

THE UNITED STATES IN THE TWENTIES AS REFLECTED IN F. SCOTT FITZGERALD'S *THE GREAT GATSBY*

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Abstract

The Great Gatsby was written by F. Scott Fitzgerald in the 20s. According to the theories explaining that literature is the reflection or mirror of the society in which the work is created, this novel depicts clearly about the condition of American society in the twenties. The era of twenties is the post-war era when American tried hard to build the country after the World War I or The Great War was ended. The success reached by The United States to recover from post-war condition lead them to a very prosperous and modernization era followed by the development of advanced technology and the abundance transportation meansd like cars and even planes possessed by the wealthy people of this country. As the technology and modernization developed, education, emancipation, the change of lifestyle and new beliefs like hedonism and materialism went along with them. Both hedonism and materialism is the beliefs that idolize the pleasure and material comfort to its utmost that lead American society to the moral failure of this era. The pursuit of the goal were focused on the material gain so that crimes, gambling, and illegal business become a sort of culture of the society of this era. The Amendment that prohibited the consumption and the trade of alcohol was broken by the people. This research is aimed to analyze the condition of American society in the twenties as reflected on the characters found in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* through sociological study of the literature and qualitative-descriptive method.

Keywords: the twenties, prosperity, hedonism, materialism

A. INTRODUCTION

In the aftermath of World War I, America entered a prosperous era and, as a result of her role in the war, came out onto the world stage. Social customs and morals were relaxed in the giddy optimism brought on by the end of the war and the booming of the Stock Market. New music and new dances came on the scene. Women got the vote in 1920 and were entering the workforce in record numbers. The nationwide prohibition on alcohol was ignored by many when it suited them. There was a revolution in almost every sphere of human activity, and fashion was no exception.

This era has inspired many authors to write their work based on those condition. One of them is F. Scott Fitzgerald who wrote of tired, disillusioned upper-crust Americans. Fitzgerald's best-known book was *The Great Gatsby*. (www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/teachers/lesson_plans/pdfs/unit9_2pdf)

The Great Gatsby is usually considered as Fitzgerald's finest novel (Piper, 1970:127). Through this novel, with the twenties as the setting of time, and Long Island, New York mostly as the setting of place. The readers can learn that modernization and prosperity in America had achieved its remarkable level at this age. It is described in the novel as follows:

"This is the valley of ashes –a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens; where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke, and, finally, with a transcendent effort, of ash-grey men who m ove dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air. Ocassionally a line grey cars crwals along an invisible track, gives out aghastly creak, and comes to rest, and immediately the ash-grey men swarm up with leaden spades and stir up an impenetrable cloud, which screens their obscure operations from your sight (2010: 20).

America in the twenties was also swarmed by new beliefs; hedonism and materialism. Hedonism is a belief that pleasure is the chief goal. Hedonist idolize pleasure and material comfort to its utmost. It may result the interaction among members of a society simply for material benefit (Leuchtenburg, 1986: 188). The attitudes which regard too much pleasure create people who are very selfish and insensitive of others' sufferings and pains.

Besides hedonism, materialism also emerged in America in the twenties. Materialism is the tendency of people to place everything and wealth is the chief end of the man (Leuchtenburg: 1993: 188). The implication is that people competitively try to be rich as quick as possible. The ambition to be materially rich sweeps out religious and moral values written in Holy Books. People are no longer taking care of hereafter life with its reward and punishment. Kirchway wrote about American in the twenties that never in recent generations have human beings so floundered about outside of ropes of social and religious sanctions (1993: 158).

Those condition will give a great influence for the characters found in *The Great Gatsby* in finding the way of their life. The characters themselves had various characteristics that brought about various attitude and behaviors towards the social condition of the Twenties as well.

This study discusses how the characters in *The Great Gatsby* that are the reflections of American society in the Twenties responded to, and then handled, the role conflicts as their adaptation to the era.

B. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In the case of a work that sets out from the condition of the society Hall states that the concept of literature as a social reference is, however, perfectly viable since it takes into account the writer's active concern to understand his society (1979: 32). Fitzgerald as the author of *The Great Gatsby* is an intense observer toward his society who notices many aspects which he considers important. In a broader sense, he insists that a poem is a cry of its occasion. It can be interpreted that a literary work cannot be separated from its socio-historical background which creates it. People may assume from the novel that F. Scott Fitzgerald creates his literary work as a depiction of the social condition when it is created.

