

THE ASPECT OF GEOGRAPHY IN F. SCOTT FITZGERALD'S 'THE GREAT GATSBY'

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Abstract: Modernism is a very interesting movement in American literature, and *The Great Gatsby* is a real milestone of modernist literature where Francis Scott Fitzgerald depicted this new way of life and what affected it. The gap between the rich and the working class widened during this period, a period between the two world wars which was marked by many changes and new events. It was a period when a lot of people became rich overnight, mainly illegally, through bootlegging, and thus became part of the aristocracy. Fitzgerald chose New York as the setting for *The Great Gatsby* because it was considered the cultural centre of the United States during the 1920s, a city where the characters lived a posh life, and enjoyed the American Dream. Fitzgerald compares life and people in East Egg, West Egg, which are the peninsulas of Long Island and where the rich characters live, and Valley of Ashes, where the poor and outcasts lived. Throughout the novel Fitzgerald stresses the East Egg's content luxury, the West Egg's increasing extravagance, and the Ash Valley's decaying monotony and misery. Each area has its own particular characteristics, and mainly represents interwoven but separate themes about the effects of money. I decided to analyze and point out how geography repeatedly marks the established social differences between the "new rich", represented by Gatsby, and "old money," (or the established social elite) represented by Daisy and Tom Buchanan. Geography also helps deliver many of Fitzgerald's important messages such as commentary on the cost and quest for success, both economic and social. It is also very important, both for its plot purposes and metaphor. The characters' vocabulary is also influenced by their social status and position. I will try to analyze all these aspects in the novel, and point out the importance of the social class, the part that geography has in distinguishing the social class, and how do these geographical terms affect characters' life, or better to say their behavior and relationships with other characters. They enjoy parties, they eat in posh restaurants, speak accordingly, etc.

So, in conclusion, the role of geography in *The Great Gatsby* is clear and specific, but also widespread. It is clear that there is no doubt that without the use of geography, *The Great Gatsby* would be arguably far less memorable, especially considering the deep insightfulness of the closing line's impact upon Modern literature. It truly does prove a key in the delivery of Fitzgerald's messages time after time.

Keywords: Gatsby, Geography, Social class,

AMERICA AS A LAND OF OPPORTUNITIES - THE ROARING 1920S :

After the IWW, America was considered a New Eden, it was considered a land of beauty, money and unlimited opportunities. Both the promise and the disappointment of this idea are reflected in one of the greatest American novels, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. This work was published at a time when money and the pursuit of pleasure had become major aims for many people, so Fitzgerald described the 20s as an era pleasure and wealth, but on the other hand, it was a period of moral and spiritual corruption. In the novel, it is presented by the characters who symbolize class, wealth and social standing. The title character, Gatsby, is a self-made man whose wealth has mysterious and clearly illegal origins. His whole life is spent trying to attain money and status so that he can reach a certain position in life. Gatsby tries to woo both society and the woman he loves with lavish expenditures. His extravagant gestures are in pursuit of a dream. Unfortunately Gatsby's capacity for dreaming is far greater than any opportunity offered by the Roaring Twenties, and he meets a grotesquely violent end. Gatsby's greatness is bound up with his tragedy: he believes in an America that has virtually disappeared under the degradation of the new modern life. It is left to Nick the narrator, to reflect at the end of the novel on the original promise of the American Dream:

*'Gradually, I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailor's eyes—a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby's house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder.'*¹⁶⁵

THE NEW MONEY AND THE OLD MONEY

In "The Great Gatsby" Fitzgerald talks mostly about the high class people, rich people who enjoy the era. However, these people are two distinct types of rich people, the first presented by the Tom and Daisy Buchanan, and Jordan Baker who were born in wealthy families, rich people for many generations, and they are portrayed as the *old money*, that didn't have to work but just enjoy and have fun.

¹⁶⁵ Fitzgerald, F.Scott; *The Great Gatsby*, Cambridge University Press, 1991, p.142

The second group of people is called *new money*, since they have acquired money recently, in many cases illegally by bootlegging, presented by Jay Gatsby who has recently become rich, but no one knows how. This is why people of ‘the old money’ don’t like him and the ones around him.

In *The Great Gatsby* Fitzgerald portrays a harsh picture of the world he is surrounded by, the world which obviously is destined for disaster. In this world people believed in superficial means such as materialism and money, leaving aside their sensitivity and compassion.

