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**DECAY OF MORAL VALUES IN F.S. FITZGERALD'S NOVEL
"THE GREAT GATSBY"**

The 20th century was a period of great trial: world wars, revolutions, tragedies of enormous scale that touched upon thousands of million

people. The First World War is commonly viewed as a major historical break. The USA played a vital role in delivering final victory for the allies. This gave the Americans a feeling of invincibility as industrially and economically they were way ahead of the rest of the world. The developments in industrialization caused decay in moral values. This resulted in materialism's obliteration of the doctrines and rules of moral duties. Literature and its great representatives couldn't stand aside these painful changes in the society. They acutely raised the problems of the post-war society and very subtly depicted the generation going hedonistic searching for pleasure.

F. Scott Fitzgerald was recognized as the ultimate chronicler of the American post-war boom and Jazz era describing extravagant non-stop, alcohol-fuelled party of the Pre-Depression years. In F.S. Fitzgerald's novels the problems of the "lost generation" found its embodiment, they capture the restless, pleasure-hungry, defiant mood of the 1920s. No novelist of his time had better understood the nature of this joy-riding, extravagant and irresponsible society, and the spiritual desperation it represented. "The Great Gatsby" by F. Scott Fitzgerald reflects the American society during this period and clearly portrays the contrast between the traditional and the corrupted values by manifesting the distinct characters' traits, attitudes and habits, their individual patterns of typical lives and thoughts about the others.

The aim of the report is to reveal the problem of moral decadence in F.S. Fitzgerald's novel "The Great Gatsby". The importance of the present study is determined by the fact that the problems of moral degradation are similar to the present epoch and modern generation.

After the First World War as people got away from the traditional life style, their moral considerations were suspended. These changes are illustrated by the personalities, behaviour and life styles of characters in the book. Firstly, these characters are concerned chiefly and only with themselves. As Nick observes Tom and Daisy who have been cruel and vulgar, he explains their attitudes towards others by saying that "they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made" [5: 187]. This criticism points out the fact that selfishness is one of the major traits present in the society. Secondly, although people meet frequently in social events, they lack sincere intimacy. At Gatsby's party, Nick hears the guests milling

around, exchanging rumours about their host but no one seems to know the truth about Gatsby's wealth or personal history. This indicates that although people seem very close, they do not really share anything and are distant.

The various social climbers and ambitious speculators who attend Gatsby's parties evidence the greedy scramble for wealth. Also, Jay Gatsby's need to climb the "social ladder" shows the need of wealth of the individuals in this era. If one reads the passage in which Fitzgerald characterizes Gatsby's house as an "amusement park" [5: 41], it is also said that there are guests that attend without even meeting the host. This shows the need for "new money" people to socialize with others to climb this "social ladder". The clash between "old money" and "new money" manifests itself in the novel's symbolic geography: East Egg represents the established aristocracy, West Egg the self-made rich. Meyer Wolfshiem and Gatsby's fortune symbolize the rise of organized crime and bootlegging.

Old values represent the traditional life style and are based on morality and virtue. Old values give one a sense of right or wrong and obedience to social conventions. For example, Nick, the narrator of the book who lives according to these values says that he is slow thinking and full of interior rules that act as brakes on his desires. Then he observes the people around him and adds that he is "one of the few honest people that he has ever known" [5: 64]. His ideas show that spiritual values such as self-control, honesty and human respect are significant but rare. Secondly, the old life style includes close and warm friendship that depends on respect and love. Gatsby trusts Nick and shares his secrets with him. They establish a genuine friendship. This emphasizes the importance and scarcity of sincere relationships. This way of life is illustrated by the settings of the book. For instance, West Egg, where Nick and Gatsby live, corresponds to the traditional life style. Nick describes this place like: "I lived at West Egg, the-well, the less fashionable of the two. My own house was an eye-sore but it was a small eye-sore and it had been overlooked" [5: 9]. This place is associated with old-fashioned stability, modesty and frugality, concepts that are meaningful according to the old moral code.

