

## **New Money Versus Old Money; The Importance of Wealth in Building Relationships in *The Great Gatsby***

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### **1. Introduction**

*The Great Gatsby* is a novel by F. Scott Fitzgerald. It sketches life in the United States in the 1920s. It chronicles the lifestyle of the rich, the dreams of the nouveau riche and the ambitions of the working class through the eyes of a character named Nick Carraway. Nick, who is a Midwesterner, narrates his life and social relationships with other characters such as Jay Gatsby, Daisy Buchanan and Tom Buchanan in Long Island and New York City. The life of the Americans is shown from Nick's perspective after the First World War during the economic expansion in the United States. Hence, *The Great Gatsby* is considered to be a chronicled account of what is known as the Roaring Twenties.

Fitzgerald examines money in the light of the economic boom in America. In his novel, money is divided into two types: new money and old money. New money is the fortune that self-made characters like Gatsby have. Old money encompasses the inherited money owned by Daisy and Tom. Furthermore, talking about money inevitably can be developed into talking about social classes. For example, Tom is a member of the upper class and his fortune and possessions are inherited. On the contrary, Gatsby is a nouveau riche who comes from a modest background and has built his fortune in the land of opportunities. Therefore, Marius Bewley (1959) suggests that Fitzgerald's novels are based on "a concept of class" (Bewley, 1959, p. 260).

The purpose of this paper is to show the role of money in building relationships in *The Great Gatsby* and to discover how far love is contingent on money through analysing characters of Jay Gatsby, Daisy Buchanan and Tom Buchanan. This paper seeks to find out the relationship between love and money or the link between having money and building relationships. Firstly, the historical context of the novel is revisited. For as Jonathan Bate (2010) puts it, literature "at its best is a song of experience" (Bate, 2010, p. 10), a brief account of the Jazz Age is presented to offer a few glimpses of that age and how it is reflected in the novel.

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## 2. The Jazz Age and the Roaring Twenties

It is generally accepted that the context, in which any literary work is written, has a strong influence on the authors and their works. The literature mirrors the era enabling the readers to extract aspects of different walks of life from texts. This also applies to F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* which was first published on 10 April 1925, in a very socially problematic period in the twentieth century after the First World War and the haunting economic depression (Mizener, 1972, p. 68). That era later came to be known as the era of Modernism encompassing two decades from 1910 to 1930 (Faulkner & Jump, 1977, p. 13).

The Jazz Age began nearly after the end of the First World War and lasted until the Great Depression in the years preceding the Second World War. The aforementioned period has been referred to as "The Jazz Age". It is widely believed that Fitzgerald coined the term himself, which signifies the prosperous America in the 1920s (Marcus & Sollors, 2009, p. 577). Describing the Jazz Age, Lan Tran (2009) writes "[it was] an era of previously inconceivable wealth and opportunity in the United States" (Marcus & Sollors, 2009, p. 575).

The Jazz Age was a time when tendency towards an extravagant lifestyle grew bigger to develop to a new phenomenon. Throwing notorious parties in luxurious hotels were in vogue. Invitees would show up to these everybody-is-coming cocktail parties bringing two or more people without being invited in a rather opportunistic manner. For example, Lloyd R. Morris (1951) brings a suite in an opulent hotel into view describing its walls that were covered with paintings of Vermeer and Rembrandt, though the guests rarely conversed about such masterpieces. This novel form of hospitality re-emphasizes these social gatherings' superficiality (Morris, 1951, pp. 297 – 298).

Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* tackles the materialistic values of the society through the characters who cherished accumulating wealth, having lavish balls and heavy drinking. Yet, the author does not refrain from showing a less bright side of the 1920s by illuminating the hardship suffered in the impoverished areas. An instance of prosperity of the American life can be experienced when Nick Carraway talks about Jordan Baker and her frequent travels and gives a very brief account of the famous Palm Beach resort in Florida, which was a favourite destination for the elite to visit, among them were "the Rockefellers, Vanderbilts, Astors, and Carnegies" (Guerty, 2007, p. 3). In contrast to the abovementioned example, however, Phillip M. Guerty (2007) asserts that in the nearby places to the Palm Beach, there were people living a very poor life, struggling to obtain a higher economic status, or at least stay in their current state. Moreover, Guerty adds that even aspects of racial segregation could be observed. Guerty states:

In the early twenties [Florida] underwent an economic boom fueled by rapid population growth, increased agricultural production, and an accompanying housing explosion. By 1926, this growth began to slow as the cycle of speculation, especially in the housing market, ran its course and prices began to fall. The result was a devastating economic collapse which sent the area into a depression. For most people in the area, the late 1920s was not a time of wealth and celebration, but rather poverty and hardship. (Guerty, 2007, p. 3)

Accordingly, the valley of ashes, between West Egg and New York is an instance that represents the hardship and suffering of the poor who live at a small distance away from those who have profligate sleepless parties on a daily basis. The valley of ashes is a desolate area of land that is the abode of paupers and toilers who, due to dust and ashes, can hardly see the rays of light emitting from the sun or from parties of the wealthy people. Hence, Nick Carraway narrates: “This is a 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 (Fitzgerald, 1993, p. 16).”

### **3. New Money versus Old Money**

Fitzgerald in his novel *The Great Gatsby* questions money in the 1920s. The concentration is on a new notion of the American Dream which is the connection between having money and financial profit and success. Liamarie Snyder (2012) suggests that conspicuous consumption has shifted the American dream from working hard, being virtuous and preserving high moral values to materialistic accumulation as an indicator of success. Hence, a number of characters in Fitzgerald’s novel fall for this idea (Snyder, 2012). Money is divided into two categories: new money and old money. As an example, Jay Gatsby portrays the new money. Gatsby, who is a resident of West Egg, made his fortune during the economic expansions of the Roaring Twenties. He is the figure through which Fitzgerald draws the readers’ attention to a new element of the society who are nouveau rich Americans. In contrast, other characters such as Daisy Buchanan, who is the portrayal of the elite, represent the old wealth. In the novel, the aristocratic families live in East Egg, which is the domicile of the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant Americans (Bloom & Hobby, 2009, p. 69). These are the extremely rich people who do not have to work. The ancestors of this subclass have left them a great fortune. Therefore, as Tetsuo Uenishi (2011) suggests they live an idle life and are called the “leisure class” or the “idle class” (Uenishi, 2011, p. 92).

#### **3.1 New Money**

Gatsby is a mysterious entrepreneur whose source of fortune is rather shady. He is willing to regain the love of Daisy Buchanan, whom while in the army falls in love with, but she marries Tom Buchanan, through impressing her with his mansion, his car and his affluent lifestyle. He also thinks that via money he can reshape his past (Samkanashvili, 2013, p. 74). It is believed that the character of Gatsby is used to show the fragility of the American Dream. In order to reach his goals, Gatsby has to reconstruct his identity by changing his real name from James Gatz to Jay Gatsby as the former name alludes to his ethnic background. With the help of his massive fortune, he creates a new personality. He claims that he has studied at Oxford University, therefore speaks an affected British English accent and quite frequently uses the expression “old sport” when addressing people (Bloom & Hobby, 2009, pp. 67 – 68).

He is a nouveau riche who has amassed his fortune illegally during The Prohibition era. He earns a living through partaking in bootlegging and bribery. Thus, he is different from Daisy since she belongs to the “idle class” who does not have to work to make money (Bloom & Hobby, 2009, p. 69). This self-made newly-rich identity will not be able to join the inherited old wealth of Tom and Daisy Buchanan. The difference is not only hypothetical, but physical elements of this distinction can be observed in the location

of their dwellings as well for the old wealth is located in the East Egg, whilst the new money is situated in the West Egg (Bloom & Hobby, 2009, p. 69).