IMPORTANCE OF SETTING

F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* tells the story of Jay Gatsby and his life as part of the New York social elite, as he tries to gain Daisy's love. Fitzgerald focuses on the change money and wealth, or lack thereof, can cause in people. He chose New York as the setting for *The Great Gatsby*, which was considered the cultural centre of the United States during the 1920s. East Egg and West Egg are the peninsulas of Long Island, part of New York, and where the main characters live. In real life the peninsulas are not referred to by these names, but Fitzgerald saw them as egg shaped, and that is why he named them so. Throughout the novel, places and settings epitomize the various aspects of the 1920s American society that Fitzgerald depicts. Geography repeatedly marks the established social differences between the newly rich and the old money, (or the established social elite) that I mentioned above. East Egg represents the old aristocracy, the place where the *old money* lives. The West Eggers are the *new money* that the East Eggers resent. In fact, each location represents a different social class and caste, and Fitzgerald stresses the East Egg's content luxury, the West Egg's increasing extravagance, or the Ash Valley's decaying monotony and misery.

The East Egg symbolizes unbelievable wealth, which seems to draw its possessors into apathy. Its inhabitants are generally members of the established aristocracy, or old money, and seem unsure of what they should do with their life. For many of those who live there, they plan nothing, but prefer lying on the sofa and enjoy all the time. They also have an air of superficiality about them, such as Jordan, who is dishonest, and Daisy, who values money over everything. The West Egg represents a more active, creative lifestyle. Nick, as an inhabitant of the West Egg, sees himself as a ‘guide, a pathfinder.’¹⁶⁶ In contrast to East Egg, West Egg is also a land of honest people, although not necessarily honest in the sense of not lying. The honesty they possess is often more to themselves and to their hopes and dreams. After all, West Egg is also a land of dreamers, such as Gatsby himself, a loyal and good-hearted man. In a sense, Gatsby is mostly a dream himself, for he ‘sprang from his platonic conception of himself.’¹⁶⁷

Another very important place in the novel is the ‘Valley of Ashes.’ This desolate wasteland is located on the way to New York from East or West Egg. It is the location of George Wilson's garage and is also the site of Myrtle, his wife's death. The billboard of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg, a symbolic reference to God, is also located in the Valley of ashes. The valley represents modern society, urbanism and the destruction that it causes. The ashes are a byproduct of the trains and represent a poisoning of the American landscape. The valley is essentially a dumping ground for modern, industrial, toxic waste. Finally, the Valley of Ashes represents a place devoid of money, vitality, and dreams. Wilson, its primary occupant, is described as ‘a blonde, spiritless man, anaemic...’¹⁶⁸ who is in the pains of despair. The land around it is gray and lifeless, as if it too had been sucked dry and left as refuse. Wilson has lost his will to fight, but rather fades into the background of his garage. His wife, Myrtle, still maintains her vitality, and tries to escape the oppressive atmosphere of the Valley through money and glamour, by becoming Tom Buchanan's mistress.

Geography in *The Great Gatsby* clearly conveys many of Fitzgerald's important messages such as commentary on the cost and quest for success, both economic and social. We see this over and over again in East vs. West Egg and the Valley of the Ashes. Fitzgerald compares and contrasts East Egg and West Egg throughout the entire novel, and thus sets a tone of ‘class conflict’ and a social crisis of identity from the very beginning, declaring on p. 8: I (Nick) lived at West Egg, the-well, the less fashionable of the two, though this is a most superficial tag to express the bizarre and not a little sinister contrast between them.’, whereas, a paragraph later, he describes East Egg as ‘fashionable East Egg.’ The difference between East and West Egg is important, since through these differences Fitzgerald wishes to convey messages. First of all, the contrast between old money and new money, East and West, is what Fitzgerald sees as the corruption of the American Dream. No matter that both Gatsby and Nick have worked to earn their wealth, they still will never be the same as the ‘old money’, since they lack the elusive established history that Tom Buchanan of the East Egg has. This corruption of the American Dream is really important, as Fitzgerald stresses the unwillingness of the established aristocracy to accept the newly rich, while also showing the corruption of some of the West Eggers themselves, such as Gatsby, that have engaged in criminal activities to rise to the top. Geography also stresses the differences

