

What Makes “THE GREAT GATSBY” by F.S. FITZGERALD GREAT?

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Abstract

The article is dedicated to the factors contributing to the greatness of “The Great Gatsby” by F. Sc. Fitzgerald. The following factors are analyzed: title, eternal topics, hero (and not just major character), going beyond genres, exquisite language and style, sophisticated and simultaneously simple plot, being place-bound and cosmopolitan as well as historic and timeless. This greatness has been time-tested. Gatsby is an American Don Quixote of the 1920s, ridiculous and charming at the same time. However (or that is why), millions of women all over the world would like to meet their Gatsby.

Key words: “The Great Gatsby” by Fitzgerald, title, genre, major character, hero, topic.

Introduction

What contributes to the greatness of a work of literature?

- The way the author writes it: there is something especially innovative in the work, the plot is exciting, the theme and the moral – everlasting and cross-cultural, and/or the stylistic devices - very expressive, etc.?

- Or the way the public and the literary critics assess it? This often contradicts the first criterion as the public may have a poor taste and the critics may be too conservative to evaluate the innovation properly. Not every book is easily understood by the reading public or the critics. However, a genius book not read by many generations is eventually forgotten, though it is unfair.

- Time-tested books? (See the last sentence above.) Some books are extremely popular for a few years and then totally forgotten, if they are linked with a popular person or event but do not have the advantages mentioned in the first criterion. Continuously being among the most high-rated books is what eventually turns the book into a classic one.

- Just luck - writing it in the “right” time and place? Sometimes the book cannot reach the reading public at all as the author addressed the wrong publisher who couldn’t recognize its virtues. Besides, some generations in some countries have so many good authors that the same writer in another historic period might have been announced a great one, but in his/her time is just ranked as “outstanding”.

In this research of the greatness of “The Great Gatsby” by F. Sc. Fitzgerald I will mainly deal with the purely literary criteria, however, let me also refer to other criteria in short. It is very interesting to find out the reasons of the overwhelmingly high value of a rather thin book with quite a trivial plot.

The contemporary world is fond of all kinds of rat-

ings. Of course, it is too primitive to judge about a literary work, a real masterpiece by its rating, but, besides the deep literary analysis, it also matters. From this point of view Fitzgerald’s “The Great Gatsby” is certainly a great book and Fitzgerald - a great author, as it is hard to find a rating since the 1930s in which they do not occupy a worthy place (e.g., Greatest, n.d.; Twenty-five, 2012; The 100 best, 2012 and many others).

The action in the book takes place from spring to autumn 1922, during a prosperous time in the United States known as the Roaring Twenties – an exciting time to write books about. “The Great Gatsby” received mostly positive reviews when it was first published (e.g., Clark, 1925) and many of Fitzgerald’s literary friends wrote him letters praising the novel. However, “The Great Gatsby” did not experience the commercial success of Fitzgerald’s previous two novels, “This Side of Paradise” and “The Beautiful and Damned”, and although the novel went through two initial printings, some of these copies remained unsold years later (Bruccolui, 2000). The novel has been filmed in the USA five times (in 1926, 1949, 1974, 2000, 2002 and is being filmed for the sixth time). There are some TV versions, one produced in South Korea, and even an opera adaptation (in 1999). All this, certainly, contributes to the popularity of the novel.

The Title

Fitzgerald tried many choices before settling on “The Great Gatsby”. He shifted between *Gatsby*; *Among Ash-Heaps and Millionaires*; *Trimalchio*; *Trimalchio in West Egg*; *On the Road to West Egg*; *Under the Red, White, and Blue*; *Gold-Hatted Gatsby* and *The High-Bouncing Lover*. Initially, he preferred Trimalchio; after the crude parvenu in Petronius’s “Satyricon”. Unlike Fitzgerald’s

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protagonist, Trimalchio participated in the audacious and libidinous orgies that he hosted. That Fitzgerald refers to Gatsby by the proposed title once in the novel reinforces the view that it would have been a misnomer. A month before publication, after a final review of the proofs, he asked if it would be possible to re-title it Trimalchio or Gold-Hatted Gatsby but was advised against it. On March 19, Fitzgerald asked if the book could be renamed Under the Red, White and Blue (a hint to the tricolor of the American flag?) but it was at that stage too late to change. "The Great Gatsby" was published on April 10, 1925. Fitzgerald remarked that "the title is only fair, rather bad than good".

