

The Great Gatsby: A book about America

Book Review: Francis Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*

Perhaps one of the most influential books in the canon of modern literature is Francis Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925). Despite countless attempts, no review could ever fully capture the immersive reading experience engendered by the novel's realist, yet phantasmagorical depiction of contentious issues such as love, moral corruption, gender normativity, class segregation and so on. It is rather self-evident that the book is granted a respectable standing in formal academic curriculum across disciplines. This acknowledgement of the novel's contribution to an interdisciplinary education does not absolve the novel from valid criticisms pertaining racial representativeness, but rather accentuate its facilitation to critical engagement and productive discussion bridging both public and academic discourse. With an ever-increasing influx of Vietnamese students embarking on their journey to the United States¹ to seek out a world-class education that may help them realize their 'American Dream', the novel presents an opportunity for students to have a more nuanced understanding of such a dream, and a realistic perception of America as not a utopia free of racial discrimination.

Many critics, such as Colleen Ruggieri, Laura Goldblatt or Tiur Mitra and Parvin Ghasemi, have already argued that the novel is a literary critique of the alluring, yet illusory "American Dream", which according to Goldblatt, "provides a short hand for aspirations that include the desire for social mobility, the ideals of freedom, and a nonhierarchical, or less hierarchical ride, society" (Goldblatt 107). Indeed, Fitzgerald's portrayal of Gatsby's unrequited, but consuming love for Daisy, and his admirable journey of transforming from "James Gatz" to "Jay Gatsby" illuminate the unyielding spirit required for those who would want to realize their ambition of rising above the at-birth social status and fulfilling a goal driven by class desire. Unfortunately, despite Gatsby's dream being already "so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it" (Fitzgerald 115), his dream is never realized—just like the blinking green light at the end of Daisy's dock being so close to Gatsby's fingertips every time he stretches out his arm, yet never

¹ "The number of Vietnamese students in the United States has increased consistently for 16 straight years, according to the Institute of International Education's (IIE) annual "Open Doors" Report. The report for the 2016-2017 academic year (AY) shows that Vietnam remains the sixth leading country of origin for all international students in the United States, with 22,438 students, up 1,035 students since last AY 2015-16, a nearly 5 percent increase." (www.migrationpolicy.org)

truly within his reach. Gatsby's failure to achieve his dream is by no mean because of his indolence, but rather because of a hierarchical society that discriminate against him on the basis of his humble class origin (97). This detail is made very apparent in the adaptation² of the novel; when Tom invectively asserts the inherent class difference between him and Gatsby: "We're all different from you. You see, we were born...different. It's in our blood...and nothing that you do or say or steal...or dream up can ever change that". With his plenteous wealth, Gatsby receives Daisy's love, but he would never be good enough to be her husband. While the 'American Dream' is advertised as a path to social mobility as long as ones work hard enough, Gatsby's unrealized dream signifies a hierarchy of class structure that imposes a 'glass-ceiling' on the lower class, which prevents them from having the true 'freedom' to climb the social ladder in the United States.

Moreover, even though the novel's contextualization is framed in the 1930s, the issue of racism and white superiority engaged by the novel is still relevant in today public and academic discourse. An exemplary scene is Tom Buchanan's ardent mentioning of the book *The Rise of the Coloured Empire* by an author named Goddard (Fitzgerald 10). Tom insists that "it's a fine book, and everybody ought to read it [since the] idea is if we don't look out the white race [...] will be utterly submerged" (10). He adamantly claims that everything is "all scientific stuff" and "[has] been proved" and thus "[it's] up to [the white], who are the dominant race, to watch out or these other races will have will have control of things" (11). Not only is what he says not contradicted by anyone at the table, Daisy even whispers to Nick with a "[ferocious wink]", contending that "We've got the beat them down" (11). Fitzgerald draws attention to the operation of racism through the language of science that not only naturalizes white supremacy, but also legitimatizes the domination of other races due to their 'scientifically proven' inferiority. The novel's depiction of racism, though not central to the novel, serves as a reminder of how racism manifested itself through language in modern society and how racist conducts, such as of Tom and Daisy, can easily be overlooked despite its blatancy in nature. In a country as demographically homogeneous as Vietnam, while students are not alien to the notion of racism, many does not possess to epistemological tools to recognize, deconstruct and challenge the semantics of racist practices. In a lachrymose time witnessing the rise of isolationism and xenophobia in the United States, the

² *The Great Gatsby* (2013) directed by Baz Luhrmann

brief portrayal of this racist remarks in *The Great Gatsby* is certain to facilitate research trajectories for students and productive discussion in both academic and non-academic setting pertaining the issue of racial inequality in the United States.

The critique of the 'American Dream' and the issue of racism illustrated in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, to a certain extent, demonstrate this book's relevance to the modern academic curriculum, especially for that of Vietnam, where not all students are familiar with these two cultural notions.

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