100 years of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*

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April marked the 100th anniversary of the publication of F. Scott Fitzgerald's third novel, *The Great Gatsby*, one of the outstanding contributions to American and world literature. The novel has sold nearly 21 million copies since it was published and steadily sells about 500,000 copies a year. It has been made into or influenced at least seven films. It is part of countless high-school and college curriculums in the United States, and the reader who is not moved by it is rare.

After a century, Fitzgerald's characters may seem far away, formal and even highly mannered. His people belong to a distinct period and place in history, the booming American 1920s, often called the Jazz Age. A barrier exists between us and this period, produced by ten decades that have been filled with momentous events, social triumphs and horrors, vast technological changes and other earthshaking developments.

Perhaps the biggest adjustment for the modern reader is that Fitzgerald shows us, we who live in the age of the decline and putrefaction of American imperialism, scenes from the period of its rise and self-confidence.

Nevertheless, the dilemmas and feelings of Fitzgerald's characters are contemporary, beset by the social divisions that Fitzgerald depicts so precisely. The novel inescapably points to the corruption and disease at the heart of bourgeois American life, aspiration and self-delusion.

Considering what it is that accounts for *Gatsby*'s continuing popularity and resonance is perhaps another way of asking: which aspects of Fitzgerald's view of American society a century ago have proven objectively true, enduring and indelible? Did he not grasp, in fact, at a time when US dominance was becoming a fact of life, that American capitalism was rotten and criminal, that the "party was [already] over," to borrow a phrase from the novel's final pages?

Moreover, a work's ability to raise and convey universal concerns even as it treats the concrete here and now is the mark of artistic greatness. As novelist John Dos Passos, a contemporary of Fitzgerald, remarked 20 years after *Gatsby*'s publication: "It's the quality of detaching itself from its period while embodying its period that marks a piece of work as good."

Connected to this is the stunning beauty of Fitzgerald's writing. His figurative language is often poetic, and supplies insight and even revelation about the physical, historical and emotional world in a few words or brilliant images.

The book is narrated by Nick Carraway, an upper-middle class bond trader whose cousin, Daisy, is married to an extremely rich brute named Tom Buchanan, a former classmate of Nick's at Yale. Nick moves to the fictitious Long Island (New York) village of West Egg, next to the ruling-class enclave of East Egg, where his neighbor is Jay Gatsby, a fabulously wealthy giver of splendid parties, a man who never wears the same shirt twice and who lays claim to everything and everyone he wants, including Daisy.

Gatsby uses Nick toward this end, and Nick comes to know him and is ultimately both intrigued and repulsed. Gatsby has rewritten his own life and has become rich through his connections to the criminal underworld. In the end, Gatsby's selfishness—along with Daisy's and Tom's, and perhaps even Nick's—leads to the deaths of three people and the crushing of the illusions Nick has about the high life he encounters.

What infuses the novel is a general sense that the lives of the very affluent are far removed from everyone else's, that the rich use up what they want without regard for other people and that what is glittering and golden is acquired at the expense of the suffering of those forced to inhabit a grey, barren world of ash.

The ash motif is quite literal. Nick enters into the East Egg world by showing the elegance and poise of Daisy and her friend Jordan, a professional golfer who becomes his love interest for a while. The elegance is counterposed to the racist ignorance and vulgarity of Tom, Daisy's mate.

But Tom's moral depravity leads us to the Valley of the Ashes, an area of Long Island now part of Queens, where a century ago vast quantities of ash and waste were dumped. In Fitzgerald, the area acquires symbolic importance—it lies between the elite enclaves of Manhattan and East Egg, and those commuting by car or train must pass through the ash mountains.

> About halfway between West Egg and New York [–writes Fitzgerald–] the motor road hastily joins the railroad and runs beside it for a quarter of a mile, so as to shrink away from a certain desolate area of land. 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 men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air.

Tom Buchanan's mistress, Myrtle, the wife of an auto repair shop owner, officially resides here. Before we even meet Gatsby and see his parties, however, Myrtle hosts a much more modest party in the Manhattan apartment in which Tom has set her up. This is a gloomy, dispiriting affair. It ends in drunkenness and Tom breaking someone's nose.

The scene prefigures the infinitely more lavish weekly parties that Gatsby hosts. These sequences are some of the most justly famous in American literature. Fitzgerald writes with the utmost economy. There are actually only two full scenes representing these orgiastic gatherings, and a third recounted by Nick, but they bring to life the ruling class figures and their mores: the obsequiousness of the hangers-on toward big money, the disregard of the rich for their social inferiors.

> The lights grow brighter as the earth lurches away from the sun, and now the orchestra is playing yellow cocktail music, and the

> opera of voices pitches a key higher. Laughter is easier minute by minute, spilled with prodigality, tipped out at a cheerful word. The groups change more swiftly, swell with new arrivals, dissolve and form in the same breath; already there are wanderers, confident girls who weave here and there among the stouter and more stable, become for a sharp, joyous moment the centre of a group, and then, excited with triumph, glide on through the sea-change of faces and voices and color under the constantly changing light.

