
The Vices of Love: Locating Morality in *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald

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Abstract: The first half of the twentieth century was a turbulent time in the history of the world. It constituted the world wars, which left devastating impacts that still persist. The impact of the First World War was especially predominant since it was the first time for the world that a war had affected more than thirty countries simultaneously. The soldiers that returned from the war were not the same men that had left to fight in the war. The Prohibition Act was implemented in January of 1920. The economy of America was greatly disturbed due to the Prohibition Act, but illegal businesses flourished. The people now, fresh from the wounds of war and access to cheap liquor, lost track of their moral compass. The aim of this research paper is to closely analyse each of the major characters and their morality as depicted by Fitzgerald in his novel *The Great Gatsby*. The methodology that is applied in this research is close textual analysis. This paper also helps in understanding the social context of twentieth-century American society.

Key Words – morality, love, society, death, Gatsby.

Introduction: F. Scott Fitzgerald was an American novelist and short-story writer who is credited with his depictions of the Jazz Age in the 1920s. The life of Fitzgerald was as interesting as his novels. He fell in love with Zelda Sayre, who was the daughter of a judge, got engaged, and went to New York to earn money. He failed to do so, and Zelda broke off the engagement. Two years later, Fitzgerald achieved success with the publication of his first novel, *This Side of Paradise*. He then married his love, Zelda Fitzgerald. Fitzgerald depicts the era of Prohibition in a concise and accurate manner, as he himself was a part of that culture, the parties, and the high living in New York City. *The Great Gatsby* is the most influential and seminal novel of Fitzgerald, which was published in 1925.

The Great Gatsby tells the story of Jay Gatsby by the narrator, Nick. Jay Gatsby was a self-made millionaire. The story of the novel revolves around Daisy Buchanan. Daisy was the love of Gatsby, but when Gatsby went to fight in the First World War, she waited for him to return. But when Gatsby did not return, Daisy married Tom Buchanan, who was a very wealthy man and was from an influential family. In the novel, Gatsby enlists the help of Nick to reconnect with his lost love, Daisy. Gatsby and Daisy reconnect, and Daisy starts having an affair with Gatsby, all the while being married to Tom Buchanan, who himself was having an affair with Myrtle Wilson. At the end of the novel, Daisy accidentally hits and kills Myrtle Wilson; Tom Buchanan frames Gatsby for killing Myrtle, and Myrtle's husband kills Gatsby and shoots himself thereafter. Set in the Jazz Age (a term popularized by Fitzgerald), *The Great Gatsby* vividly captures its historical moment: the economic boom in America after the First World War, the new jazz music, the free-flowing illegal liquor. The brazen lavish culture of West Egg is a reflection of the new prosperity that was possible during Prohibition, when illegal schemes involving the black-market selling of liquor were in full bloom. Such criminal enterprises are the source of Gatsby's income and finance his incredible parties, which are probably based on parties Fitzgerald himself attended when he lived on Long Island in the early 1920s.

Morality in the Novel: According to the *Cambridge Academic Content Dictionary*, morality can be defined as "a personal or social set [of] standards for good or bad behaviour and character, or the quality of being right and honest." We shall now examine the morality of the characters in F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby*.

Nick Carraway: Nick Carraway is the narrator of the novel. He is also Daisy's cousin. In the novel, he attends the parties thrown by Gatsby and enjoys the life of the 1920s. He befriends Jordan Baker, a mutual friend of Tom and Daisy Buchanan and a professional golf player, whom he had met in Tom's house. At a party in Gatsby's mansion, Jordan introduces him to Gatsby, who apparently had a request to make from Nick. Gatsby befriends Nick, and both of them have some fun together, and in their second meeting after the party, Gatsby requests Nick to invite Daisy to Nick's house. Nick accepts the request and invites Daisy to his house; Gatsby too comes to his house as a neighbour, and both the separated lovers meet at the house of Nick. Here, Nick plays the role of a person who is helping two separated lovers, but he also knows that his cousin Daisy is a married woman, the wife of Tom Buchanan, and a mother. So, we can say that what Nick did was not morally correct. In the later part of the novel, after the death of Myrtle, Nick could have said to George Wilson that the person with whom his wife Myrtle was having an affair was not Gatsby but Tom, but he does not do so, after which George Wilson kills Gatsby. Though Nick suggests Gatsby to leave the town for some time, he cannot be considered blameless in Gatsby's demise. And, initially, Nick does not like Gatsby but attends his parties. Later, he likes him; he understands that Gatsby was not a proper businessman and not everything about Gatsby's wealth was legal. Even then, he shows admiration towards Gatsby. We can see this admiration when he says, "You're worth the whole damn bunch put together." (Fitzgerald, pp. 164). From this, we get an estimate of Nick's morality.