However, I believe that Fitzgerald chose the title perfectly. First, it is a kind of a pun: a great book about Gatsby or a book about great Gatsby. The title kind of tells us: it is a great book. Besides, it has a sort of advertising effect. If a book is about a great somebody, it should be interesting (it is always interesting to learn something about outstanding people). What makes people great? A lot of people think that position, power and money do. Gatsby wanted to be great in that way, but not only he couldn't, but also he was ridiculous in his effort to be so. He becomes rich, but he lacks the good manners of the privileged class and, though they attend his luxurious parties, they despise him.

S. Maugham in "The Moon and Sixpence" wrote in the first chapter of his novel: "I do not speak of that greatness which is achieved by the fortunate politician or the successful soldier; that is a quality which belongs to the place he occupies rather than to the man; and a change of circumstances reduces it to very discreet proportions." I can only agree with him, and Gatsby from this point of view is great, as he is a man of great passion, a real gentleman, not by manners, but at heart: he takes Daisy's guilt upon himself; he does not care about life if his Lady does not love him.

Gatsby – the major character or a hero?

Jay Gatsby, the major character of the novel, who has made a fortune selling illegal whiskey, is far from ideal, but we may say he is a hero, as he is ready to sacrifice himself for Love. He was born James Getz to a poor farm couple in North Dakota. At seventeen he changes his name to Jay Gatsby as he severs ties with his humble beginnings and dreams of a better life. His job with a millionaire yacht owner teaches him how to make money. While serving in the US Army he falls in love with Daisy Fay, but she marries the scion of a wealthy family after Gatsby goes overseas. After Gatsby returns, he pursues his dream: to make a fortune that would enable him to reclaim Daisy. Fortune/money by itself is not a value for him, it is just a tool to achieve his dream, to win the love of his Beautiful Woman. Gatsby idealizes Daisy due to her beauty, good manners, education, etc., but she is far from ideal as we can see in the end of the story.

Daisy Fay Buchanan is a beautiful and selfish young woman who rejects poor Gatsby and marries wealthy Tom Buchanan, then again has an affair with Gatsby who has become rich. She is shallow and immature, although Gatsby thinks she is the ideal woman. Daisy seems bored with her life, saying "I've been everywhere and seen everything and done everything". Although unhappy in her marriage and her privileged lifestyle, she is unwilling to give up either.

"Her voice is full of money," he said suddenly. That was it. I'd never understood before. It was full of money — that was the inexhaustible charm that rose and fell in it, the jingle of it, the cymbals' song of it... high in a white palace the king's daughter, the golden girl"(Fitzgerald, chapter 7).

Well, Gatsby is not the only worthy man pursuing a false ideal. Fitzgerald himself was (his "gold girl" Zelda Seyre who was unable to give him real love) made him suffer so much. Don Quixote is another good example, which makes him externally funny, but finally a real noble knight, ready to fight with the evil (windmills). Gatsby is also ready to die for Daisy - his Beautiful Lady Dulcinea del Toboso (a plain farm girl called Aldonza Lorenzo), more beautiful and with better manners than the real Aldonza, but with as evil/empty heart as her. Some may laugh at Gatsby, calling him unpractical, but there are so many women who would dream to meet their hero – Don Quixote or Gatsby.

