

How and why does the motif of higher education in *The Great Gatsby* play an important role in the readers' understanding of class in America in the 1920s?

The Great Gatsby, written in 1924 by F. Scott Fitzgerald, comments critically on how the wealthy class in New England uses higher education to perpetuate a classist divide in America. In *The Great Gatsby*, wealth is synonymous with the prestige of Ivy League universities. Because of their wealth, the wealthy class has access to Ivy League universities, such as Yale, or English universities like Oxford. They value their wealth, status and heritage more than they value education, learning and intelligence. Why does F. Scott Fitzgerald include the motif of higher education throughout the novel? How does this motif help shape the reader's understanding of classism in the US in the 1920s? Through a careful study of the motif of education in the novel, readers can see how Fitzgerald is critical of the injustices and hypocrisies of the wealthy elite.

Through an analysis of the symbols of books and libraries, Fitzgerald exposes the hypocritical nature of the wealthy class. One symbol of Gatsby's education is his library. Although upper-class people often had personal libraries in New England in these times, they rarely filled them with actual books (Only Yesterday). Instead, they would line their shelves with fake books. In *The Great Gatsby*, Nick Carraway, the narrator, wanders through Gatsby's personal library and meets an eccentric party guest who says "[The book is] a bona fide piece of printed matter. It fooled me. This fella's a regular Belasco. It's a triumph. What thoroughness! What realism! Knew when to stop too—didn't cut the pages. But what do you want? What do you expect?" (Page 50). Books in these times were printed on large sheets of folded paper, and the edges were often left for the owner to cut (Stopka). By not cutting the pages of his books, Gatsby is typical of most wealthy Long Island residents and he earns the guest's respect. Gatsby shows that he, like other Long Islanders, hypocritically values the social status provided by the books and not the knowledge that they contain. Gatsby's library is symbolic of Gatsby. He is an imposter. Like his library, his only purpose is to prove himself to the wealthy class of New York and impress Daisy Buchanan. Gatsby only uses books and education to gain power and not to learn about humanity. Arguably it is this lack of understanding people which costs him his life in the end. He fails to understand that money cannot buy love, happiness or even acceptance into America's elite.

Throughout the novel, education is a motif that contributes to the characterisation of Jay Gatsby and Tom Buchanan to highlight the classist battle between them. Tom Buchanan, the novel's antagonist, is part of the elite rich who lives on East Egg. His main source of pride in life comes from his athletic achievements at Yale University. As Nick describes, "Tom had been one of the most powerful ends that every played football at New Haven - a national figure in a way, one of those men who reach such an acute limited excellence at twenty-one that everything afterwards savours of anticlimax" (page 6). University, for Tom, is a place to prove that his physical dominance justifies his financial dominance over others. As a character, he is proudly anti-intellectual. When Daisy, his wife, says "Tom reads deep books

with long words in them,” she is facetious, as she is not at all impressed with the simplistic racist ideas that Tom finds in these books. Tom’s blatantly racist ideas make him look stupid to a modern-day reader. His theories of white supremacy are not scientific, as he claims, and one wonders what he actually learned at university. For Tom, however, where one goes to university is more important than what one learns at university.

Education, as a motif, is very relevant to understanding the story’s narrator, Nick Carraway, and the classist society in which he lives. America in the ‘roaring 20s’ both rewards Nick for attending an Ivy League school and does not reward him for being an intellectual. Nick Carraway introduces himself to the reader as a member of the elite class of the Midwest. He writes about his heritage, privilege and intellectualism at Yale University. “I was rather literary in college — one year I wrote a series of very solemn and obvious editorials for the ‘Yale News’” (page 6). After attending Yale, Nick asks his family permission to leave Chicago and enter the bond business on Wall Street, New York. Their reluctance to say yes shows that that ‘old money’ frowns upon this new method of making money. He takes an intellectual approach to the bond business: “I bought a dozen volumes on banking and credit and investment securities, and they stood on my shelf in red and gold like new money from the mint, promising to unfold the shining secrets that only Midas and Morgan and Maecenas knew” (page 6). The phrase ‘new money’ is not accidental nor is connecting American entrepreneur, J.P. Morgan to the mythological Greek king, Midas, and the Roman patron of the arts, Gaius Maecenas. Early in the novel, Nick naively thinks that the “well-rounded man” (page 6.) is best positioned for acquiring new wealth. As he learns, however, new wealth is really generated by uneducated criminals and bootleggers, such as Meyer Wolfsheimer and Jay Gatsby. Real power, as Nick comes to learn, is controlled and maintained by families such as the Buchanans. No matter how sympathetic Nick grows to Jay Gatsby, he knows that he is inextricably connected to the Buchanans and ‘old money’ through institutions such as Yale University, where both Nick and Tom went to school. In effect, the novel is really about Nick’s frustration that hopeless romantics and self-made men like Jay Gatsby will never have a seat at the table of the ‘old boys’ club’.

At the heart of the novel is the question of whether Jay Gatsby actually attended Oxford University. The success of Jay Gatsby’s plan to win back the heart of Daisy Buchanan, who is now married to Tom, hinges on a fantastical story that he tells everyone about his wealth, family and education. In the same scene in which Jay Gatsby shows Nick, the narrator, a photograph of himself at Oxford with other students, he also says that he grew up in San Francisco, in the ‘Middle West’ of the United States. Gatsby’s lack of topographical knowledge is evidence that his life story is fake and that he is clearly uneducated. While Nick is forgiving of Gatsby’s lies, Tom Buchanan is determined to call him out on his lies in front of Daisy to show her that he is a fake. He cannot believe that Jay Gatsby, a man of ‘new wealth’, went to Oxford University. “An Oxford man! Like hell he is! He wears a pink suit” (page 77), Tom explains to Nick, Daisy and Jordan. When confronted with this lie, Gatsby admits that he had gone there in 1919 and only stayed for five months, which was why he couldn’t call himself an ‘Oxford man’. “It was an opportunity they gave to some of the

officers after the armistice” (page 82). In response, Daisy sees Gatsby as a war hero, and Tom’s plan nearly backfires. Daisy knows that to become wealthy and remain wealthy, one must lie. She sees Tom lie continuously about his affair with Myrtle. Although she may be able to forgive Gatsby for lying about his time at Oxford University, she could never divorce Tom to marry Jay Gatsby. As Tom explains to Jay Gatsby, in Daisy’s presence: “She’s not leaving me! Certainly not for a common swindler who’d have to steal the ring he put on her finger” (page 84). Deep down, Daisy knows that Tom is right. Gatsby’s lie about his education at Oxford does not change the fact that he was born poor. Being a “swindler” is one thing. Being “common”, however, is another thing that she could never overlook.

In conclusion, the motif of education plays an important role in *The Great Gatsby*, showing the reader that where one goes to school is a badge worn by the wealthy elite to preserve their power. Book smarts, as the reader learns through Nick Carraway, do not matter in a corrupt world where both police commissioners can be bought and millionaires can be killed. In effect, the reader is outraged by this world that hypocritically claims to be civilised and educated but acts in reckless, brutish ways. Published in 1924, F. Scott Fitzgerald’s novel is the writing on the wall before the stock market crash of 1929 and the Great Depression of the 1930s. Such decadence, hypocrisy and inequality was not sustainable. One wonders if the United States would have spiraled out of control if it had had a stronger, educated middle class. Such questions remain relevant today, making Fitzgerald’s novel rather timeless.

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