Besides, Gatsby realizes that Daisy belongs to a different class, therefore he tries to refashion his identity by changing his “ethnic-sounding” name to Jay Gatsby. Yet, what Gatsby is not aware of is that inheritance has a great role in creating identity, since on Long Island anything can be bought except the inherited grace and elegance of the upper class (Bloom & Hobby, 2009, pp. 68 – 69). As he sketches Gatsby’s manners and his dubious background, Nick Carraway refers to the origin of Gatsby as having emerged from “the swamps of Louisiana or from the lower East Side of New York” (Fitzgerald, 1993, p. 32). Creating a new identity may have been due to the fear of being rejected as a member of the upper class, since arrogant members of the aristocracy, for example the likes of Tom Buchanan, are openly racist (Bloom & Hobby, 2009, p. 70). Henceforth, the distinction between the two communities in East Egg and West Egg is made clear through the respective inhabitants, as Lan Tran (2009) suggests “Jay Gatsby is rich, [but] he is far from royal. And for that reason he, along with the rest of the less pedigreed West Egg community, is tolerated by the blue blood East Egg residents, like foreign labor when it can of service” (Marcus & Sollors, 2009, p. 576). Accordingly, Tran asserts that the reaction of the aristocracy towards Gatsby represents the hostility of the upper class against the foreigners. Tran confirms the separation which is made in the novel between East Egg and West Egg notifies the distinction between the old money and the new money (Marcus & Sollors, 2009, p. 577).

With a forged identity based on money, Gatsby tries to impress Daisy in order to rekindle his love in her heart. When Nick Carraway invites Daisy, in accordance to Gatsby’s request, Gatsby bids them to his house, as an attempt to show Daisy his wealth and possessions. Nick narrates that Gatsby said “I’d like to show her around” (Fitzgerald, 1993, p. 57). In this fashion, Gatsby endeavours to restructure his relationships with Daisy as he realizes that “her voice is full of money” (Fitzgerald, 1993, p. 76). So, he uses money as a device that would empower him to retrieve his beloved. Fortune for Gatsby is an instrument which could be used to make the dreams come true (Samkanashvili, 2013, p. 74). Furthermore, Gatsby employs another way of exhibiting his fortune by opening two hulking patent cabinets to show and throw before Daisy his sheer linen and thick silk shirts. By throwing his expensive shirts before Daisy, he powerlessly beseeches her approval that Gatsby has gained the status which enables him to claim back Daisy’s love, a status he has wished to reach for quite a long time (Morgan, 1984, p. 169).

Although both Gatsby and Daisy are rich, they belong to two different worlds. The difference stems from the dissimilarity of their respective sources of money and possessions. Gatsby wants Daisy’s love back, but he has not evaluated the impact of the collision between the supercilious old wealth and superficial new money. Therefore, as Tanfer Emin Tunc (2009) accentuates although Gatsby wears bright colourful clothes and drives an expensive Rolls Royce flamboyantly, he will never be able to possess Daisy Buchanan’s hereditary old-wealth taste. Thus, Gatsby can never grasp the real affluence of the aristocracy and Daisy remains a dream to him because despite all of “their obvious wealth, the nouveau riche are imposters—cheap materialistic imitations of the American Dream” (Bloom & Hobby, 2009, pp. 69 – 70). Gatsby as Scott Donaldson and Ann Massa (1978) suggest is the most prominent twentieth-century dreamer. However, Daisy is a dream that cannot come true for a “dream dreamed, not the dream materialised becomes the best reality” (Donaldson & Massa, 1978, pp. 112 – 113).

### 3.2 Old Money

Daisy is a beauty that represents the old money. She is the object of Jay Gatsby's affection. She is a self-centred woman who marries Tom Buchanan and rejects Jay Gatsby because the latter was poor at the time. With her "voice [which] is full of money", she is the muse that inspires young men, who are socially inferior to her, to become rich (Morgan, 1984, p. 175). However, in contrast to her inspiring voice, when attending social gatherings that are held by the nouveau riche, she becomes rather dismayed. For example, When Daisy is invited to one of Gatsby's sumptuous parties; she is appalled by the people partying there. Her reaction signifies that even though certain aspects of her character can motivate young men to become rich, they can never be a part of the upper crust of the society. Therefore, Daisy's dismay at the party is the portrayal of her knowledge that she belongs to a class that is incongruous with to where Gatsby belongs (Uenishi, 2011, p. 96).