The Genre

It is quite difficult to define the genre of "The Great Gatsby". The book is too thin to be called a novel. On the other hand, it is too great (by emotion, depth, quality of language and style) to be ranked as a novella. At first sight it may impress the reader as a trivial love triangle story or a trivial detective story (there is a murder and an investigation in it, like in another masterpiece – Dostoevsky's "Crime and Punishment"). But in fact, it is so much beyond any borders that it is a sin to classify it even as prose/epic.

"The Great Gatsby" is a novel of tragedy. I would even say it is a tragedy. In ancient Greek literature, a tragedy involved the downfall of a noble character with a tragic flaw (called hamartia). "The Great Gatsby" records the downfall of two characters with at least some noble characteristics: Gatsby and American Society. Their tragic flaws are naïve idealism and corrupt behavior. In ancient Greek theatre heroes and a chorus participated. In "The Great Gatsby" all guests at Gatsby's parties are so similar to that chorus.

"The Great Gatsby" is probably the most poetic work of prose. It is too emotional to be termed "a prosaic work". It might be called a lyrical love poem (verse libre). Some parts of the book are very rhythmic, e.g.:

"If personality is *an unbroken series of successful gestures*, then there was something gorgeous about him,

some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life, as if he were related to one of those intricate machines that register earthquakes ten thousand miles away. (Fitzgerald, chapter 1)

Notice the bold parts are actually in poetic iambic pentameter.

Fitzgerald so often uses too many stylistic devices, especially those which are much more typical for poetry than to prose.

a) color symbolism (golden, silver, pink, blue, green):

Golden stands for

1) richness, but also

2) happy or prosperous: *golden days, golden age*

3) successful: *the golden girl of tennis*

4) extremely valuable: *a golden opportunity*

At Gatsby's parties even the turkeys turn to gold. ".turkeys bewitched to a dark gold" (Fitzgerald, chapter 3).

Jordan Baker - the golden girl of golf - is associated with that color. "With Jordan's slender golden arm resting in mine" (Fitzgerald, chapter 3); "I put my arm around Jordan's golden shoulder" (Fitzgerald, chapter 4).

b) Alliteration: the title itself: Great Gatsby, "his hand took hold of hers" (Fitzgerald, chapter 5); "The wind had blown off, leaving a loud, bright night, with wings beating in the trees and a persistent organ sound as the full bellows of the earth blew the frogs full of life" (Fitzgerald, chapter 1).

c) Metaphors: **Eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg**: These gigantic blue eyes without a face look out at the valley of ashes from behind a pair of yellow eyeglasses. This billboard advertisement -- which provides its eternal presence looming above the ash-heaps -- takes on added significance in Chapter 8, as a grief stricken George Wilson refers to it as God. While looking at the giant eyes after Myrtle's death Wilson reveals he had taken his wife to the window just before she died and told her, "God knows what you've been doing, everything you've been doing. You may fool me but you can't fool God!...God sees everything".

d) Fitzgerald uses irony, paradox and oxymoron effectively throughout the novel. Gatsby, for example, is "elegant", but he is also a "rough-neck" (Fitzgerald, chapter 3). Another example of paradox is this observation by Jordan Baker: "I like **large parties**, they're so **intimate**. At **small parties** there is not any **privacy**" (ibid, chapter 3). Although many people attend Gatsby's parties, which are indeed large, few attended his funeral. Tom, an upper-class snob, keeps a lower-class mistress. In the climactic scene in a hotel room in which Gatsby and Tom exchange verbal thrusts and parries, the relationships between Gatsby and Daisy, Nick and Jordan, and Tom and Myrtle end. Meanwhile, in the room below, a wedding is taking place, representing a new beginning. An implied oxymoron is that Daisy Buchanan is a "free prisoner" that is, she has the money and opportunity to do anything she wants but is

unable to liberate herself from her unhappy marriage and circumscribed lifestyle.

The Topics

All topics of the book deal with main human values and are eternal: Love; Beauty (the problem is also eternal – are all beautiful girls soulless?), American Dream (so loved by Americans), War, heroism, money in people's lives, etc.

