The Great Gatsby is a brilliantly written example of the social divide in 1920’s America – the Jazz Age, the Golden Age or the Roaring Twenties, a period when everybody who was somebody had money. The narrative is so realistic that author of the novel, F. Scott Fitzgerald has been accused of unintentionally using the 1888 Kipling play The Story of the Gadsby’s and a 1922 unsolved murder that occurred in New Brunswick as the basis of The Great Gatsby (Plath 2001, Phelps, 2001). The novel focuses on a group of social elitists between the age of twenty and forty, who spend their time in lavish surroundings in a lifestyle that infers there is simply a limitless supply of possessions. Gatsby’s perception that the Great American Dream that offers limitless freedom, wealth and power, is doomed. Gatsby imagines that once he amasses his illegally gained wealth from bootlegging, he will be able to win back Daisy’s love but also gain a position in a society whose inhabitants have inherited wealth and live within a traditional code of behaviors that apparently signifies their upper class. Perhaps to feminists the most disappointing factor in the novel is that of Daisy’s total inability (or refusal) to act with courage and conviction – she is coded as just as shallow and callous as her husband Tom Buchanan (Trask 1970, p.214). Given that radical social changes were occurring Daisy could have taken the opportunity to gain even more power for herself and inadvertently other women, by supporting Jay Gatsby. Yet she chooses to keep the sin of murder to herself and allows Gatsby to go to a lonely grave marked as the murderer of Ethel Wilson.

There are few words that have not been written in critique of The Great Gatsby; research found writings pertaining to the symbolism of Jay Gatsby’s choice of coloured shirts and suits, loss of ‘manhood’ as the world knew it to be, new money vs old money and the use of Jazz music within the novel. Embedded messages in the novel relate to the ideologies of patriarchy, classism, nationalism and capitalism – the Great American Dream has foundations deriving from each of these ideologies. A predominant theme is that regardless of what Jay Gatsby did, he just could not recreate history and ‘win’ Daisy back into his life. The social divide between Gatsby and Daisy is so great that it is one that could never be met; the concept of The Great American Dream is not applicable to Jay Gatsby.

A culture of shallow relationships and deceit is also displayed throughout the narrative. However, it is the deceit and lies portrayed by the upper class that is more repulsive to the reader than those of Jay Gatsby. The obvious lack of social power for Jay Gatsby and Myrtle and George Wilson demands sympathy from the reader. It is naïve of Gatsby to assume that by amassing wealth and possessions he will be accepted into the same social circle as Daisy. Possessions though are highly symbolic in The Great Gatsby (Donaldson 2001).

Possessions clearly indicate the depth of the vast social gap between Myrtle and Tom but they also symbolise to the reader that it is not just money that creates the upper class social system. Narrator Nick Carraway tells the reader that Jordan Baker confides to him that before Tom and Daisy’s wedding, Daisy got drunk and declared that she had changed her mind about the wedding. Daisy asked Jordan to return to Tom the string of pearls valued at $350,000 (Fitzgerald 1974, p.83). The pearls represent the wealth that Daisy expects to have access to in her life and Tom Buchanan is able to extend that wealth to Daisy in the social contract of marriage. Daisy declared she wanted to return the pearls but when sober she relinquished her decision and the next day married Tom as though no other thought had ever crossed her mind. The pearls represent Daisy’s preference to lead a surface existence with Tom rather than wait for the return of Jay Gatsby or to even step out of the social norms expected of her.

Upon re-meeting Daisy after she is married and has a child with Tom, Nick Carraway astutely assesses Daisy’s relationship with Tom and feels that the best thing for Daisy would be for her to rush out of the house with the child in her arms – but she clearly has no intention of doing so (Fitzgerald 1974, p.27).