Gatsby already knows that "[Daisy's] voice is full of money", but what he does not realize is that money and true status are not two sides of the same coin. Daisy comes from money and has a true status which has germinated from the opulence of the old wealth, whilst he accumulates money as a nouveau riche (Morgan, 1984, pp. 170 – 175). Yet, Daisy marries wealthy Tom Buchanan, a member of the upper class as well, because she thinks that money can protect her. Her desire for a stable and secure life leads her to this marriage. Daisy's social class has a strong influence on her decision making abilities since she is expected to take the code of conduct of the upper class into account. Therefore, in Gatsby's absence during the First World War, she marries Tom since she "wanted her life shaped now, immediately — and the decision must be made by some force — of love, of money, of unquestionable practicality — that was close at hand" (Fitzgerald, 1993, p. 96). In addition, after her marriage, she is still required to adhere to the upper class and its code when building relationships. So, the relationships between Daisy and Gatsby is socially inharmonious, since Gatsby's attitude and behaviour are incompatible with the class that to which his paramour belongs and he is the object of ridicule of the upper class with pink suit, his mansion and his parties (Chase, 1958, p. 166).

Similarly, Tom Buchanan is an icon of the old wealth. He is Daisy's husband and has an affair with Myrtle Wilson. He inhabits the East Egg and lives in a modest house, in comparison to Gatsby's mansion. Through his character the corrupt and futile life of the American rich is shown. The failure of Tom and Daisy's marriage can be seen as the failure of the civilized way of life which is characterized through the matrimonial life of the upper class (Gray, 1983, p. 154). For instance, on the one hand, Tom cheats on Daisy while they are still honeymooners and later rather publicly builds an extramarital affair with Myrtle Wilson. On the other hand, Daisy covers her husband's cheating, which indicates her continual adherence to the code of conduct of the aristocracy (Bloom & Hobby, 2009, pp. 73 – 74).

Tom's character is an amalgamation of physical strength and wealth. He builds his relationships upon this combination of powerful physique and high financial status. He marries Daisy as he can provide her with a stable and secure life. Thus, their marriage is conditional on the money and the provision of a changeless lifestyle (Uenishi, 2011, p. 98). Moreover, with respect to Myrtle Wilson, Tom employs the same method of depending on money to win Myrtle's heart. Myrtle is a materialistic woman who lives in "the valley of ashes". She is fascinated by the glitter of the old wealth. Similar to Gatsby, she tries to dispose of the traces of her working-class origins by imitating the manners of the upper class. Having read her mind,



Tom realizes that she admires to ascend to a higher status through having an affair with a blue-blooded individual; he takes advantage of her aspiration. Tom pampers Myrtle and buys her a flat in New York City for their romantic trysts (Bloom & Hobby, 2009, pp. 75 – 76).

#### 4. Conclusion

It can be concluded that building relationships is dependent on having money in *The Great Gatsby*. Characters employ methods such as accumulating a great fortune, targeting a materialistic goal or taking advantage of financial inferiority of other characters when establishing relationships. Based on the analysis of three major characters, namely Jay Gatsby, Daisy Buchanan and Tom Buchanan, the employment of these methods differ according to the social class of the character.

Jay Gatsby builds a great fortune in an effort to re-establish an old relationship which was once rejected due to his poverty. Daisy, Gatsby's target of affection, is a member of the "idle class"; she targets a materialistic goal for marriage. She believes that a secure and stable materialistic life can be found among the upper class. Thus, Gatsby, a nouveau riche, cannot safeguard her life since he cannot buy the real opulence and the true social status of the elite. Therefore, Daisy marries Tom who is socially parallel to her status. In addition, Tom exploits the social and financial inferiority of Myrtle to win her heart, as he knows that she wishes to do away with her working-class origins by being the mistress of a member of the aristocracy. In short, having money plays a crucial part in establishing relationships in *The Great Gatsby*.

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