

A DISCOURSE ON VARIEGATED ASPECTS OF ‘TASTE’: AN ANALYSIS OF ‘CLASS DISTINCTIONS’ IN F. SCOTT FITZGERALD’S THE GREAT GATSBY

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I

Such a wholesome and delectable topic it is! How palatable it is to discourse on ‘taste’! From the prehistoric times to the present, ‘taste’ as a human attribute—cultivated or instinctual—as an abstract idea has continued to exert its influence in all its variegated forms and facets. Geographical, cultural, social, ethnic, religious diversities are essentially identified in relation to ‘taste.’ Food, housing, clothing, tools, automobiles, linguistic nuances are recognizable in the overall context of ‘taste.’ And twenty first century, properly speaking, seems to sum up the past, the present, providing clue to the future. And we as aestheticians, literary and art critics, philosophers, cultural conscience keepers will only meekly struggle to come up with a definable and workable clarification of this tantalizing and painfully tasty simple word ‘taste.’ And its multiple shades of meaning will for ever shadow us. And we will continue to be teased out of thought. While its universality cannot be ignored, its individual characteristics will always be mystifying and puzzling.

‘Taste’ is not only visceral; it is aesthetic. It is not only the ‘taste’ one relishes on one’s palate, but it is also conditioned by our collective unconscious response dictated by societal, environmental, cultural, and group determinants. It is one human characteristic that encompasses all senses as also our intellectual faculties. Taste for food, taste for colors—natural and artificial—, taste for beauty; taste for art; taste for human relationships—it is synesthetic. It is a human trait. To be human is to be complex. After all to be ‘simple’ is to be ‘dull’ and ‘boring’—perhaps unappetizing! To be ‘complex’ is a sign or a reflection of the multifacetedness of the congeries of human impulses, desires, and forces. A person of ‘taste’ is considered cultured, well bred, refined, sophisticated, and educated. A person of taste is one who delightfully savors not only tasty food but also instinctually appreciates a tastefully decorated flower vase, a symmetrically built building. Taste is perhaps indicative of ‘good sense’ and ‘good judgment’ and ‘beautiful discrimination.’ ‘Taste’ includes applause and approbation.

Perhaps the only Handbook that has included an entry on a definition of ‘taste’ is the one put together by Harmon and Holman.

A term for the basis of personal reception of a work of art. Perhaps no critical term remains, despite all efforts, more purely subjective. However, as

it is commonly used, it has two distinct meanings; it may refer to the mere condition of liking or disliking, in which case it may be deplored but not debated. (“There is no accounting for taste.” *De gustibus non est disputandum*); on the other hand, it may refer to the ability to discern the beautiful and to appreciate it, in which case *taste* is capable of being cultivated. T.S. Eliot had such a view of *taste* when he saw one function of criticism to be “the correction of taste,” and so had Addison when he said that *taste* “discerns the Beauties of an Author with Pleasure, and the imperfections with Dislike.”

Taste in the first sense is used to describe a purely impressionistic response, as in the criticism of Croce; in the second sense it designates a kind of aesthetic judgment, as it does with Eliot.

(A Handbook to Literature 514)

The 18th century urbane essayist and subtle ironist with a refined ‘taste’ begins his Spectator Essay No. 409 with “Gratian (Baltasar Gracian, 1601-1658), Spanish literary critic’s *Arte de Ingenio* (1642) very often recommends the fine taste as the utmost Perfection of an accomplished Man.” (McDonald 450). Addison then discourses on how one may “acquire fine Taste of writing which is much talked of among the Polite World” (Learned, Civilized) and distinguishes between that Mental Taste ... and sensitive Taste which gives us a relish of every Flavour that affects the Palate...” (McDonald 450)

A Man of fine Taste in writing will discern after the same manner (as a man who possessed in great Perfection having “tasted ten different kinds of Tea, he would distinguish, without seeing the Colour of it, the particular Sort which was offered him)—“not only the general Beauties and Imperfections of an Author, but discover the several ways of thinking and Expressing himself, which diversify him from all other authors...(451)

Addison then convinces himself and his readers that he is entitled to “define (taste) to be that Faculty of the Soul, which discerns the Beauties of the Author with Pleasure, and the Imperfections with Dislike.” (451) He further admits that

It is very difficult to lay down Rules for the Acquirement of such a Taste as that I am here speaking of. The Faculty must in some degree be born with us, and it very often happens, that those who have other Qualities in Perfection are wholly void of this... Conversations with Men of a Polite Genius is another Method for improving our Natural Taste. (452)