Possessions also assist Jay Gatsby in expressing his entire being; his identity is based on his appearance, his lavish home, his expensive parties and his motor vehicles. Tom Buchanan believes that Gatsby makes too many glaring mistakes in the direction of ostentation with his choice of possessions. His clothes, cars and parties all label him as ‘newly rich’ but obviously un schooled in the upper class of social graces. It seems ironic then that the very tools that Gatsby uses to declare himself as socially equal to Daisy are the very objects that push him to the periphery of the social circle into which he is desperately trying to belong. Myrtle’s choice of possessions and her grammatical errors signify her existence at the ‘lower’ rung of the social scale. Not unlike the class differences between Gatsby and Daisy, in her relationship with Tom, Myrtle has a vast social divide to cross to enter the upper class territory where Tom exists. The purchase of Myrtle’s dog shows the objectification of Myrtle both as a possession but also as an animal. Donaldson (2001) expands on this concept by suggesting that the dog of indeterminate breeding best symbolises Myrtle’s own situation. Tom objectifies Myrtle as a possession to play with, fondle and then ignore. There also exists a relationship between Myrtle and the collar she plans to buy for the dog – one that is silver and leather. The collar represents Myrtle’s need for expensive gifts but it also represents the assumed need for Myrtle to be ‘restrained’. Tom hits Myrtle and then toward the end of the novel, George Wilson physically restraints Myrtle when he realises it is obvious that Myrtle is having an affair (Fitzgerald 1974, p.143). During Nick’s final meeting with Tom, the dog comparison is confirmed by Tom when he declares that after Myrtle’s death he returned to the flat and cried like a baby when he saw the dog biscuits sitting on the sideboard (Fitzgerald 1974, p.186).

The pattern of the patrician male having no qualms in taking advantage of a female of inferior social standing would not have been considered unusual in the social context. Daisy’s actions, of course, signify a role reversal, and Tom is not happy when he discovers that Daisy is having an affair with Jay Gatsby. Tom’s unhappiness not only stems from jealousy but also from the threat that Tom perceives that Gatsby poses to the concept of ‘old money’ and also to the construction of masculinity (Forster 2003). Tom Buchanan’s world is one where patriarchy rules, men and women should never inter-marry and men just do not wear coloured shirts like those owned by Jay Gatsby.

The Great Gatsby has an exemplary status that resides in the fact that it responds with melancholy to specific social loss. Forster (2003) suggests that one of the apparent losses in the novel is the new possibility for male identity that Jay Gatsby embodies. The actual historical social loss is the style of manhood that had been dominant in the United States for much of the nineteenth century. This construction of masculinity combined aggressiveness and competitive vigour with the more gentle qualities of self-restraint, moral compassion and interior values. (Forster 2003) links the changes of masculinity with changes in capitalism. Fast paced industrial change saw more and more alienation, the outcome being that a new form of manhood emerged alongside production changes. Interestingly, during the 1920’s – 1930’s, Fitzgerald believed that capitalism was breathing its last breath and so too were those who accumulated or inherited wealth by the exploitation of others (Donaldson 2001). The new style of masculinity sought to root out changes of masculinity with changes in capitalism. Fast paced industrial change saw more and more alienation, the outcome being that a new form of manhood emerged alongside production changes. Interestingly, during the 1920’s – 1930’s, Fitzgerald believed that capitalism was breathing its last breath and so too were those who accumulated or inherited wealth by the exploitation of others (Donaldson 2001). The new style of masculinity sought to root out changes of masculinity with changes in capitalism. Fast paced industrial change saw more and more alienation, the outcome being that a new form of manhood emerged alongside production changes. Interestingly, during the 1920’s – 1930’s, Fitzgerald believed that capitalism was breathing its last breath and so too were those who accumulated or inherited wealth by the exploitation of others (Donaldson 2001). The new style of masculinity sought to root out changes of masculinity with changes in capitalism. Fast paced industrial change saw more and more alienation, the outcome being that a new form of manhood emerged alongside production changes. Interestingly, during the 1920’s – 1930’s, Fitzgerald believed that capitalism was breathing its last breath and so too were those who accumulated or inherited wealth by the exploitation of others (Donaldson 2001). The new style of masculinity sought to root out changes of masculinity with changes in capitalism. Fast paced industrial change saw more and more alienation, the outcome being that a new form of manhood emerged alongside production changes. Interestingly, during the 1920’s – 1930’s, Fitzgerald believed that capitalism was breathing its last breath and so too were those who accumulated or inherited wealth by the exploitation of others (Donaldson 2001).
Men like Tom require tokens of power like Daisy but they also exert their power over ‘unbeautiful’ women like Myrtle, who is constructed as a female to be used by men such as Tom. Daisy is constructed as the helpless female who is part of a culture that demands women of her class to be sophisticated and beautiful. When she gives birth to a daughter she says that she hopes the child will be a beautiful little fool as that is the best thing a girl can be in the world (Fitzgerald 1974, p.24). One of the greatest disappointments in the novel is Daisy’s inability to act with authenticity, assertiveness and any form of real intelligence. Despite the radical social context of her time, Daisy is clearly not a feminist. Ritzer & Goodman (2004, p.439) state that opportunities for feminist protest and massive mobilisation for suffrage was enormous in the early twentieth century. Given Daisy’s social position she could have been involved in feminist issues at least in her own life – if not for herself then for her daughter, but she chooses to remain inert in her own development. Daisy’s betrayal of Gatsby shows her incapability to act with dignity or respect for another human being. This is a clear display of the shallowness in relationships both with self and others.