Considering that this research also discusses about society, in this case, the American society that mentioned and revealed in *The Great Gatsby* becomes the important subject to discuss, it cannot avoid applying sociological theories. Blau and Moore define sociology as the study of society or of social life. Further, they explain that such definition in terms of subject matter does not distinguish it from the other social sciences, for they all study social life or, to put it more precisely, patterns of conduct that are common to groups of people ()

Society which becomes the subject matter of sociology is defined by Maclver as a system of ordered relation (1995: 22). However, there is another definition taken from Laski who argues that society is a group of human beings living together for the satisfaction of their mutual wants. Such a society is a state when the way of life to which both individuals and associations must conform is defined by a coercive authority binding upon them all (2008: 8-9).

In case of analyzing a literary work through literary sociology, Wellek and Warren describe that much the most common approach to the relations of literature as social documents, as assumed as pictures of social reality. They suggest further that used a social document, literature can be made to yield the outlines of social history (1975: 102). It is in line with the theory of Laurensen and Swingewood in Suwardi which says that first, literary work can be a social document in which the work is created to reflect the situation of its era; second, it serves as the mirror of the writer's social situation, and third, it becomes the manifestation of historical events and the condition of social culture (2003: 79).

As a social document in which a work is created to reflect the situation in the era, Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* fits a lot. He writes a great deal about relatively hot issues happening in American society in the Twenties. As a work of literature, *The Great Gatsby* can be the manifestation of historical events from which readers can take historical events from which readers can take historical knowledge since there are many things stated in the work, most of them are significant to include in historical events.

C. METHOD OF THE RESEARCH

As a qualitative research, this study attempts to interpret and explain the phenomena and issues which become the subject matter. In conducting the study, library research has been

employed. From Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* as the primary source the researcher tries to find out some phenomena of the twenties found in the novel. Then she makes some categories and differentiates them according to the contexts.

As the grouping is done, the researcher collects the data of related topic from other written materials as the second sources. As supporting and background information the researcher conducts internet browsing.

The selected data are processed by applying a qualitative method because this method of research is aimed to comprehend the process of someone's or a group of individuals' thought toward the way they live. In the qualitative method, meaning is essential to interpret someone's or society's behavior (Bogdan and Biklen, 1982).

However, by applying the library research, this study can hand down the issues in terms of proposing and analyzing the various data through a descriptive analysis. It means that the study deals with the description of any data found out in the work in order to relate all data comprehensively in achieving the objectives.

D. ANALYSIS

Scott in his book entitled *Five Approaches of Literary Criticism* states that literature is not simply a creation that of a person, but of an author who, fixed in certain time and place, attempts to reveal social condition in which he or she lives (1962:123). This statement implies that the existence of literary work cannot be separated from the society and social condition where the writer lives and the literary works are written. Literary works are the mirror of the society where they are created.

This case also happens with *The Great Gatsby*. This novel is created by F. Scott Fitzgerald who lived in the Twenties. Thus, *The Great Gatsby* reflects the social condition where the author lived.

The setting of the novel is New York and Long Island, USA, in the Twenties. It is the decade when, in the wake of The Great War, the United States became modern and a leading world power, and in an era of economic boom and unprecedented change the nation entered on what Fitzgerald himself tagged the greatest, gaudiest, space in the history (Bradbury, 2004: ix-xi). This is the era of the new post-war generation where the independent young men and women of this Golden Age had new kinds of songs, dances, hairstyles, manners and more of dating and petting and the glitz of the new urban amusements. This is really the ages of parties and extravagant lives.

Along with the modernization happened in the twenties, there was such a kind of moral failure of the people. Crimes and corruption spread over this land. Some of the men who wanted to get rich quickly handle some wrong ways to satisfy their dream by gambling, boot-legging as well as doing illegal and illicit business. In this era too, the new beliefs called hedonism and materialism emerge.

The Great Gatsby that is written in the era depicts some characteristics of the Twenties and those of the American society who lived in as well. They are as follows:

1. The era of post-war generation

The era of the Twenties is the era of post-war generation. Most of the men took a part in the Great War; Nick Carraway and Jay Gatsby were also young men who had come back from the war.

