her. She didn't care about a commitment to him when he was poor, or when he was rich.

The climax of Gatsby's career comes tragically, because he is ultimately killed by an overwhelmingly alien world. He is a victim of a private revenge, but his downfall comes when he begins to lose his sense of reality. He lives for the past and puts all his energy into getting even for the problems and injustices of his past. He loses his perspective on the real world when he can't distinguish between the truth and hopeless dreams. It begins when he can't realize where his relationship with Daisy is leading and can't find any other purpose for which to live. Daisy is in his past, and he couldn't go back to change all of that past, no matter how many times he tried.

Sources

Fitzgerald, F. Scott, The Great Gatsby, New York: Scribner's & Sons, 1925.