The Great Gatsby portrays the dark and light human frailties of betrayal and love but it also illuminates the past and portrays the light and darkness of social life in the 1920s. This period saw an enormous break with tradition as a consequence of World War I (Jazz Age, 2006). Young women shocked the older generation with hairstyles, clothing and behaviour that was considered by some to be “born of the devil”. Jazz music was considered to be seductive and conducive to a wild way of life. In 1918, Prohibition had been introduced in America – the law banned the sale, manufacture and transportation of alcohol. Gangsters like Al Capone quickly saw the ready market for alcohol and cashed in with illegal production and sales. Capone himself is reported to have earned up to $60 million in one year from alcohol sales alone (Jazz Age, 2006). According to Roberts (2006) the 1932 film Scarface, based on the story of Capone uses the idea of Gatsby’s shirts as a symbol of wealth. While the coloured shirts assist to construct Gatsby as belonging to the ‘old style of manhood’, the shirts symbolise much more to Daisy. They are reminders of the lack of authentic beauty in her life and also of the shallowness of her marriage to Tom.

“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” (Fitzgerald 1974, p.99).

Roulston (1980) suggests that Fitzgerald contrasted the romantic decay of the way things were in the ‘old society’ against the crass vigour of the ‘new society’. Gibb (2005) supports Roulston’s argument and suggests that one way that Fitzgerald was able to portray this contrast was by the use of Jazz music throughout the novel. This style of music was able to reinforce the emerging and radical ‘new society’. The first number that the reader ‘hears’ is the fictitious piece named Jazz History of the World. This piece of music does not alone herald the emerging ‘new society’ – it highlights emotion as well. One of the most poignant contrasts in The Great Gatsby occurs at the party where the fictitious Jazz History of the World is played. The lively debauchery of the party is played out against Gatsby’s lonely isolation that hints at the real purpose of his parties but also at the concealed nature of his passion. When the Jazz History of the World was over, girls were putting their heads on men’s shoulders in a puppyish, convivial way, girls were swooning backward playfully into men’s arms, even into groups, knowing that someone would arrest their falls – but no one swooned backward on Gatsby, and no French bob touched Gatsby’s shoulder, and no singing quartets were formed with Gatsby’s head for one link (Fitzgerald 1974, p.56).

This paragraph is a metaphor for Gatsby’s life; when all the fun and frivolity is over there is no one there for Gatsby, he is truly on his own. He leads a secluded life despite the parties he holds; his only ambition in life is to reinstall Daisy into his life. The Great Gatsby portrays a culture that is loaded with shallowness and deceit and exposes Daisy as expressing a selfish level of contentment to accept the behaviour code of her class. While there has been brief discussion on possible sources for Fitzgerald’s narrative, it cannot be denied that The Great Gatsby is a classic narrative of enduring popularity. The events of the novel remind the reader that nothing in human existence is static, nothing stays the same and regardless of efforts history cannot be replayed. The character of Jay Gatsby demands sympathy from the reader; expressed in the finals words from narrator Nick Carraway to Jay Gatsby.

“They’re a rotten crowd”, I shouted across the lawn. “You’re worth the whole damn bunch put together.” (Fitzgerald 1974, p.160).

Nick confirms the true characteristics of Jay Gatsby to the reader; despite his bootlegging and the lies about his identity Gatsby is indeed a man who is worth more than the façade portrayed by the likes of Tom Buchanan in his deceitful upper class existence or Daisy the murderess who chooses to keep silent and let Gatsby go to a lonely grave marked incorrectly as the murderer of Myrtle Wilson. In his writing F. Scott Fitzgerald exposes that the great social divide of America in the 1920s ensured that The Great American Dream was only available to those who were considered to be ‘properly socially located’.

References:

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