

## **REREADING THE GREAT GATSBY IN THE POST PANDEMIC WORLD: HOPE, DISILLUSIONMENT AND SOCIAL CHANGES THEN AND NOW**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Published in 1925, the novel *The Great Gatsby* was considered to be a failure initially and viewed as one of the greatest works in American literature presently. The novel, inspired by a relationship between F. Scott Fitzgerald and a young socialite, captured the spirit of the Jazz Age, the wild and glittering parties common in the elite society of the time and the spirit of the roaring twenties, a decade which was marked by the end of the Spanish flu pandemic and the World War 1. World War 1 killed millions, both soldiers in combat and civilians. The Spanish Flu pandemic death toll was even higher – an estimated number of between 20 up to 50 million people, most of them young and healthy, died after contracting the virus. The novel depicts the restlessness of the generation of people who survived two cataclysmic events, the society grappled by profound changes and the disappointment and disillusionment in the American Dream. The article was written in June 2021, during the summer when most countries joyously greeted the ease of COVID-19 restrictive measures and the rise of hope after vaccination rollouts started in many countries. As we reread *The Great Gatsby*, we might ask ourselves about the future of our post-pandemic world. Will we learn something from the past? Can we expect the roaring 2020s? Will we see the same joy, the same recklessness and the *carpe diem* of the roaring 1920s? Will we return to the pre-pandemic normal – the consumerism, the lack of consideration for the environment, the greediness which brought us here to begin with?

**Key words:** The Great Gatsby, historical context, war, pandemic, hope, consumerism American dream, disillusionment.

### **1. INTRODUCTION: HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND SOCIAL CHANGES UNDERPINNING THE WORLD DEPICTED IN *THE GREAT GATSBY* – *THE WORLD WAR 1 AND THE SPANISH FLU***

When published in 1925, the novel *The Great Gatsby* was not an immediate success. In fact, it was received with mixed reviews. During Fitzgerald's life, it was printed additionally once again, although the initial 20000 copies were selling slowly. The novel was rediscovered a few years later and became very popular during the upcoming decades.

Set in the summer of 1922 and the Jazz Age, the novel *The Great Gatsby* depicts a society recuperating from a series of devastating events. World War 1 - the Great War- shattered the lives of many and disillusioned the most. The carnage and the brutality of the war were unprecedented and it marked the

beginning of similar conflicts during the twentieth century. It determined the era and the lives of the people in many different ways, including the economy, the society and the traditional values and norms. Shattered from the war, the human kind faced a new calamity. The Spanish Flu outbreak started in 1918, almost simultaneously in USA, Europe and some parts of Asia. It quickly spread through the world. Already weakened by the years of war, with no efficient medications and non-existent vaccines, the human kind confronted the one of the deadliest pandemics in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The H1N1 virus killed an estimated minimum of 50 million worldwide and around 675000 in USA (Jordan, D., 2019).

The novel *The Great Gatsby* emerged after these two events. Oddly enough, F.S. Fitzgerald refers infrequently to these events: the war is mentioned only several times in the novel and the pandemic is not mentioned explicitly at all. We have to take into account the fact that the novel is well-known for describing an period in American history that has two names: one is *The Roaring Twenties*, *The Jazz Age*- both having embedded meaning of boisterous, exuberant time period. However, the atmosphere of glamour, excess and incessant partying emerges merely two years after the gloom of the third wave of Spanish Flu in the USA, which killed thousands and prompted the authorities to place signs on houses' doors to indicate that entire families living there are stricken with flu. Still, the allusions to the past that the author uses give the novel almost a dream like quality.

Regarding the history in *The Great Gatsby*, Rohrkemper (1985) states the following: "More than anything else, it is Fitzgerald's use of historical allusion which gives *The Great Gatsby* its delicate weight, its buoyant profundity, and this seems to be precisely what many of the first readers of the novel missed". In the aftermath of the World War 1, profound changes could be noticed in the society and the economy. A wave of various migration patterns could be noticed within the societies of European countries as well as USA.

Bessel (2017) discusses the post war society in USA and the Immigration Act from 1924, stating the following: "The restrictions introduced during the first year of the Harding Administration and then the 1924 US Immigration Act<sup>1</sup>, were part of a global trend towards strict border and passport controls, a new postwar regime that left hundreds of thousands of people – refugees and stateless persons – without a national citizenship." Movements from rural to urban areas, in search of employment, became well established practice. Even *The Great Gatsby* narrator, Nick Carraway, describes his move from his home town to New York: "Instead of being the warm center of the world the middle-west now seemed like the ragged edge of the universe—so I decided to go east and learn the bond business" (*The Great Gatsby*, p1.)