This calls to mind the balls in Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, which show another aristocracy and its concerns before the disasters of war, one with convention and elegance, absent here in Gatsby's parties. The atmosphere here suggests a crude imperial power after a victory in a war, a victory that is neither permanent nor satisfying.

It is all a fraud to prop up other frauds in Gatsby's life. People gossip about the source of Gatsby's money, and who he really might be. Nick discovers that his wealth has been acquired illegally and that the story Gatsby tells about his life is a lie. The parties, we come to understand, are essentially a maneuver. Gatsby's parties and his mansion, even his wealth, are aimed at acquiring the one thing he does not have: Daisy. In his effort to capture her, he has given himself a fake past, a new name and a false present.

Daisy, miserable with Tom and almost entirely self-involved, acquiesces for a while. When she accidentally and fatally strikes Myrtle while at the wheel of a car in the Valley of Ashes, Gatsby covers it up for her, and in the end Myrtle's husband murders Gatsby and kills himself.

The verdict of Nick, and doubtlessly of Fitzgerald, comes in the famed lines toward the end of the novel:

> It was all very careless and confused. They were careless people, Tom and Daisy—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.

As with all art, this emerges from something in the real world, a deeply felt sense and a studied analysis of life. All of these things seem to have been at work in Fitzgerald in 1924 when he wrote the book while he was in France.

Fitzgerald (born 1896), from a middle-class family in St. Paul, Minnesota, was educated alongside children from wealthier families, and seems to have developed an envy that propelled him to "succeed." He attended Princeton and then enlisted in the military when the First World War broke out. He never saw service, to his chagrin, but published his first novel in 1920, *This Side of Paradise*, about a student and his rebellion against the values of his time. The book includes a notable scene in which his protagonist, Amory Blaine, defends the 1917 October Revolution and rejects bourgeois commonplaces about human nature.

> [Amory:] "For years people have been stalled off with promises. Socialism may not be progress, but the threat of the red flag is certainly the inspiring force of all reform. You've got to be sensational to get attention."
> "Russia is your example of a beneficent violence, I suppose?"
> "Quite possibly," admitted Amory. "Of course, it's overflowing just as the French Revolution did, but I've no doubt that it's really a great experiment and well worthwhile."

Gatsby was published in a period of political, economic and cultural upheaval. The United States intervened in the war in Europe in 1917, after the slaughter had exhausted that continent for almost three years. Millions died in the trenches, as the nation-state system of decaying capitalism tore itself apart, and the peoples of the belligerent countries ultimately sought a way out through revolt.

The Russian masses tossed aside Tsar Nicholas II in March 1917, one month before the US began committing troops to the side of Allied imperialism, and then they overthrew capitalism altogether in October of that year under the Bolshevik leadership of Lenin and Trotsky.

In the year 1919, whose feeling Fitzgerald captures in his story, "May Day," revolution convulsed Germany, Hungary and Italy, with mass strikes also erupting in Britain. North America too saw an upsurge in the class struggle, in the form of railroad strikes, battles in the coalfields, a steel strike and general strikes in Seattle and Winnipeg. The US government thereupon launched a "red scare" counter-offensive, and deported immigrants and raided the young Communist movement.

American capitalism was able to stabilize the postwar setup, at least temporarily. In the US, a marked shift in social life took place. For sections of the middle classes and the very wealthy, the strife of 1919 was followed by the boom times of the 1920s, when money came rolling in from the stock market and other investments.

These were times of sharp cultural shifts. New technologies like radio, commercial airflight and the vast expansion of the film industry emerged, as well as changes in moral views. The establishment still banned books (James Joyce's *Ulysses* in 1922, for example), but the old Victorian prudery and American provincialism began to give way in the face of countless new realities.

Most of all, official American society enjoyed its new world position, even as the Soviet Republic fought off all enemies and great social struggles continued to brew in Europe. To a great extent, as with the characters in *The Great Gatsby*, US capitalism at its pinnacle of success deluded itself.

Fitzgerald came of artistic age in this period, experiencing the day-to-day realities of American life but always aware of the Russian Revolution, which hung over social, political and intellectual life. His first book made him rich, and his short stories kept a tidy income rolling in, at least for a while. He lived in Manhattan, in Great Neck, Long Island, the suburb on which East Egg is based, and then in Paris and on the French Riviera, where much of Fitzgerald's *Tender is the Night* (1934) is set, where Americans had more money than anyone else and hobnobbed with the upper echelons of several nationalities.

"Bolshevism" was not merely a foreign reality. Fitzgerald lived in a society in which the working class socialist movement posed its challenge to society generally, including artists. The writers of the generation before him, including Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, Sinclair Lewis and Upton Sinclair, had all embraced a critical realism, following upon the vast changes in American society after the Civil War. As the critic Alfred Kazin commented in 1940, it was a literature characterized by "our writers' absorption in every last detail of their American world together with their deep and subtle alienation from it."

