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Dystopian and Utopian Parallels in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*

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Abstract

This paper analyzes both the utopian and the dystopian aspects of American society in F. Scott Fitzgerald's (1896-1940) *The Great Gatsby* (1925). It aims at depicting those aspects of the society through a careful examination of the settings, particularly East egg and the Valley of Ashes. The former represents the protagonist's ideal reality in which he dreams of becoming famous, wealthy, and more satisfied. Yet, the climax and tragic ending of *Gatsby* reveal the dystopian aspects of East Egg society, such as chaos, prohibition, and social disintegration. Likewise, the valley of ashes is made out of ashes, and its gray color stands for emptiness and the moral decadence of its people. The social hierarchy of the American society, along with its expectations, demoralizes its people; the worldly desires of *Gatsby* ruin his life as well as the future he imagines in East Egg. Thus, a state of material well-being emerged but lacking in spiritual life or purpose. Throughout the novel, *Gatsby*'s life and shocking manners reflect those dystopian aspects of a post-war society in which wild parties, illegal drinking, and crimes prevail. *Gatsby*'s dream of becoming wealthy leaves him with a painful awareness of inferiority, isolation, and ultimately death.

Keywords: chaos, disintegration, dystopia, F. Scott Fitzgerald, moral decadence, prohibition, society, *The Great Gatsby*, utopia.

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Introduction**Utopia versus Dystopia**

For many people, the concept ‘utopia’ is often associated with positive views of the future where they can live in an ideal society and attain satisfaction due to prosperity and technological developments. Thomas More (1478-1535) was the first writer to use it in his famous work *Utopia*, in which he creates a vision of an ideal society that can never exist in reality. More’s utopian society, along with its whimsical nature in which people are equal to each other parallels the equality, opportunity and other sets of ideas that characterized the American society during the Roaring twenties. America represented a new life of freedom, holding a promise of spiritual and worldly fulfillment. That promise and other wishes were reflected in Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence of 1776, where it was stated, “We hold those truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” (Allen p.4)

The search for freedom and happiness goes back to the beginning of American civilization, to the time of the first settlers: the Puritan fathers, the Quakers, and other religious refugees who came to America. To these people, America symbolizes a new life of freedom, holding a promise of spiritual and worldly fulfillment, yet there is always a shocking truth that lies beneath the surface. The paper is concerned with the Utopian and the dystopian aspects of American society in *The Great Gatsby*. It shows how the chances, opportunities, and freedom offered in the American society demoralize its people and create a struggle among them as reflected in each setting, the pastoral as well as the industrial. Marx (1964) argues that “Fitzgerald's work evinces a tension between a complex pastoral ideal of a bygone America and the societal transformations caused by industrialization and Machine technology” (pp. 358-64).

As for ‘dystopia’, it refers to a state where there is great suffering and injustice- typically one that is post-apocalyptic. “Dystopias are often characterized by rampant fear or distress” (*Merriam-Webster*, 2012). Other themes typical of a Dystopian Society include “complete control over the people in a society through the usage of propaganda, heavy censoring of information or denial of free thought, worshipping an unattainable goal, the complete loss of individuality, and heavy enforcement of conformity” (*Miami Dade College Learning Resources*) Moreover, it refers to a devastated environment where characters/people indulge themselves in sins, violence and immorality.

In *Great Gatsby*, the dreams and predicaments of the characters portray an early American in whom that dream was still very much alive-- in a society that is on the edge of destruction. The novel depicts the moral decadence of a society in which hypocrisy, corruption, exploitation, and suppression prevail. The predicament and the suffering of the characters turn the American dream into an illusion. West Egg people, Nick and Gatsby have their assumptions of East Egg as an ideal society. Still, those assumptions fail when they recognize the society’s cruelty, carelessness, and the moral decadence of its people.

East Egg Society***Social Disintegration***

In the novel, characters have a favorable view of living in East Egg; for the New Money characters, it is something of a Utopia where everything is perfect and ideal. For instance, Nick Carraway has moved to East Egg to start his business bond, assuming that it is a perfect place where he can obtain opportunities. He says, “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.” (Fitzgerald, 2002, p.3) Ironically, and as Mizener (1965) maintains, Nick “returns to Midwest after despairing of the decadence and indifference of the eastern United States.” (p. 190) Towards the end of the novel, Nick becomes more disturbed and shocked due to the moral decadence and the carelessness of East Egg people, especially when his neighbor, Gatsby, dies. He says, “After Gatsby’s death, the East was haunted for me.” (Fitzgerald. 2002, p.110) Nick has always had a desire for peace and moral order that he could never find in East Egg, as Lisca (1967) maintains, “Nick embodies in extreme the principals of order and decorum,” (p. 21) and he has failed to impose his moral standards upon other characters who embody all sorts of chaos and disorder. He says, “Even when the East excited me most, even when I mostly keenly aware of its superiority to the bored, sprawling, swollen towns beyond Ohio, with their interminable inquisitions which spared only the children and the very old- even then it had always for me a quality of distortion”(Fitzgerald, 2002, p. 110).