The economy recuperating in the aftermath of the war meant that the living standard started to rise. People in USA started to seek the American Dream. Women gained a very different position the society, in contrast to the Victorian era. Women obtained their right to vote and to be present in the political scene and governing bodies. Even the fashion, especially for women's clothing, has changed extremely, marking a beginning of an era. The long dresses and tight corsets of the Victorian era, gave their way to the flapper skirts and short bob. It became accepted for women to wear makeup, drive or smoke, participate freely in social activities without conforming to the norms of the previous century.

## **2. HOPE AND THE AMERICAN DREAM**

The twenties of the twentieth century represented the time when a new generation emerged and when new fashions, music and dancing were seen and heard for the first time. At the same time, electricity and technological advances brought a profound change in the society and everyday living.

A theme that constantly reoccurs in the novel is the American Dream and the constant hope for the better. The novel, in its core, presents the remarkable story of a boy who grew up in utter poverty and who built himself up to fantastic wealth, for one purpose only—to fit in the society which would be fitting for Daisy. Gatsby's hope is symbolically presented by the green light—the signal at the end of the dock in front of Daisy's house. Gatsby is reaching for the green light as if he wants to touch the rays. Even in the first description of him, we can sense the futility of chasing the hope and the American Dream.

But I didn't call to him for he gave a sudden intimation that he was content to be alone—he stretched out his arms toward the dark water in a curious way, and far as I was from him I could have sworn he was trembling. Involuntarily I glanced seaward—and distinguished nothing except a single green light, minute and far away, that might have been the end of a dock. When I looked once more for Gatsby he had vanished, and I was alone again in the unquiet darkness.

*(The Great Gatsby, p.16)*

In the last chapter of the novel, Nick reanalyzes Gatsby's capacity for hope and his dreams again, concluding that Gatsby's dream was over even before he had reached it:

And as I sat there brooding on the old, unknown world, I thought of Gatsby's wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of Daisy's dock. 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.

*(The Great Gatsby, p.115)*

Similarly, to Jay Gatsby, Americans and much of the world today, chase a dream of financial security and career success – something that many can reach only by sacrifice and hard work.

### **3. CONSUMERISM AND MATERIALISM IN THE GREAT GATSBY**

One of Fitzgerald's most prominent insights about the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the core of the novel is the consumerism, a phenomenon emerging in the society which persists to this day. The rise of consumerism, emerging of a leisure class similar to the celebrities and social media influencers of the present day, presents the new social order. In the introduction of the Wordsworth Classics edition of the novel, Guy Reynolds (2001, xii) states the following:

The Great Gatsby, with its set-piece parties, its shopping trips and dry notation of prices (Daisy's wedding pearls cost \$ 350000), its references to golf, cinema and jazz, is one of the major fictions about the leisure class. Fitzgerald takes leisure absolutely seriously, and lavishes on his subject all the analytical intelligence that a Victorian novelist would have brought to topics such as religious nonconformity or the rising middle classes. He takes leisure seriously because it represents a monumental theme: the diminution and eventual corruption of American idealism and the American Dream.

Although *The Great Gatsby* can be defined as a love story, the materialistic aspects and consumerism are dominating the novel. In fact, every moment we witness love in the novel, is shaped and colored by material things and desires which are not necessarily connected with love. Gatsby, before reconnecting with Daisy, plans their reunion and hopes that they will be together again, but his dream is not void of materialistic components. He is involved in bootlegging and dubious financial deals, with one aim only-

to meet Daisy again, after five years, during one of his parties in his lavish home and to impress her with his wealth.

Nick Carraway describes Gatsby's hope: "He had waited five years and bought a mansion where he dispensed starlight to casual moths so that he could 'come over' some afternoon to a stranger's garden." (*The Great Gatsby*, p.51).

Later on, as they rekindle their relationship, he continues with his efforts to impress her with the things that he can afford for himself and for her as well.

He took out a pile of shirts and began throwing them, one by one before us, shirts of sheer linen and thick silk and fine flannel which lost their folds as they fell and covered the table in many-colored disarray. While we admired he brought more and the soft rich heap mounted higher—shirts with stripes and scrolls and plaids in coral and apple-green and lavender and faint orange with monograms of Indian blue...