"I graduated from New Haven in 1915, just a quarter of century after my father, and a little later I participated in that delayed Teutonic migration known as the Great War. I enjoyed the counter-raid so thoroughly that I came back restless (2010:4).

"At a lull in the entertainment the man looked at me and smiled.

'Your face is familiar,' he said, politely. 'Weren't you in the First Division during the war?'

'Why, yes. I was in the Twenty-eighth Infantry.'

'I was in the Sixteenth until one nineteen-eighteen. I knew I'd seen you somewhere before.' (2010:40)

2. Prosperity

The success of The United States in recovering the post-war era had led them to a very prosperous era.

"I lived in West Egg, the –well, the less fashionable of the two, though this is a most superficial tag to express the bizzare and not a little sinister contrast between them. My house was at the very tip of the egg, only ffity yards from the Sound, and squeezed between two huge places that rented for twelve or fiteen thousand a season. The one on my right was a colossal affair by any standard –it was a factual imitation of some Hotel de Ville in Normandy, with a tower on one side, spanking new under a thin beard of raw ivy, and a marble swimming pool, and more than forty acres of lawn and garden. It was Gatsby's mansion. Or, rather, as I didn't know Mr. Gatsby, it was a mansion, inhabited by a gentleman of that name." (2010: 6)

"Her husband, among various physical accomplishments, had been one of the most powerful ends that never 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 anti-climax. His family were enormously wealthy –even in college his freedom with money was a matter for reproach –but now he'd left Chicago and come East in a fashion that rather took your breath away; for insance, he'd brought down a string of polo ponies from Lake Forest. It was hard to realize that a man of my own generation was wealthy enough to do that" (2010:7)

"This is the valley of ashes –a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens; where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke, and, finally, with a transcendent effort, of ash-grey men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air. Ocassionally a line grey cars crawls along an invisible track, gives out a ghastly creak, and comes to rest, and immediately the ash-grey men swarm up with leaden spades and stir up an impenetrable cloud, which screens their obscure operations from your sight" (2010: 20)

3. Modernization

The twenties also glorified by the modernization. Some electronic and communication devices like television, radio, and telephone were commonly used. The luxurious cars and even planes were also possessed by some wealthy people in this era.

"The telephone rang inside, startlingly, and as Daisy shook her head decisively at Tom the subject of the stables, in fact all subjects, vanished into the air. Among the broken fragments of the last five minutes at table I remember the candles being lit again, pointlessly, and I was unconscious of wanting to look squarely at everyone, and yet to avoid all eyes" (2010: 15).

"We talked for a moment about some wet, grey little villages in France. Evidently he lived in this vicinity, for he told me that he just bought a hydroplane, and was going to try it out in the morning" (2010:40).

"At nine o'clock, one morning late in July, Gatsby's gorgeous car lurched up the rocky drive to my door and gave out a burst of melody from its three-noted horn. It was the first time he had called on me, though I had gone to two of his parties, mounted in his hydroplane, and, at his urgent invitation, made frequent use of his beach" (2010:52)

4. The Emancipation

During the 1920s or the "Roaring Twenties," women did things they did not do before; for instances working, going to college and playing sports. Furthermore, they also won the right to vote.

" When we were on a house-party together up in Warwick, she left the borrowed car out in the rain with the top down, and then lied about it –and suddenly I remembered the story about her that had eluded me that night at Daisy's. At her first big tournament there was a row that nearly reached the newspaper- a suggestion that she had moved

her ball from a bad lie in the semi-final round. The thing approached the proportions of a scandal –then died away. A caddy retracted his statement, and the only witness admitted that he might have been mistaken” (2010:49).

5. New types of songs, music and dances

In this era, there were new genres of music, songs and dances. The new type of music in the twenties was jazz, thus the era of the Twenties is often called *The Jazz Age*.

“By seven o’clock the orchestra has arrived, no thin five-piece affair, but a whole pitiful of oboes and trombones and saxophones and viols and cornets and piccolos, and low and high drums” (2010:33-34).