Similarly, Gatsby has an attitude of faith and hope that looks forward to the fulfilling of wishes and desires, which ironically makes him suffer a painful experience that ultimately leads to his death. For Gatsby, East Egg is where he assumes he could find material fulfillment in becoming wealthy and prosperous, and spiritual fulfillment in getting closer to his lost love, Daisy. As the story progresses, one finds out that East Egg is not a perfect society and its aspects are all revealed to be fake; East Egg society is far from being idealistic, for it is characterized by ruthlessness, bleak future, and moral decadence. Describing the pessimistic attitudes of the Roaring Twenties in *The Great Gatsby*, Harris (2015) maintains, “The violent, destructive end of the idealistic hopes for the achievement of the American dream, embodied in Gatsby but representing a broader collective as well, establish the era as a sort of broken inversion of paradise- a dystopia” (p. 40).

Having moved to East Egg, Gatsby thinks that he lives in a Utopian society hoping to find an alternative reality. Both Gatsby and Nick believe that East Egg society is an ideal place and a perfect society to stay in, but in fact, they confront a dystopian future where there is no goodness or peace. Gatsby hopes to get accepted within the society of East Egg by throwing wild parties. He makes great efforts to integrate within a society that creates a distinction among its people according to their material wealth, not moral wealth. This society, which is supposed to be ideal most minuscule for Gatsby and Nick, consists of people who attend his party without being invited by the host. Ironically, they tell rumors about Gatsby’s real identity, his past, and the sources of his wealth. These attitudes and other hypocritical behaviors of East Egg people emphasize the social disintegration that Gatsby experiences while living there.

The lavish style of East Egg people and their social attitudes enhance the social disintegration depicted above. Tom Buchanan, for instance, speaks about the white race as being superior to other races. When Tom and Daisy talk about Jordan Baker's origins and family, Nick says, "Is she from New York?" Tom replies, "From Louisville. Our white girlhood passed together there. Out beautiful –"/ "Did you give Nick a little heart-to-heart talk on the veranda?" demanded Tom suddenly. "Did I?" She looked at me. 'I can't seem to remember, but I think we talked about the Nordic race...' (pp. 12-13) Both Tom and Daisy believe that the white are the dominant race; they consider their European ancestry as an indication of superiority to other characters who belong to different social backgrounds, especially Americans whose ancestors were taken as slaves in America. Tom's social and hypocritical attitudes show a sense of racism which eventually, highlights the social disintegration analyzed in the novel. Bermen (1996) comments on Buchanan's attitudes towards others saying, "such anxieties were more salient in national discourse than the societal consequences of world wars" (p. 30).

The first time Nick goes to East Egg for Dinner, he describes the place, the attitudes of its people and their lavish mansions. He says,

Their house was even more elaborate than I expected, a cheerful red-and-white Georgian Colonial mansion, overlooking the bay. The lawn started at the beach and ran towards the front door for a quarter of a mile, jumping over sundials and brick walks and burning gardens- finally, when it reached the house drifting up the side in bright vines as though from the momentum of its run (Fitzgerald, 2002, p. 4)

And when he attends one of Gatsby's parties, Nick says, "I believe that on the first night I went to Gatsby's house, I was one of the few guests who had actually been invited. People were not invited- they went there. They got into automobiles which bore them out to Long Island, and somehow ended up at Gatsby's door." (Fitzgerald, 2002, p. 25) Gatsby's guests never try to talk to their host; on the contrary, they come and go without being invited to the parties, and they keep gossiping about his identity.

Instead of getting involved and accepted by East Egg society, Gatsby fails to integrate into it and is always seen as an outsider. Gatsby changes his real identity to fit the standards of East Egg society. Additionally, he speaks a different accent hoping to fit the standards American Eastern society; his real identity is vague. Vogal (2015) maintains, "Gatsby's socio-economic ascent is deemed a threat not only due to his status as *nouveau riche*, but because he is perceived as an outsider." (p. 38) Ironically, Gatsby's wild parties bring him more isolation than the greatness and the fulfillment he aspires to achieve. Foster (2011) writes that *The Great Gatsby* "showed us in a bad light. Because it had all those things that should have been fun-wild parties and speakeasies and gangsters and affairs and jealousy- but was definitely not a romp. Because its main character was a fraud, a caricature of our dream of success that ended up very badly" (p. 136).

