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The Negation of Gatsby's World by Fitzgerald's Language

Scott Fitzgerald, born in 1886 in Minnesota, started his writing in the 1920's, known as the "Jazz Age." Critics have found him to be a brilliant writer endowed with a fabulous genius. But this genius, some have argued, is due to hazard, following no consistent methodology. My paper will try to disprove this claim by focusing on *The Great Gatsby*, described as the masterpiece of his writing career.

In the novel, a record of his generation, Fitzgerald narrates through Nick Carraway the life of a big bootlegger, Jay Gatsby, who is the embodiment of the corrupted American society of the Jazz Age. Fitzgerald is reported to have openly expressed in the "Author's Apology" his contempt for rich people who have acquired their wealth through illegal practices, such as Jay Gatsby (352). Indeed, *The Great Gatsby* has been the center of many thematic studies related to characters, pecuniary considerations, corruption, morality and amorality, just to name a few.

Unlike many of these studies, which have studied exclusively the social and pragmatic aspects of these themes, I will analyze in my paper the language of unreality, and how it helps underscore the theme of amorality and negation of Gatsby's world. More precisely, I will explore Fitzgerald's use of negation, his choice of content words, and how he manipulates the rhetorical figures of speech and punctuation.

The most striking way in which Fitzgerald condemns and rejects Gatsby's world, is through negating the protagonist himself, and applying words with no precise referent to him and his world. In fact, being the main figure of the novel, one would expect Gatsby to be introduced in the opening lines of the novel. But such is not the case, since our first encounter with him is in the third chapter. One could interpret the author's resistance to introducing Gatsby as his rejection of what Gatsby stands for.

Here, Fitzgerald presents the negation in a subtle way through the delayed introduction of Jay Gatsby. Finally, when he decides to talk about Gatsby, he does so using negation. Thus, Jordan Baker, who has been coming to Gatsby's parties ever since, reports to Nick to "have never met him" and when they try to find him, "Gatsby was not there," they "couldn't find him," he "wasn't on the verandah" (35). These lines give the impression that Gatsby is avoiding his guests, an idea that "he" and "Gatsby," respectively the subjects of "was" and "wasn't," suggest.

Besides these instances, Fitzgerald's language presents Gatsby as a person with no identity. Nick talks of Gatsby as "my neighbor, my host" (31, 33), even though he knows Gatsby's name, and no one can say anything sure about him; only "somebody who knew Gatsby" (34) introduced him to somebody else, saying that "he doesn't want any trouble with anyone" (37), that there is "something funny" about him and that Nick can see "nothing sinister about him" (39). All these words and negations contribute to the "dim background" of Gatsby and are hints at his obscure identity. Gatsby is a cipher, whose words Jordan "doesn't believe": she "doesn't think he went to Oxford" as he claims (38). Through these phrases, one could say that Gatsby is nobody, an idea that Fitzgerald reinforces by putting the word in Gatsby's mouth himself, when he says to Nick: "I don't want you to think that I am just some nobody" (51), and by having Tom call Gatsby "Mr. Nobody from nowhere" (98).

Furthermore, the symmetrical structure of the novel reinforces the negation of Gatsby, in the sense that the writer introduces him through negations and impersonal pronouns, and speaks of his end in

similar terms as well. When Nick tries to get someone to assist him in taking care of Gatsby's funeral, he finds that Daisy and Tom "left no address," that the house attendant does not have "any idea" of their whereabouts, that he does not know, nor can tell how to reach them; and that Gatsby cannot go through this alone. In addition to these negations, in spite of Nick's attempts to get someone for Gatsby, "no one's there" eventually. He gets "neither a wire nor" does he see his only friend, Mr. Wolfsheim, arrive (125). Everything in Gatsby's world is emptiness and there is no place for such honest people as Mr. Wilson, who has no friend and was not even enough for his wife (121).

Besides negations and impersonal pronouns, the recurring questions and repetitions are symptomatic of the nothingness that Gatsby's world represents. He gives the impression of always looking for someone else's approval of his ideas so as to reassure himself about their validity. He seems to be conscious that his world is an illusion, but clings to it and runs away from reality, as Blissert says of Nick Carraway (65). So he asks Nick several questions as a way of proving to himself that he is doing the right thing (67-68). One common feature in Gatsby and Daisy's language is the unnecessary repetition (68), due to their being from the same world. However, as William Baer rightly points out, "the constant use of repetition and syntactical parallelisms" in Daisy's language indicates her "interior vacuity" and "her childish chatter"(19).