“Suddenly one of these gypsies, in trembling opal, seizes a cocktail out of the air, dumps it down for courage and, moving her hands like Frisco, dances out on the canvas platform” (2010: 34)

“By midnight the hilarity had increased. A celebrated tenor had sung in Italian, and a notorious contralto had sung in jazz, and between the numbers people were doing ‘stunts’ all over the garden...” (2010:25)

“When Klipspringer had played *The Love Nest* he turned around on the bench and searched unhappily for Gatsby in the gloom.” (2010: 78)

6. New hairstyles, fashion, and lifestyles as well

In this era, the fashion changed as the roles of women in modern society changed, particularly with the idea of freedom for women. Although society matrons of a certain age continued to wear conservative dresses, forward-looking and younger women now made sportswear into the greatest change in post-war fashion. The tubular dresses of the 'Teens had evolved into a similar silhouette that now sported shorter skirts with pleats, gathers, or slits to allow motion to rule women’s fashion for the first time in history.

The straight-line chemise topped by the close-fitting cloche hat became the uniform of the day. Women "bobbed," or cut, their hair short to fit under the popular hats, a radical move in the beginning, but standard by the end of the decade. Low-waisted dresses with fullness at the hemline allowed women to kick up their heels literally in new dances like the Charleston. (http://tirocchi.stg.brown.edu/514/story/fashion_twenties.html)

The young generation of the twenties also enjoyed their best and extravagant life by having parties and freedom of life.

“The sister, Catherine, was a slender, worldly girl of about thirty, with a solid, sticky bob of red hair, and a complexion powdered milky white” (2010: 26)

“I began to like New York, the racy, adventurous feel of it at night, and the satisfaction that the constant flicker of men and women and machines gives to the restless eye. I liked to walk up Fifth Avenue and pick out romantic women from the crowd and imagine that in a few minutes I was going to enter into their lives, and no one would ever know or disapprove” (.2010: 48).

“There was dancing now on the canvas in the garden; old men pushing young girls backwards in eternal graceless circles, superior couples holding each other tortuously, fashionably, and keeping in the corners –and a great number of single girl dancing individualistically or relieving the orchestra for a moment of the burden of the banjo or the traps” (2010: 39)

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7. The Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution was ratified.

It made selling and drinking alcohol against the law. This was called Prohibition. However, bootlegging and illicit or illegal business dealing with alcohol still became the choice for the people because of enormous profit gotten in a very short period of time. Not only bootlegging, but gambling and crimes were also common things in this era.

"'He's a bootlegger,' said the young ladies, moving somewhere between his cocktails and his flowers. 'One time he killed a man who had found out that he was a nephew to Von Hindenburg and second cousin to the devil'....'" (2010: 50).

"'Meyer Wolfsheim? No, he's a gambler.' Gatsby hesitated, then added coolly: 'He's the man who fixed the World's Series back in 1919'" (2010: 60).

"'Yes,' His eyes went over it, every arched door and square tower. 'It took me just three years to earn the money that bought it.'" (2010: 74)

"That drug-store business was just small change,' continues Tom slowly, 'but you've got something on now that Walter's afraid to tell me about'" (2010: 110).

Along with the modernization spreaded over the country, there were new beliefs in this land known as materialism and hedonism. Materialism is a belief that placed wealth as everything and as the cheif-end, and this principle may let people do everything such as gambling, bootlegging, cheating, corruption or doing illegal business to be wealthy as quickly as possible. They often break the law to get what they want. Meanwhile, hedonism is a belief that idolize pleasure and material comfort to its utmost. The spirit of hedonism of the decade was "letting oneself bew carried along by the mad hilarity and heartbreak of Jazz, living only for the exiteament of the evening" (Leuchtenburg, 1993: 175).

E. CONCLUSION

The work of literature is the reflection of the society in which it is created. It will reveal the condition of the society clearly. F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* is the great example of it. The novel written by F. Scott Fitzgerald in the Twenties depicts the condition of American society in this era.

The prosperity of the era, the changes of women's roles, fashion, hairstyle, lifestyle, the development of technology and means of transportation and also the emerge of new beliefs like hedonism and materialism that led people to do bad things such as gambling, bootlegging, illegal business in order to get rich as quick as possible are depicted so clearly in this novel.

As one of Fitzgerald's greatest work, *The Great Gatsby* fits the need of the readers to gain a deep knowledge about the Twenties in the United States.

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