The corruption of society is clearly indicated by this secession among people. In addition, suspension of devotion to family comes along with corruption of values. For example, Jay Gatsby was in fact called James Gatz. He changed his name because "his parents were shiftless and

unsuccessful farm people – his imagination had never really accepted them as his parents at all. The truth was that Jay Gatsby, of West Egg, Long Island, sprang from his Platonic conception of himself. He was a son of God” [5: 104]. As it is emphasized in this quote, Jay Gatsby struggles to establish a new life for himself just because his parents are poor and do not fit into the idealistic figure of modern family.

Furthermore, materialism replaces the vanishing values and money promotes to be the only aspiration of the people. The luxury of Tom’s house is described by elaborate decorations such as “the frosted wedding cake of the ceiling”, “wine coloured rug” and an “enormous couch” [5: 12]. This rich decoration shows how important the appearance and money are. The fact that decorations of this house are considered significant and worked on elaborately despite the problematic relationships is a proof of the corruption in the society.

Speaking about the decay of moral values a special attention should be paid to Daisy and Tom Buchanan who are the reflection of “modern” values of that time. At first Daisy is portrayed as a sweet, innocent beauty, as her name suggests. However, Daisy’s character is that of a “vampire”, that is shown by her selfishness, reliance on men, and the way she needs great wealth in her life, as a vampire would need blood. Daisy has never had to concern herself with having to worry about money or material possessions. Daisy had always lived a wealthy, upper-class life, and she had to live that way. When Gatsby first met Daisy in Louisville Gatsby had to lie about his wealth and social status in order for him to win Daisy’s heart. When Gatsby left for the war he knew that he must be rich when he came back if he were to marry Daisy. So Gatsby dedicated his life to making a fortune through unlawful ways in order to “buy” Daisy’s love. Here is a life that mirrors the ideal of the American Dream in the 1920’s.

Her looks, status and “charm” have worked wonders for her. Since such qualities have served her so well, she has mastered the art of deception and manipulation. She is completely in love with luxury and cannot imagine life any other way. Though she promised herself to Gatsby, she sees opportunity with Tom Buchanan. In order for Daisy to get the things she wants, she relies on men. Daisy married Tom because she needed money and an upper-class life style, which Tom could provide her. Daisy did not love Tom, and she was even constantly aware of Tom’s affair with Myrtle, but without Tom she would never be able to get those

two things which are of the utmost importance in her life. Tom has the ability to give her the lifestyle of which she has dreamed. He comes from an aristocratic family and can give her the lifestyle that she is accustomed to. Her parents have given their blessing which makes her decision that much easier.

She has no concept of what it would be like to have to work for anything and, as a result, she feels that she is owed all she receives. The ideas of work or personal responsibility are completely alien to her. On some unconscious level, she may not realize that her actions are self-destructive, but she doesn't have the capacity to even fathom such a thought. In a word, she is dense. Daisy has learned what high society expects from her. She knows exactly how to dress, how to act and what to say in order to maintain appearances. Her innocent air and fragility does not allow her to assume fault for any wrongdoing.

Despite Daisy's appearance, she is a very cold and emotionally numb young woman. Her self-serving nature only serves to reinforce her superficial characteristics. She even casts off her own daughter. Daisy never speaks of the child and acts as though she is an inconvenience. She maintains a firm illusion that she is in control of her situation. Though she is like a puppet whose strings are held by her husband. Whether or not she would readily admit it, she clings to Tom as though he is the air that keeps her alive.

Daisy loves Gatsby but she also loves the monetary lifestyle he represents. Her love for material possessions is evident in several places throughout the text, but is most telling in the part where she and Nick go on a tour to Gatsby's impressive mansion. Surrounded by Gatsby's dazzling wealth, Daisy responds with violent emotions to what she could have had, if only she had waited. When Gatsby shows her his expensive wardrobe of silk shirts, she sheds tears of regret. And, when she sees a picture of young Gatsby aboard on a yacht, she exclaims: "I adore it! ...you never told me you had a pompadour – or a yacht!" [5: 99]. In other words, she would have chosen differently if only she had known the life he could have given her.