¹⁶⁶ Ibid, p. 7

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, p. 77

¹⁶⁸ Ibid, p. 22

between the wealthy elite, which the author uses as a basement of the idea of the corruption of the American Dream. The physical difference between the locations is compared to the social differences. However, when Nick describes the Valley of Ashes, we see that geography does not only stress differences between old and new money:

*'About half way between West Egg and New York the motor road hastily joins the railroad and runs beside it for a quarter of a mile, so as to shrink away from a certain desolate area of land. 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 and, finally, with a transcendent effort, of men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air. Occasionally a line of gray cars crawls along an invisible track, gives out a ghastly creak, and comes to rest, and immediately the ash-gray men swarm up with leaden spades and stir up an impenetrable cloud, which screens their obscure operations from your sight.'*¹⁶⁹

It would not be strange, but in *The Great Gatsby*, there are F. Scott Fitzgerald's personal political reflections that are present. Fitzgerald's depiction of the Valley of the Ashes could very well be a literary manifestation of the existing politics. The valley sits in an unarguably poor state as large amounts of filth and ash cloud the valley due to the passage of trains. Fitzgerald, in depicting a place so plagued with misery and dilapidation, could very well be creating an example of the need for business regulation. The vivid imagery surrounding the Valley of the Ashes compels the reader to question the reason behind the town's dilapidated and deteriorated state: 'The valley of ashes is bounded on one side by a small foul river, and, when the drawbridge is up to let barges through, the passengers on waiting trains can stare at the dismal scene for as long as half an hour.'¹⁷⁰ According to John Hilgart, The valley of Ashes 'is the shared toilet of the two adjacent geographic manifestations of rich promise and massive consumption – the neighborhood with lawns that jump over sun dials on one side and the city on the other'¹⁷¹

However, it is through the physical geography of the characters that Fitzgerald creates a dystopian vision of 1920s America that shows the moral corrosion of society, dramatizes tension between traditional Western and modern Eastern values. West Egg can first be seen as having retained traditional values and a provincial American dream that is increasingly becoming something of a myth in the postwar era. Nick Carraway and Jay Gatsby exemplify these notions of the American dream. They see West Egg as a land where they can realize their aspirations. Gatsby is obsessed by the idea of individual accomplishment. They each migrate from the Mid-West on their own accord and with their own aspirations. Fitzgerald depicts West Egg as one of the last lands of the American dream. Through their rugged individualism, Nick and Gatsby aspire to attain goals that are more personal rather than materialistic. Nick has come to West Egg only 'to learn the bond business' and make a career for himself on the East. However, for Fitzgerald, Gatsby embodies ideals of 'freedom, exploration, and opportunity.'¹⁷² He has come to West Egg for the chance to regain the love of Daisy Buchanan, his parties are thrown for Daisy, he bought a house near, so that he has Daisy around. According to Baker, Gatsby and Daisy fell in love when he was a soldier at a dance in Louisville, Kentucky, but her parents and social norms of the time became obstacles for that relationship. Nick attends Gatsby's lavish parties, which stress Gatsby's social crudeness. He shows his crudeness through these parties so that he could be noticed as a part of the elite. However, he also wants to attract Daisy's attention and win her love. Nick describes his first party where 'champagne was served in glasses bigger than finger-bowls,' and as a place where 'The bar is in full swing, and floating rounds of cocktails permeate the garden outside, until the air is alive with chatter and laughter, and casual innuendo and introductions forgotten on the spot, and enthusiastic meetings between women who never knew each other's names.'¹⁷³ Although Gatsby has created such senseless gaiety, Nick still manages to propose a sense of integrity. For Nick, Gatsby had 'represented everything for which I have unaffected scorn...' but yet 'turned out all right at the end.'¹⁷⁴ As Chambers says, "Carraway draws attention to the fact that conduct is an accurate expression of inner code..."¹⁷⁵ Nevertheless, throughout the book his honesty becomes broken down through his contact with the others. Although critical of the intoxicating atmosphere of New York City, Nick is 'within and without simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life'¹⁷⁶ as shown at Gatsby's parties. Nick is vulnerable to the effects of alcohol and so readers can assume a misrepresentation in narration whenever he notes having consumed alcohol. For instance a few weeks later upon his arrival at one of

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, p.21

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, P.21.