Further Addison boldly asserts that “for a Man who would form to himself a finished Taste of Good writing, to be well versed in the works of the best Criticks both Ancient and Modern.” (453)

Unlike Addison whose approach is essentially literary analysis imbued with a refined sensibility, the 18th century German philosopher Immanuel Kant in his "Critique of Judgment" delineates judgment of 'taste' according to quality which is aesthetical

The satisfaction which determines the judgment of Taste is Disinterested; comparison of The three specifically different kinds of satisfaction—the Pleasant, the Beautiful, and the Good--; of the empirical interest in the Beautiful. Second Moment of the Judgment of Taste, according to Quantity; (a) the Beautiful is that which apart from concepts as the object of a universal satisfaction; (b) comparison of the Beautiful with the Pleasant and the Good by means of the above characteristic; (c) the universality of the satisfaction is represented in a judgment of Taste only as subjective; (d) investigation of the question whether in the judgment does Feeling of Pleasure precede or follow the judging of the object. Third moment of the Judgment of Taste according to the Relation of the purposes—the Pure Judgment of Taste is Independent of Charm and Emotion. (Greene xii)

These are some of the characteristics that are identified essentially under 'contents' of Kant Selections.

Kant's analysis or discourse further takes into account relation of genius to Taste, Products of Beautiful Art.

The Empiricist David Hume believes 'Taste' is the primary notion, for there is no authority beyond 'taste' for the evaluation of works of art and that a standard of taste, however, can be derived from the workings of the mind. In his essay "Of the Standard of Taste," Hume asserts that "though men of delicate taste be rare, they are easily to be distinguished in society, by soundness of their understanding and the superiority of their faculties above the rest of mankind." (Hume 88) Can there be right or wrong taste in morals, eloquence, or beauty?

While Addison, Kant, and Hume recognize applicability of 'taste' to literary works and art, it is "fruitless to dispute concerning tastes." (Hume, 80) "It is natural for us to seek a *standard of taste*, a rule by which the various sentiments of men may be reconciled." (Hume 80) Sometimes 'taste' hides hypocritically primitive and inelegant and unrefined.

All the three well known 'arbiters' of taste certainly limited their discussions on art, literature, and philosophy. They have not extended their views into social, cultural, economic realms nor into regions beyond the west. Thus, their considered opinions are limited in scope. For that matter, there are no references or responses to aural, sartorial, olfactory, gastronomical. How about 'taste' as reflected in 'class distinctions' such as those found in Asian cultures-- 'caste system' in India? Or, 'economic' distinctions as reflected in affluent societies that inherently recognize the difference between 'aristocracy' and 'nouveau riche'!

II

The second part of my paper is to examine critically the famous 20th century American novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* which "has become an international source for American social history and is read as a record of American life at an actual time and place" (Brucoli 193). Contextually certain textual passages are cited and examined to elucidate the 'class distinctions' that the novelist ironically brings out with his 'double vision,' specifically the characters of Tom Buchanan, the inherently wealthy, arrogant and smug aristocrat—the antagonist, if one may—, the nouveau riche dreamer and idealist Jay Gatsby, the vague and mysterious tragic protagonist because of his 'shady dealings' who materializes from the "Platonic conception of himself"—the novelist's sympathetic projection of the Horatio Alger myth from 'rags to riches' idea—the all-embracing American Dream.

In the context of the novel some general observations are apropos.

Aristocratic people generally demonstrate their elegance and opulence and taste in a mild, subdued, sophisticated manner tempered with arrogance yet subtly revealing their 'taste' to appeal to refined sensibilities and for a mute approbation. Nouveau riche, on the other hand, exhibit their newly acquired immense wealth in a flashy fashion, showing off with lavish parties and dazzling automobiles in garish colors with 'little taste.' Essentially the aristocrat is arrogantly proud of his inheritance.

'Taste' is not only a matter of judgment and aesthetic sensibility. 'Taste' can be 'objective' and 'subjective'; it is reflected as a binary: 'classical' versus 'popular'; pure and chaste language of the 'educated' versus poor, gutter, vulgar language of the 'uneducated'; economic 'class distinctions'; 'caste' distinctions; 'urban' versus 'rural.' 'Taste' can be related to 'social' and 'class' distinctions.

Scott Fitzgerald in *The Great Gatsby* presents three sets of characters to delineate ironically 'class distinctions.' The aristocrats Tom Buchanan and his wife Daisy; the poor garage owner George Wilson and his wife Myrtle; the "American self-made—indeed self-invented man" (Brucoli xi)— Jay Gatsby--indeed the metamorphosis of his name from Jim Gatz to Jay Gatsby is a clear indication of the self-invented man—who "believes in the American Dream of success." (Brucoli xi).