Because she admires his superficial qualities the most, Daisy is unable to match Gatsby's affection for her. The same self-serving nature that caused her to forsake him during their youth allows her to betray him once again at the end of the novel. This time, she allows him to make a terrible sacrifice, one that exposes him to serious danger. She lets him

take the blame when she accidentally runs down another person with his car. The act itself was unintentional, but her decision to let Gatsby assume the responsibility shows just how incapable she is of returning his love. She feels no regret or emotion over what has happened.

When Tom's mistress is killed, the audience learns that Daisy is responsible. And, yet, she is more than willing to allow Gatsby to take responsibility for the woman's death. Not once does she even consider the idea of coming forward and clearing his name. She feels no regret or emotion over what has happened. In a warped sort of way, Tom is a type of addiction for Daisy. While she focuses completely on Tom, she has no need to give thought to her own demons.

As for Tom he comes from upper-class family and pretends to be a noble, aristocratic and idealistic representative of the upper-class, but, actually, he is absolutely opposite to the public image he attempts to create. In fact, Tom does not have any purpose in his life and his social position allows him living purposelessly since he does not need to think of earning money, which he has enough. It seems as if he "would drift on forever seeking, a little wistfully, for the dramatic turbulence of some irrecoverable football game" [5: 6]. Tom attempts to receive positive emotions and he believes that he can buy everything with his money. In fact, being a representative of the upper-class he just enjoys the life. He is sure that money can give him everything he wants and such attitude to money overshadows his noble origin and makes him a pragmatic, materialistic person seeking for personal benefits in relationships with other people whom he plays as puppets.

The actions Tom takes in the book are due to him being a conceited and ignorant man. His ignorance is a result of the easy access he has to power and wealth. He feels that because he has wealth and power in society, he is given the acquiescence to be as arrogant and immoral as he so chooses and society cannot do anything about it. Because of this he looks down on people that he feels are lower in the social and financial ladder. An example of this is when Nick is talking to Tom about his accomplice in adultery and Nick says: "Doesn't her (Myrtle Wilson) husband object?" and Tom replies with "Wilson? He thinks she goes to see her sister in New York. He is so dumb; he does not know he is alive" [5: 26]. This indicates that Tom is very cocky and ignorant.

Tom's immoral acts in the novel stem from his overconfidence and ignorance due to his wealth and power. This is further proved by the fact

that when his first and only child was born, he left Daisy without any support only one hour after the birth of their daughter. This is shown in the novel when Daisy says “Well she was less than an hour old and Tom was God knows where” [5: 22].

For most, the birth of a child would be a joyous occasion and a reason for celebration but as for Tom’s case, he had no love for Daisy at that time. If he had love for her, he would not commit a sin and perpetrate adultery with Myrtle Wilson. A man with strong morals would never commit the sin of betraying his spouse and then cause the other person do the same in the process.

Moreover, Tom proves to be immoral even in relationships with his own wife for he has a mistress Myrtle. But he does not really love even his mistress whom he demands a total obedience. Thus, she means nothing for him as well as his own wife. In fact, Tom is a cynic, immoral man.

For instance, he reveals his hypocrisy when he becomes furious when he guesses about close relations between Gatsby and Daisy but, at the same time, he does not do anything to help his wife when she kills Myrtle. In this situation, it would be more natural for a noble and idealist man who loves his wife to act as Gatsby does but Tom demonstrates his indifference to Daisy’s fate. Even though he does not love his wife, Tom uses his wealth as the mean to keep Daisy as his wife, as his toy.

“The Great Gatsby” is a profound social commentary on the corrupt and disillusioning effect that the First World War had on the members of society. F. Scott Fitzgerald describes the 1920’s as an era full of greed, moral corruption and unending social activities. The author does a great job portraying different aspects of life of this time making his work a mirror of society in the modernizing era.

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