¹⁷¹F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, edited by Harold Bloom, Sterling Professor of the Humanities Harold Bloom, Infobase Publishing, 2010, p.80

¹⁷² Matterson, Stephen. *The Great Gatsby*. Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1990, p.6

¹⁷³ Fitzgerald, F.Scott; *The Great Gatsby*, Cambridge University Press, 1991 p.34

¹⁷⁴ Ibid, p.6

¹⁷⁵ Chambers, John B. *The Novels of F. Scott Fitzgerald*. New York: St. Martin's, 1989, p.101

¹⁷⁶ Fitzgerald, F.Scott; *The Great Gatsby*, Cambridge University Press, 1991 p.30

Gatsby's parties, Nick 'slunk off in the direction of the cocktail table—the only place in the garden where a single man could linger without looking purposeless and alone'¹⁷⁷. Living on the East made him want the world be different, in uniform and under moral attention. However, he himself has failed to do so. He challenges his own beliefs by recounting his admiration of New York and 'the racy, adventurous feel of it at night, and the satisfaction that the constant flicker of men and women and machines gives to the restless eye. I liked to walk up Fifth Avenue and pick out romantic women from the crowd...'¹⁷⁸ Again, Fitzgerald uses the juxtaposition of Fifth Avenue and women to show women's objectified commodity status during this period, and thus Nick has become guilty of Tom's own commoditization of women.

If in the novel, West Egg functions as a land of order and meaning, Fitzgerald positions East Egg as its direct antithesis. Matterson considers *The Great Gatsby* to be 'a novel about the condition of American society at a particular time,'¹⁷⁹ shaken by the rise of the new capitalist boom of the 1920s consumer culture. Tom and Daisy Buchanan exemplify the materialistic obsession of the aristocratic elite who Fitzgerald depicts as heartless souls, capable of exploiting wealth's manipulative value. Fitzgerald critiques their wealth as having afforded them a kind of purposeless leisure devoid of meaning. Additionally, they feel superior, knowing their place in society and make it a point to let others know their position. It was indeed a cruel body that transmits feelings of inferiority onto those of West Egg, and in particular Gatsby. The East Egg feeling of superiority to West Egg emerges out of the fact that unlike Tom's pre-existing wealth, Gatsby appears a rather mysterious character. Even the lavishness of Gatsby's parties that seemed to symbolize the 1920s does not impress the Buchanans of East Egg. Nick observes that Daisy was amazed by West Egg and its vigor, he saw something awful in the very simplicity she didn't understand. Similarly, Tom generalizes Gatsby's based on his residency in West Egg, considering Gatsby nothing than a big bootlegger. Tom, on the other hand, had sent Daisy an expensive pearl necklace of 150 dollars. The price in fact is an exaggerated detail of the monetary value of this gesture, and can be seen as his critique of the excessive spending afforded to the upper classes in the new consumer capitalist economy, which rendered them meaningless. Another reflection of the materialistic nature of their marriage, Daisy consistently reverts to the security of Tom's wealth and position in society. In the scene in New York City at the Plaza, Tom and Gatsby turn Daisy into an object of consumption 'to be fought over on the basis of social and economic conventions.'¹⁸⁰ Tom yells to Gatsby that Daisy isn't going to leave him 'for a common swindler who'd have to steal the ring he put on her finger.'¹⁸¹

Although West Egg and East Egg are the two main settings in the novel, the setting of the Valley of Ashes also has a symbolic meaning. Lacking the rustic suburban allure of West and East Eggs, and positioned halfway between East Egg and West Egg, it is a barren wasteland of the lower class that highlights the destruction of traditional mores in all characters, and thus all classes, in this new capitalist American society of the 1920s. Nick depicts the Valley of Ashes as a lifeless background 'where ashes take forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and finally, with a transcendent effort, of men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air.'¹⁸² Clearly the alley of Ashes is less of a land of hope and more of terrain of disquieting decay.