Prohibition

The Great Gatsby depicts a society where materialism prevails and exposes the corruption and immorality which turn it into a dystopian society. It was written when prohibition was at its

peak during the Roaring twenties, when America lost its moral compass in a rush to embrace post-war materialism. The novel depicts Gatsby's psychological and emotional suffering as a result of materialism and consumerism. Wilkinson (2010) explains, "Mindless consumerism threatens physical, social, and psychological health." (p.22) American consumerism and prohibition created a black market which allows bootleggers and gamblers like Gatsby and Meyer Wolfsheim to collect large amounts of money within a short time. Thus, prohibition is an essential way through which Gatsby's progresses. In fact, bootlegging is said to be the principal source of Gatsby's wealth. Nick becomes suspicious about Gatsby's relationship with Wolfsheim when he is told about Meyer Wolfsheim's achievements. "Meyer Wolfsheim? No, he's a gambler. Gatsby hesitated, then coolly: "He's the man who fixed the World's Series back in 1919" (Fitzgerald, 2002, p.45). The conversation implies that Gatsby might even have ties to the crime Wolfsheim is responsible for. Consequently, the source of his wealth is put into a severe question since his wealth is not inherited and linked to a particular family.

During the Roaring Twenties, the production of alcoholic drinks was prohibited to raise society's moral values. However, Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* clarifies that alcohol was an essential part of the social life of its characters. Some of its characters were born into wealthy families, like Tom and Daisy. Throughout the novel, we can notice the lifestyle of its old-money and new-money characters whose wealth, fine clothing, and luxurious mansion emphasize the dystopian aspects of American society. Gatsby collects his wealth through illegal activities and becomes wealthy overnight, and starts throwing wild parties for no particular occasion with music and fancy food and a full bar "stocked with gins and liquors and with cardinals so long forgotten that most of his female guests were too young to know one from another." (Fitzgerald, 2002, p.24) Thus, prohibition causes the greatness and richness that Gatsby ever wants, but ultimately leads to his predicament and death.

The Valley of Ashes

The paper is also concerned is the Valley of Ashes which is located halfway between West Egg and New York. Describing it, Nick says, "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." (Fitzgerald, 2002, p. 14) It is the industrial setting depicted in *The Great Gatsby* where dirty ashes stand for moral decadence and the plight of its poor characters (the Wilsons), and as Marx (1964) maintains "the valley of the ashes represents a man-made wasteland which is a byproduct of the industrialization that has made Gatsby's booming lifestyle, including his automobile, possible" (p. 358). Furthermore, the Valley of Ashes exposes the social hierarchy of American society and the gap between the wealthy class and the poor who used to live among the dirty ashes.

In the Valley of Ashes, the grey color of the land and "the spasms of bleak dust" (Fitzgerald, 2002, p.14) turn it into a wasteland whose people lost their moral compass. For instance, Myrtle Wilson, Tom's mistress and her husband, George, who suffer because of the social gap created within the American society. Moral and social decay is first reflected in the fake reality of Myrtle Wilson's behavior when she meets Tom. In addition to the fact that she is unfaithful to her husband by having an affair with the wealthy Tom Buchanan, she behaves as

though she belongs to the rich class. “Tom Buchannan and his girl and I went up together to New York- or not quite together, for Mrs. Wilson sat discreetly in another car. Tom deferred that much to the sensibilities of those East Eggers who might be on the train.” (Fitzgerald, 2002, p.16) Speaking about Myrtle Wilson’s behavior, Nick says, “She had changed her dress to a brown figured muslin...she bought a copy of Town Tattle and a moving-picture magazine, and in the station drugstore some cold cream and a small flask of perfume” (Fitzgerald, 2002, p.16)

Conclusion

As a result of living in a dystopian society, Gatsby goes through a tragic experience that begins when he loses Daisy, and continues when he tries to involve himself in that society. Gatsby is seen as the victim of East Egg society’s rituals and expectations. Instead of being spiritually satisfied, Gatsby lives in a state of dissatisfaction since he fakes his identity and gets engaged in illegal activities in order to live up to the expectations and the luxurious lifestyle of East Egg society, for the purpose of winning Daisy’s heart. As Harris (2015) maintains, Gatsby “Largely buys into the dominant ritual habit of the era, demonstrating a belief that his worth is judged by his wealth and status and that these are also the key to winning Daisy’s love” (p. 41).

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