Tom Buchanan: Tom Buchanan is the husband of Daisy and also a father. Tom was a socially powerful person with ancestral wealth and high status in society but was morally degenerate. We see in the novel, Tom has an affair with Myrtle Wilson. He goes to the shop of George and tells Myrtle to join him in the city. He buys Myrtle stuff to make her happy and also spends time with her in an apartment in the city. When he realizes that Daisy and Gatsby were having an affair, he confronts Gatsby and later says, "Once in a while I go off on a spree and make a fool of myself, but I always come back, and in my heart I love her all the time." (Fitzgerald, pp. 140). He is also responsible for the death of Gatsby, although not directly, when he says to Wilson that the yellow car was not his, hinting to Wilson that the owner of the yellow car is the person who had the affair with his wife and killed her with his car. But in reality, he was having the affair with Myrtle, and when he comes back home to Daisy and realizes that Daisy was driving the car at the time of the accident, he hides the truth and lets Gatsby take the fall for Myrtle's death. Here, Tom behaves as an immoral person who does not even have the courage to take responsibility for his lover, and later lets the murderer of his lover, his wife, go without any punishment and even consoles Daisy.

Daisy Buchanan: Daisy is a married woman, the wife of Tom Buchanan and a mother. She is a woman who belonged to a wealthy and socially respected family. She is portrayed as a woman who, before her marriage, used to entertain many men but falls in love with Gatsby and waits for him to return from the war. Later, she marries Tom and has a daughter with him, but when she meets Gatsby again, she starts an extramarital affair with Gatsby. We see that she is a pretentious woman when Nick narrates, "The instant her voice broke off, ceasing to compel my attention, my belief, I felt the basic insincerity of what she had said." (Fitzgerald, pp. 20–21). When confronted by Tom about the affair and asked whom she loved, she says, "I did love him once – but I loved you too." (Fitzgerald, pp. 142). We see that Daisy is not certain whom she loves, but in the end of the novel, we come to know that deep down she only loved her lavish lifestyle and money. She is the one who kills Myrtle with the car, although by accident. She does not stop the car and does not take responsibility for her action. Instead, she indirectly plays a role in Gatsby's death and decides to choose Tom's money and social standing over Gatsby's love. From this, we understand the moral standing of Daisy.

Myrtle Wilson: Myrtle Wilson is a married woman who is unhappy in her marriage due to the reason that her husband does not earn enough to support her lavish desires. She belongs to the lower class of society, and when she meets a man from a higher class, Tom, she starts having an extramarital affair with him. When George Wilson, her husband, gets an idea of her affair, he decides to move West with her. Myrtle resists this decision, which leads George to beat her and lock her up in the house above his garage. When Myrtle sees the yellow car coming from the city, she thinks that it is Tom who is driving the car and rushes out thinking that he will rescue her from George. However, Daisy was driving the car and accidentally kills Myrtle. Here, we can say that it was Myrtle's morality which, in a way, was responsible for her death.

Jay Gatsby: Gatsby is the protagonist of the novel, whose story is that of from rags to riches. He was born in a very poor family, met Don Cody, learned the manners of high society, joined the army, trained at Camp Taylor, fell in love with Daisy Carraway, deployed to war, became a war hero, promoted to major, studied at Oxford, came back to New York after the war, did business with Meyer Wolfsheim, and became extremely wealthy. He bought a mansion just opposite the house of Tom Buchanan to be closer to his love, Daisy. He threw parties that were open to all in a slight hope of meeting Daisy in one of them. We can get an image of Gatsby when Meyer Wolfsheim says, “Yeah, Gatsby’s very careful about women. He would never so much as look at a friend’s wife.” (Fitzgerald, pp. 78). But in the novel, we see that Gatsby has earned all his wealth from illegal ways. He was in the business of illegal liquor, and this was the reality of his fortune. Though he was a true lover of Daisy, he could not leave Daisy alone even when he knew that she was a married woman. When they both meet, they start to have an affair, and when confronted by Tom, Gatsby sternly defends his relationship with Daisy: “‘She never loved you, do you hear?’ he cried. ‘She only married you because I was poor and she was tired of waiting for me. It was a terrible mistake, but in her heart she never loved anyone except me!’” (Fitzgerald, pp. 139). Near the end of the novel, he defends Daisy by not letting people know that it was actually Daisy who was driving the car. He proves to be a true and faithful lover and does everything to protect her and does not force her to come to him and waits for her patiently. But at the end, he is murdered by George, who thinks that Gatsby is the person who was having an affair with his wife Myrtle and that Gatsby killed Myrtle. Although Gatsby may seem to us a person who is a good man, he is not a morally correct person. His love and obsession for Daisy ultimately take his life.

Conclusion: The survivors of the First World War that returned home were not the men that had left to fight in the war. Most of them were now wounded men; wounded here refers to the emotional damage. They were wandering, directionless men who were disoriented by the situations they were in. The general moral guidepost they had before was now in a dilapidated state. Additionally, the Prohibition Act backfired, and even more alcohol was consumed during the Prohibition era than was consumed before. The free flow of cheap liquor, the jazz music, the high lifestyle, and the all-night parties were a source to forget the harsh reality for the people. The amalgamation of these enterprises led the people, whose moral guidepost was weakened by the war, into even more involvement in immoral ventures. Fitzgerald himself was a part of that world, and he portrays in *The Great Gatsby* characters each with their own set of flaws. But not having morality is a flaw that almost each and every one of them possesses.

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