Fitzgerald's own postwar cohort, often termed The Lost Generation, which included writers Ernest Hemingway, Dos Passos and Gertrude Stein and poets E. E. Cummings and Hart Crane, reflected the uncertainty of the times, the unstable "new world order" after the Versailles Treaty of 1919, but it was largely based on this realist tradition, whose authors they learned from and often knew well.

Numerous artistic figures influenced Fitzgerald's generation, including Joseph Conrad, Anton Chekhov and Tolstoy. Other contemporaries were at work redefining the novel, such as Joyce and Virginia Woolf, and the sensibilities of poetry, including T. S. Eliot (an admirer of *The Great Gatsby*), Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams. Fitzgerald knew them

all and read them all. His own critical sense was guided by his friend and former classmate, the literary critic Edmund Wilson, who later wrote, among other significant works, *To the Finland Station* (1940), a history of socialist thought that Fitzgerald read shortly before his death. Marxism was a powerful current and presence in intellectual circles, and a thoughtful writer could scarcely avoid it.

Out of his own experiences, Fitzgerald, as Kazin noted, "came to hate the rich," but this was not simply visceral or uninformed. As Kazin says, "when his daughter complained of some school jealousy or exclusion which humiliated her … he advised her to read the chapter on "The Working Day" in [Marx's] *Das Kapital* … 'And see if you are ever quite the same.'"

Fitzgerald produced only one complete novel after Gatsby, *Tender is the Night*, many more stories and one half-finished novel published after his death, *The Last Tycoon*, an astute commentary on Hollywood, where he went to work out of economic necessity in the 1930s.

According to Scott Donaldson's *Fitzgerald and Hemingway, Works and Days*, "during 1932 through 1935 he [Fitzgerald] was considering joining the party [Communist Party]." Various issues "militated against his taking such a step," writes Donaldson, but the latter does not include the Stalinist degeneration of the USSR among them. In fact, Fitzgerald paid considerable attention to events in the Soviet Union, and sought out "influential non-Stalinist Marxists," including V.F. Calverton, who at that stage of his career, in the early 1930s, opened the pages of his *Modern Monthly* magazine to Trotskyist sympathizers.

Fitzgerald's companion Sheilah Graham rejected the notion that he adored the rich, insisting "he was always so vehemently on the side of the poor and oppressed. He detested people like Barbara Hutton, Woolworth Donahue [members of the fabulously wealthy Woolworth clan], and especially business tycoons. 'I don't know any businessman I'd want to meet in the next world—if there is a next world,' said Scott."

Fitzgerald died at the age of 44 in 1940. His alcoholism played a role in destroying him, but the ongoing Depression, the advent of a new war and almost certainly the fate of the Russian Revolution also played roles in his decline. He wrote in *Tender is the Night* about a servant who shouts at her employers "with the voice of the Commune."

The Great Gatsby stands next to the great works of the year 1925: Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*, Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, Franz Kafka's *The Trial*.

At a time when American capitalism, as it were, was only coming into its own as an international power, the best American writers like Dreiser and Fitzgerald recognized that the system was already morally dead, stillborn. They grasped or intuited that American capitalism had no glorious, honest, legitimate future. In the final pages of *Gatsby*, Fitzgerald makes clear that the promise of America, such as it was, lies in the past. What he writes about Gatsby is clearly meant to have wider application:

> He had come a long way to this blue lawn, and his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night.

Truly, as Fitzgerald also writes, about a visitor who arrives for one of Gatsby's events long after their host was dead, "it was some final guest who … didn't know that the party was over."

Gatsby retains its sting. An article published in 2019 observed that, according "to the American Library Association, *The Great Gatsby* tops the list of books that have been challenged or faced potential bans over the years." Many groups—particularly religious organizations—"have objected to the language, violence, and sexual references." However, what truly disturbs the novel's right-wing critics and would-be censors is that the novel "portrayed the American dream in a negative light by describing a man who—even after attaining great wealth and fame—lacks happiness. It shows that wealth and fame can lead to some of the worst outcomes imaginable, which is something a capitalist nation doesn't want to see happen." (thoughtco.com)

Students in college and high school, workers and youth—we all need *The Great Gatsby*. Artists themselves, stuck in the morass of identity politics in an age of official historical falsification, need it as well. It is not a work subject to a single interpretation, but it does show the rich for what they are, for what they necessarily are under the system that has created and elevated them, and the consequences of relying or playing up to them.

As Fitzgerald wrote a few months after the publication of the novel, in one of his finest short stories, "The Rich Boy":

> Let me tell you about the very rich. They are different from you and me. They possess and enjoy early, and it does something to them, makes them soft where we are hard, and cynical where we are trustful, in a way that, unless you were born rich, it is very difficult to understand. They think, deep in their hearts, that they are better than we are because we had to discover the compensations and refuges of life for ourselves. Even when they enter deep into our world or sink below us, they still think that they are different.