The Valley of Ashes is home to George and Myrtle Wilson, the proprietors of the auto-repair shop. Compared to the rest of the characters, the Wilsons do not live up to high social standards. Rather they are of the lower working class. George was, 'a blond, spiritless man, anemic and faintly handsome,' and Myrtle was 'faintly stout, but she carried her surplus flesh sensuously as some women can.'¹⁸³ Although the Wilsons do not lead an extravagant life, they do become victims of materialism. Myrtle, Tom's mistress feels hopeless in her marriage to George citing their lack of material wealth. She declares that her marriage to George was a mistake, only because of his economical status, he even borrowed his wedding suite. She devalues George's loyalty to her and admires the palpable opulence of Tom's display. She seeks to improve her social stature, resorting to the affair with Tom Buchanan, thereby compromising her moral integrity. She even begins to value what seems to them to be trivial objects such as dogs, while driving down Fifth Avenue, the main high-end commercial center of New York City. The world of Myrtle Wilson and Tom Buchanan isn't quite different from that of Daisy and Tom. It is spoiled by the principles of the moneyed and propertied class, effecting lifeless characters that have no genuine feeling for each other. There can be no doubt that Fitzgerald paints the image of substandard living in the mind of the reader, but the motives for doing so could arguable be political in origin. The Valley of the Ashes

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, p.35

¹⁷⁸ Ibid, p.46

¹⁷⁹ Matterson, Stephen. *The Great Gatsby*. Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1990, p.33

¹⁸⁰ Callahan, John F. "F. Scott Fitzgerald's Evolving American Dream: The "Pursuit of Happiness" in Gatsby, Tender Is the Night, and The Last Tycoon." *Twentieth Century Literature* 42.3 (1996): 374-95. *JSTOR*. Web. 11 Nov. 2012.p.382

¹⁸¹ Fitzgerald, F.Scott; *The Great Gatsby*, Cambridge University Press, 1991 p.104

¹⁸² Ibid, p.23

¹⁸³ Ibid, p.23

already plays well into the theme of the corruption of the American Dream, and it would be no stretch to suggest that Fitzgerald underscores his own political beliefs with these depictions.

Geography is used by Fitzgerald in one final manner with practically unmatched profundity. Here, geography is used more as a matter of distance to underscore the significance of the points Fitzgerald wishes to deliver. The distance of the green light and the endless ocean and current in which the boats beat on and on provides Fitzgerald with his platform. The first mentioning of the Green light comes at the end of the first chapter, as Nick observes Gatsby staring out at sea. Nick recalls: ‘Involuntarily I glanced seaward--and distinguished nothing except a single green light, minute and far away, that might have been the end of a dock. When I looked once more for Gatsby he had vanished, and I was alone again in the unquiet darkness’¹⁸⁴. The light remains a mystery for much of the novel.

Finally, though, Nick reveals its true purpose and symbolic significance in the final lines of the text: ‘Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that’s no matter--tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther....And one fine morning— So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.’¹⁸⁵The final lines of *The Great Gatsby* are perhaps among the most quoted in all of American literature. The role of geography in the delivery of the novel’s most important metaphor is essential. What this means is that, as young people, they are seeking their ultimate dreams of happiness in their future and the perfection of their goals and accomplishments. These goals are obviously very difficult to attain, and often impossible; such is the nature of perfection. But still, they strive on for perfection because in their pursuit, they achieve more and more unprecedented happiness and greatness, even if their ultimate goal is never attained. The great distance of this goal is represented by the literal distance of exactly the green light in the novel, as well as the use of the ocean--the vast expanse of unending waters in which the boats pursue their goals. Only with the careful, calculated use of geography in the ideas presented here does the metaphor truly hold.

The Great Gatsby is clearly much more about the loss of a way of life and values during the 1920s, than the sophistication of the Jazz Age. An age of *carpe diem* rather than traditional mores of the past, American capitalism in the 1920s led to a rise of an eclectic material culture that gave way to class struggle and meaninglessness in life. Fitzgerald critiques these to create a more realistic picture of the consequences of the 1920s to show that the characters as representatives of certain classes have achieved equality, but through a collective loss of morality.

So, in conclusion, the role of geography in *The Great Gatsby* is clear and specific, but also widespread. On multiple occasions Fitzgerald uses it as social commentary, as a platform for his own political views, and as a vehicle for the delivery of complex--but deeply profound--metaphors. There can be no doubt that without the use of geography, *The Great Gatsby* would be possibly far less memorable, especially considering the importance of the closing line’s impact upon Modern literature

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¹⁸⁴ Ibid, p.20

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