(*The Great Gatsby*, p.59)

The pile of beautiful shirts does make an impression on Daisy. The superficiality of the consumerism society and Daisy's materialistic side are clear when she says, crying. 'They're such beautiful shirts,' she sobbed, her voice muffled in the thick folds. 'It makes me sad because I've never seen such—such beautiful shirts before.'" (*The Great Gatsby*, p.59). The reader cannot justify, but perhaps can understand this feeling and focus on the material things, coming from a woman who based her entire life on the premises that a marriage is defined as successful if it is supported by wealth and financial stability.

#### **4. DISAPPOINTMENT AND DISILLUSIONMENT IN *THE GREAT GATSBY***

One of the timeless themes in *The Great Gatsby*, which we can relate to in our still-ongoing pandemic world, is the disappointment and disillusionment in relationships and people who we love and trust. Disappointment is rare on the first pages of the novel and omnipresent later, especially in the last chapter, although the reader can identify those emotions even in the most exuberant moments depicted in the novel.

The reader sense and identify Gatsby's disappointment in Daisy and his disillusionment after their relationship is renewed. Although at the beginning of their relationship, Gatsby seems to be convinced that Daisy will erase the past and commit to the relationship fully, he seems to be forgetting that Daisy is the same girl who decided to move forward and to marry another man. Gradually, he becomes aware that happiness is unattainable and that Daisy cannot meet his high expectations and dreams. The reader, through Nick's eyes, can see the plain truth which Gatsby cannot, at least not immediately: that his relationship is destined for an unhappy ending. Nick describes one of the moments when Gatsby comes to the realization that his happiness won't last:

As I went over to say goodbye I saw that the expression of bewilderment had come back into Gatsby's face, as though a faint doubt had occurred to him as to the quality of his present happiness. Almost five years! There must have been moments even that afternoon when Daisy tumbled short of his dreams—not through her own fault but because of the colossal vitality of his illusion. It had gone beyond her, beyond everything.

(*The Great Gatsby*, p.61)

Nick Carraway is also disillusioned. He is disappointed in the futility of the American dream, the ideas coming from his upbringing and the expectations he had from the Buchanans, Daisy especially.

The last chapter in the novel depicts Nick's disappointment in his cousin and her husband. The accidental meeting with Tom Buchanan, months after Gatsby's death, reveals to Nick that Gatsby's killer, Mr. Willson, was misled by Tom to believe that Gatsby was his wife's lover and the man behind the wheel of the car which killed her. Nick sees, clearly, that Tom does not feel any remorse or guilt for his role in Gatsby's death. In Tom's eyes, Gatsby is the man who tried to destroy his false, but convenient world.

Nick is aware that Daisy had her role in the cover-up of the truth as well- since she never admitted that she caused the accident. Both of them decide to shelter their way of life, their pampered security and their convenient marriage, even though the other two people, their lovers, lost their lives. They abandon East Egg with easiness, which Nick describes as a physical action of smashing up, after destroying lives.

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... (p.114)

Perhaps Nick's worst disillusionment comes at the moment of Gatsby's funeral and his realization that he is among the rare people who attend it, in contrast to the glamorous parties when hundreds of revelers gathered in Gatsby's house. The utter disappointment he feels is illustrated at the end of the novel. Nick Carraway states the following about Gatsby's hope and the American Dream:

Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter—tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther.... And one fine morning——

(*The Great Gatsby*, p. 115)

## 5. REREADING THE GREAT GATSBY IN THE POST-COVID 19 WORLD

This article was written and completed during the period of June and July in 2021. It was written during the period when most countries, The Republic of North Macedonia included, encountered a significant ease of restrictive measures against COVID-19 and the rise of hope or at least anticipation that the life will be returning to normal after vaccination rollouts started in many countries.

In this setting, it was appealing and challenging at the same time to reread the novel *The Great Gatsby*. There are so many similarities between our present world and the one described in the novel, from exactly a century ago.

The last line of the novel *The Great Gatsby's* (p. 115) reads as follows: "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past. The ending of the novel certainly does not provide any hope for the future. It is an ending where the author suggests that we are not learning from our experiences or mistakes, changing or growing when necessary.