Another way of condemning Gatsby's world is Fitzgerald's presentation of it as an illusion, an unreality. Here again, employing words of conjectures contributes to asserting this theme. The verbs "to think," "to suppose," "to imagine," "to seem," "to feel," which are often connected to Gatsby and his world, share the content of uncertainty. They express skepticism as when Nick objected to Gatsby "I thought you inherited your money"(68). Gatsby himself gives us a strong instance of the deceiving aspect of his world, when he said that Daisy "thought that I knew a lot" (114). One can understand these two sentences to imply that what Daisy and Nick believed, is not what actually was. Gatsby and his world are an

illusion that the innocent idealist Nick (Blissert, 64) and the child Daisy believe in (Baer, 19).

Besides these verbs, the adverbs and adjectives that Fitzgerald employs help present the illusionary aspect of Gatsby's world. There is a "certain" decency in Gatsby's house when Nick visits him. Everything in Gatsby's world is fake to the degree that even the decency in it is not real. The euphemism "certain" suggests that idea. "Possibly," "probably," and "perhaps" (71, 76) also stand for the doubt, the uncertainty of the statements they refer to. Fitzgerald hints at the illusionary aspect of Gatsby's life through these words, but he strongly points it out when he describes Jay's house, mentioning the "ghostly piano, the ghostly laughter, the ghostly heart" that are in the house (69, 72, 112).

Fitzgerald underlines the unreality of Gatsby's world in ascending gradation, in the sense that, from simply making the reader perceive the concept through words such as verbs, adjectives and adverbs, the author names the reality itself. Thus he explains that "none of it was any longer *real*" (69, italics added), mentioning the "vitality of his *illusion*" [italics added] which is so colossal that his *dream* goes beyond Daisy (73). The notion of the dream is reinforced when Daisy wants to get a *cloud* for Gatsby (80). When these two characters are together, the degree of illusion increases; Gatsby's house feels "unreal" and many French words are found, particularly in the passage describing his house, symptomatic of the artificial side of their lives. They wander through "*Marie Antoinette* music rooms and Restoration salons," and they drink some "*Chartreuse*" (69, italics added). Employing two languages in the same passage, English and French, respectively a Germanic and a Roman language, therefore not related, attests to the chaos in Gatsby's world.

Furthermore, through punctuation and syntax, Fitzgerald denies Gatsby's world. The frequent occurrence of ellipses in Gatsby's telephone conversation when Daisy and Nick are at his place makes his hesitation and his desire to hide something evident, as the following paragraph implies:

Yes... I can talk now... I can't talk now, old sport... I said a *small* town ... He must know what a small town is ... well, he's no use to us if Detroit is his idea of a small town... (71)

Gatsby is obviously engaged in some dishonest activities which Nick and Daisy do not know about. So he is trying to expedite the communication because he does not want them to know about his crooked activities. In addition to the ellipses, the quotation marks in Fitzgerald's language signal the narrator's demarcation from what is there enclosed. Daisy is the first "nice" girl Gatsby had ever met, and he did not realize how extraordinary a "nice" girl she could be (113). By putting the word "nice" into quotation marks each time it is applied to Daisy, Nick is ironically expressing his disagreement with the statement. Such is the case when the media describes Wilson as a "madman deranged by grief" (124). This last comment reveals that everything in Gatsby's world is upside down. Amoralism has supplanted morality. The values are corrupted and even Nick, the moral guide in the novel, "from a respectable, venerable Midwestern family" (Blissert, 64), is being corrupted by Gatsby's world, as is insinuated by the language of the novel. His corruption is thematically asserted by his guilty silence that causes Gatsby's death, because had he revealed the true murderer of Myrtle Wilson, Mr. Wilson would not have shot Gatsby dead and he would have been true to his moral line. Nick has been so corrupted by his contact with Gatsby that the novelist talks about them in the same terms. And Jordan Baker tells Nick: "I thought you were rather an honest, straightforward person, but you are not; I thought it was your secret pride, but it is not" (135). What Jordan implies here, is that Nick is a hypocrite who has deceived her by making her believe what he is not, just like Gatsby did to everybody.