In its barest outline, "*The Great Gatsby*" is a touching (on Gatsby's part) love story.

During the 1920s, the perception of the American Dream was that an individual can achieve success in life regardless of family history or social status if they only work hard enough.

Fitzgerald had much to say about the failure of American Dream, and the fraudulences that sustain it – but his insights are not all contained within the economical pages of his greatest novel. Indeed, when Fitzgerald published "*The Great Gatsby*" in April 1925, the phrase "American dream" as we know it did not exist. Many now assume the phrase stretches back to the nation's founding, but "the American dream" was never used to describe a shared national value system.

Historic and Timeless, Place-bound and Cosmopolitan

Bound to the roaring 20s, "The Great Gatsby" at the same time contains allusions to Ancient Greece and other periods' writings.

Jay Gatsby is a poor boy from a humble Midwestern family, who falls in love with Daisy Fay, when he is stationed at the nearby army base as a young officer waiting to be deployed overseas in the months after the US entered the First World War. The novel opens in the summer of 1922; Gatsby has himself become rich, and bought a splendid house on Long Island Sound directly across the bay from the mansion which Tom and Daisy live. From his beach he can see a green light at the end of Tom and Daisy's dock. Gatsby gives lavish parties all summer, in the hope, it seems, of attracting the attention of Daisy, whom he has never stopped loving. Finally they are reunited through the agency of Nick Carraway, a cousin of Daisy's who happens to move in next door. Gatsby imagines that he can erase the past and win Daisy back; it becomes clear that the entire gaudy jazz-age facade he has created has all been in the interest of recapturing his dream of Daisy. It is gradually revealed that Gatsby's wealth comes from extralegal activities, including bootlegging – although Fitzgerald leaves the details extremely vague – a fact which Daisy's husband Tom uses against him. After a showdown in a Manhattan hotel room, Gatsby and Daisy jump in Gatsby's car and Daisy, who is behind the wheel, runs down a pedestrian, who just happens to be her husband's lover, driving back

to Long Island. The aggrieved husband of the dead woman, imagining that Gatsby is the culprit, shoots him while he is lounging in his pool the next day, and Tom and Daisy retreat into the impregnable sanctuary of their vast wealth, while Nick Carraway, the narrator, returns to the Midwest, repelled and disillusioned by what he's witnessed. Nick, the innocent bystander, is in fact integral to the story, not just as the witness and the moral conscience of the book.

The story shows the lifestyle of the 1920s. Gatsby's home was mainly for show; it features a tower for no particular reason, as well as a marble swimming pool and acre upon acre of manicured lawns and gardens. Like his house, Gatsby's parties are mainly for show as well. The extravagance of this society is shown in Gatsby's parties in the flashiness, extreme quantity of illegal alcohol, and the number of guests attending, most of whom want to be near him only because of his wealth. All the guests at Gatsby's parties tried to become a part of a rich set, they were all attempting to achieve the American Dream that they believed Gatsby was privy to, they all wanted to be a part of the upper class lifestyle. It seems as if the people did not realize that he was still lacking when it came to the American Dream as well. Gatsby's life looked perfect from the outside, however he felt a deep void that he believed only Daisy could fulfill.

Automobiles also played an important role in the culture of the 1920s, as well as an important role in the lives and deaths of several characters. At the time the novel was set, the automobile was still a relatively new technology and just beginning to become important in the culture of wealthy Americans.

The novel is somewhat of a commentary on the condition of the American Dream in the 1920s. It shows how the American Dream went from an idea that anyone could achieve success in this country through hard work and perseverance, to an idea that one needs to keep accumulating material wealth in the quest for happiness and fulfillment.