Perhaps the events and the context depicted in the novel in our relatively recent past can help us have some insight into our future. Frost (2020) in his article: *An Accelerant of Social Change? The Spanish*

*Flu*, describes the testimonials of individuals who have contracted the Spanish Flu during the pandemic, thus illustrating some of the things that we can expect in our still-not post-pandemic world, including the feeling that the pandemic divided the era into pre and post period. Describing the pandemic, he includes the following testimonial: “Our old world is passed away forever,” wrote Canadian novelist Lucy Maud Montgomery, “and I fear that those of us who have lived half our span therein will never feel wholly at home in the new” (Montgomery, in Frost, 2020,p. 4). The sentiment described is very familiar. COVID-19 pandemic divided our lives in pre-pandemic and post-pandemic times. Our habits, our expectations and our priorities were changed profoundly after March 2020. International travelling, for instance, so effortless and uncomplicated for the majority of people during pre-pandemic times, become a process which involves testing, vaccination, health passports and other measures which were previously unheard of. Eating out, nights in clubs and bars, became also conditioned by curfews and limitations. Furthermore, each new COVID-19 wave brings the possibility of new ways of confronting it and new measures to be implemented.

We have to ask ourselves which changes, apart from the immediate changes of day-to-day living, can be anticipated in the aftermath of COVID-19. The pandemic raised the awareness of the fragility of our societies, economies and way of life. Premature deaths of people who were otherwise healthy, the profound impacts of lockdowns on the economy and the changes in social norms and behavior are certainly to be expected globally. Furthermore, the changes in terms of human interactions, beliefs and values are yet to be documented and analyzed.

Frost (2020,p.126) ), documents the development of the religious movements (Modern Evangelism), in the aftermath of the Spanish Flu pandemic, which he describes as follows: “Modern evangelism thus grew out of two seemingly opposing tendencies: on the one hand, an acceptance of modern methods to “spread the message”; on the other, a desire to return to the fundamentals of faith, combined with a conviction that mainstream religion had gone astray or simply could no longer answer the existential questions of life.” On the other hand, the sunshine movement, which influenced design, architecture and everyday living, developed as well. The core of this movement was living as much as possible, outside and absorbing the sunshine, since the patients were less likely to die in this environment.

Similarly, to the description of the aftermath of the Spanish Flu, conflicting tendencies in people’s behavior can be noted today. The COVID-19 pandemic, the lockdowns which are intermittently introduced during the culmination of each wave, emphasized the existence of groups and movements which were once considered to be at the fringe of the society, just like the Modern Evangelism in pre-Gatsby’s times. One example of this is the Q movement underpinned by a bizarre mix of far-right conspiracy theories, which grew exponentially in terms of followers after the beginning of COVID-19 pandemic. Refusing to wear masks and discrediting vaccines seems to be an essential part of the Q repertoire now. On the other hand, we also witness the rise and development of social distancing, almost religious hand washing and sanitizing, detachment from the society and avoiding contact with other human beings, in attempt to avoid contracting the disease.

Above all, the pandemic brings profound changes in our core as human beings. Our emotional attachments are tested to the limits with the changed patterns of everyday life. Similarly, to the characters in *The Great Gatsby*, the disappointment and disillusionment in our families, partners, governments and workplaces becomes more and more pervasive. According to article Divorce rates and Covid-19, published on July 16<sup>th</sup>, 2021 in the National Law Review, the interest in divorce in USA has increased significantly by April 2021, with newer couples being the most likely to file for divorce. The article predicts the continuation of this trend and increase of the divorce rates, strains in the relationships and increase in domestic violence, stating that 2020 saw a 9% increase in outreach to the National Domestic

Violence Hotline compared to the same period last year. Isolation, alienation from family and friends, reverting to online communication and contact certainly adds to the burden that the relationships suffer.

There are a lot of questions that we might ask ourselves, especially about the future of our post-pandemic world. Will we learn something from the past? Can we expect the roaring 2020s? Will we see the same joy, the same feeling the *carpe diem* of the roaring 1920s? Or we will become more religious, more conservative, more materialistic and more egotistical? Will we return to the pre-pandemic normal – the consumerism which is depicted in the novel, and omnipresent in our times? Will we proceed with our actions which show the lack of consideration for the environment, the destruction of nature which partially created the pandemic to begin with? What can we expect?

It is impossible to answer these questions presently. After all, the pandemic is still ongoing. It is impossible to predict the long-term consequences and the impacts on the society. Many lessons are yet to be learned, but after all, there is still hope that we will see some positive changes. Perhaps Gatsby's green light will be blinking for us too.

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