Gatsby's world is so negative that it has to disappear. His death and the peculiarity in the language found at the end of novel prompt that fate. The brevity of Nick's conversation with Jordan foresees the end of their relationship, which is an omen of the end of Gatsby's world as well

(118). The irregularities in Mr. Sloane's speech, characterized by incomplete sentences such as — "Be ver'nice" — "Well—think ought to be starting home." — "lots of room." — foreshadow the tragic end of Gatsby (78). Along with this, goes Meyer Wolfsheim's speech that shows a manifest divorce with English grammar:

Dear Mr. Carraway. This has been one of the most terrible shocks of my life *to me* I hardly can believe *it* that it is true at all. (126).

I *saw* him when he *come* into winebrenner's poolroom. He *hadn't eat* anything (130, italic added for irregularities).

These speeches related to Gatsby and his environment are Fitzgerald's ways of prophesizing the end of this amoral world.

Finally, some rhetorical figures of speech deny Gatsby and his world. The juxtaposition of "corruption" and "incorruptible" in the same sentence referring to the same person (117), on the one hand, and of "of course" and "might", on the other hand, in "of course she might have loved him just for a minute, when they were first married" (116), calls for some comment. Gatsby cannot be both corrupted and uncorrupted at the same time, nor is it possible for him to doubt in his certainty, as connoted by "might" and "of course." These antithetical constructions attest to the confusion of his world.

Irony is also a powerful stylistic device in Fitzgerald's linguistic technique to criticize the amoral life of Gatsby. In fact mowing a lawn should make it regular, but Nick mentions his "irregular lawn, well-shaved by Gatsby's gardener." The irony here expressed by the contrast between "well-shaved" and "irregular" underlines that everything Gatsby does is wrong, and should therefore be avoided. We can perceive another instance of irony in the comparison of the "close" distance that separates Gatsby and Daisy with that between the star and the moon, and they feel paradoxically alone in Nick's presence (71).

Euphemism, another figure of speech, is employed by Fitzgerald to contrast amorality and morality in the novel. Nick is, at the beginning of the novel, pure and uncorrupted. The language helps state this when he

euphemistically says "I draw her up again closer this time to my face," meaning he kisses her (61). But when Gatsby's contact corrupts him, he can no longer be partial in his language. He says euphemistically "a thin red circle in the water" to talk about Gatsby's death, which he does not want to admit. Therefore he describes him as if he were still alive whereas he bluntly asserts Wilson's death in "the gardener saw Wilson's body a little way off the grass, and the holocaust was complete" (123).

The last figure of speech that I will mention briefly in my conclusion, which previous stylistic analyses have dealt with thoroughly, is comparison, the two instances of which, simile and metaphor, are manifest in the novel. Metaphors have been extensively dealt with in studies such as Sanders Barbara Gerber's "Structural Imagery in *The Great Gatsby*: Metaphor and Metrix." I will therefore not mention them in my paper for the sake of brevity. As far as simile is concerned, Nick compares Gatsby to a weatherman; the irony of the simile is well understood when we know how "accurate" the predictions of weathermen are (68). This simile, along with Tom's comparing Gatsby with hell (69) suggests that Gatsby is a liar.

To end my analysis, I can easily state that Fitzgerald's writing of *The Great Gatsby* is a strong counter-argument against the critics who wrongfully asserted that his writing does not follow any technique. I hope this study, in addition to the few more which deal with a stylistic analysis of his literary works, helps his genius to be acknowledged. Let me mention as a final proof of Fitzgerald's mastery of language the narration pattern by Nick to characterize the unrealizable quest of Gatsby's trying to catch the past. He starts with the accomplished Gatsby, and in the course of the story, he unravels the making of Gatsby. So, not only does Fitzgerald's meticulous use of language present and condemn the amoral world of Gatsby, but his order of presenting the information participates in the same purpose. Gatsby sprang from nothing (130) and he goes back to nothing as attested by his tragic end. Undoubtedly, Fitzgerald's middle-western origin has had a strong influence on the outcome of *The Great*

Gatsby, in the sense that he presents the West positively at the detriment of the East, manifested in Nick's and Wilson's decisions to go back West for a better and moral life (94), (Barbara 1975: 63).

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