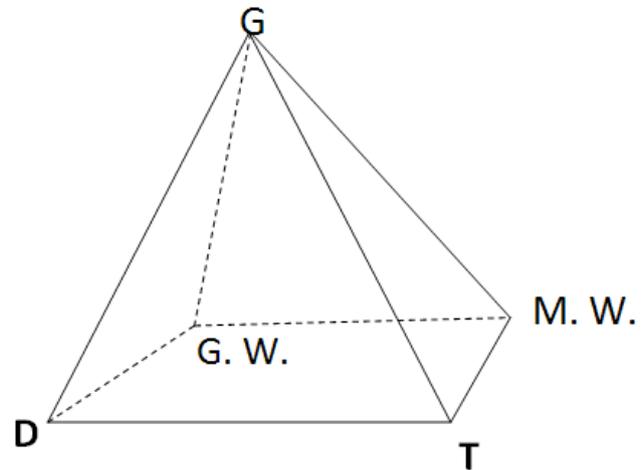
On the other hand, Fitzgerald uses numerous allusions, e.g.: "I bought a dozen volumes on banking and credit investment securities, and they stood on my shelf in red and gold like new money from the mint, promising to unfold the shining secrets that only Midas and Morgan and Maecenas knew" (chapter 1). Some allusions deal with contemporary to the author events, places and people (Morgan), but many deal with ancient times or other periods (Midas and Maecenas). Thus, Timelessness of the work deals not only with eternal topics and similarity with Greek tragedies, but also with allusions to the past.

Fitzgerald describes in detail in which parts of New York the story develops. Based on his descriptions, one can even draw a map or organize excursions like Leopold Bloom's road in Dublin (according to "Ulysses" by James Joyce). However, the story could have happened anywhere and people all over the world are not indifferent to it (re-

member the Korean TV version).

Plot

The action in the book develops fast, at a breathtaking speed, from the inciting incident (the narrator, Nick Carraway, recently returned from World War I, finds a job in New York City and rents a small house in West Egg, a small town on Long Island.), via suspense (Daisy's and second meeting – will love revive?) to climax (Myrtle is struck and killed) and resolution (Gatsby is killed). The relationships between the characters which seem to be a trivial love triangle turn to be out an intriguing and genius in its simplicity and symmetry pyramid (having a square as the base):



Gatsby loves Daisy who is married to Tom (the main, front face of the pyramid), Tom is married to Daisy, but has a love affair with Myrtle Wilson who, in her turn, is married to George Wilson (the base square), Tom blames Gatsby of killing Myrtle (one more face), Gatsby is killed by George Wilson for supposed murder of Myrtle (one more face), and, finally, Gatsby is ready to die for Daisy, but is killed (innocently) for Myrtle's murder (the last face).

Though Jay Gatsby became very rich, we cannot say that he really belonged to that class, he tried to buy the one thing that would make him happy, Daisy's love, but he failed. He became a man who has everything, but ends up with nothing.

Conclusion

The title, which Fitzgerald found rather poor, turned out to contain at least 2 stylistic devices; the word "great" in it has a special magic power. Gatsby, a man who was brave at war, but did not gain anything through his military courage, however, gains a fortune in a dishonest way. He is practical in making money, but fails to use it or to gain

love. Finally he dies in a useless way. He, thus, is a very contradictory hero, an American Don Quixote of the 1920s (jazz age). One of the thinnest, but simultaneously most exciting novels in the world, "The Great Gatsby" goes beyond a love/detective story in the direction of drama and poetry. The plot, simultaneously transparent and complicated, also contributes to the book's greatness. And finally, "The Great Gatsby" by F. Sc. Fitzgerald is a really time-tested book, because it doesn't show only relationship between concrete people, it discusses eternal topics, such as

love, heroism, commitment, war, money in people's life, people's aspiration to upper-class and wealth, immorality, etc. It is time and place bound, on the one hand, and eternal and cosmopolitan (dues to the above-mentioned topics), on the other. The conclusion can be illustrated by the "daisy" below:

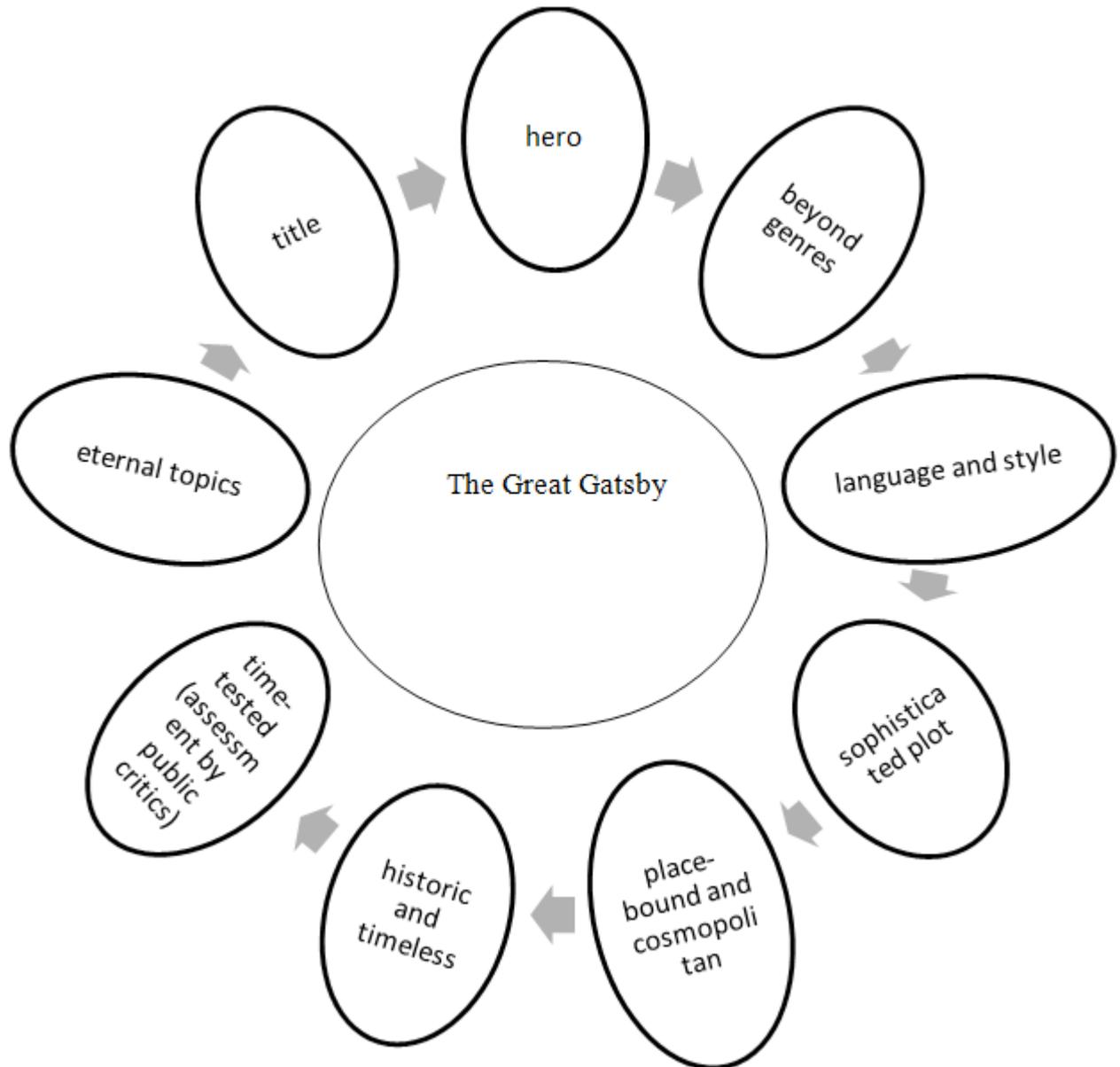


Figure 2. Factors of greatness of "The Great Gatsby"

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