The clear cut 'class distinctions' are typically expressed in the houses they live in; the automobiles they drive; their behavior and aspirations.

The Buchanans who live in the fashionable East Egg with "white palaces" are "enormously wealthy." (*Gatsby* 10) As Nick Carraway, the narrator, the central figure, who drives an "old Dodge" and lives in the West Egg, the unfashionable section of Long Island, next door to Gatsby's mansion,

succinctly states, "Their house was even more elaborate than I expected, a cheerful red and white Georgian colonial mansion. . ."(Gatsby 11).

Tom Buchanan was a sturdy, straw haired man of thirty with a rather hard mouth and a supercilious manner. Two shining, arrogant eyes had established dominance over his face... It was a body capable of enormous leverage—a cruel body... His speaking voice, a gruff husky tenor, added to the impression of fractiousness he conveyed. There was a touch of paternal contempt in it, even toward people he liked—and there were men at New Haven who had hated his guts. (*Gatsby 11*)

The novelist's juxtaposition of diction ironically demonstrating the arrogant hardness of aristocracy against their built in contemptuousness, which Scott Fitzgerald ironically ridicules by his use of 'straw haired,' 'gruff,' 'fractiousness,' toward any who are below their 'social scale' amply illustrates 'class distinctions.' Tom Buchanan simply admits to Nick, "I've got a nice place here." (*Gatsby 12*)—yet another hallmark of downplaying aristocratic arrogance in order to elicit adulation. Tom's wife Daisy calls him "brute of a man, a great big hulking physical specimen of a—"(*Gatsby 16*). This passage is a clear indication of the novelist's attitude toward the aristocrat Tom Buchanan. Both the tone and the diction are revelatory of the despicable nature of the aristocrat Tom Buchanan.

Whereas "about half way between West Egg and New York... 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" (*Gatsby 27*)—turns out to be the place where Wilsons have a garage for repairs in a "building of yellow brick sitting on the edge of the waste land." (*Gatsby 28*) The proprietor George Wilson "was a blonde, spiritless man, anaemic and faintly handsome." (*Gatsby 29*) And it his disgruntled wife—"thickish figure of a woman who carries "her surplus flesh sensuously" (*Gatsby 29*)—Myrtle Wilson that is Tom Buchanan's mistress. Ironically the arrogant aristocrat of the East Egg shamelessly calls the resident of the ash heaps his 'girl' "who has no facet or gleam of beauty" but has "perceptible vitality. Myrtle admits that she married George "because I (*she*) thought he was a gentleman. I thought he knew something about breeding but he wasn't fit to lick my shoe." (*Gatsby 39*)

Gatsby, on the other hand, "is very careful about women." As his business associate Meyer Wolfsheim testifies, "He (Gatsby) would never so much as look at a friend's wife." (*Gatsby 77*)..."a perfect gentleman." (*Gatsby 76*)

The narrator Nick Carraway, the observer and commentator and partly a participant in the unfolding tragic story of Jay Gatsby's naïve and pristine dream, sketches the figure of Gatsby the first time he sees him at night about fifty feet away from him. The diction locates the hero in a mysterious fashion:

... a figure had emerged from the shadow of my neighbor's mansion and was standing with his hands in his pockets regarding the silver pepper of the stars. Something in his leisurely movements and the secure position of his feet upon the lawn suggested that it was Mr. Gatsby himself come out to determine what share was his of our local heavens. (Gatsby 25)

What a contrast in the way both Gatsby and Tom Buchanan are introduced and portrayed! Gatsby is the self-made man by hook or crook with no mistress drawn from the ash heaps. His only dream is to obtain and possess Daisy, now married to Tom Buchanan, with a two-year old daughter, who had rejected him five years earlier because then Jay Gatsby was penniless. Since then he assiduously followed the path of 'success' to amass enough wealth to secure the love of Daisy who would later tolerate her husband's unconscionable and murky philanderings. And all the wealth he accumulated was to have a mansion across the bay in West Egg "lit from tower to cellar."

Gatsby's house "looks like the world's fair," as Nick Carraway exclaims. Gatsby admits that "it took me just three years to earn the money that bought it." The puzzled Daisy excoriates "I thought you inherited your money." (Gatsby 95) She cries pointing at Gatsby's mansion: "That huge place *there*?..."

"The big poster," "the feudal silhouette against the sky," "Marie Antoinette music rooms and Restoration salons," "the Merton College Library," "the period bedrooms swathed in rose and lavender," "dressing rooms with sunken baths." (Gatsby 96). It is undoubtedly an enormous affair!

'Taste' in the context of the overall tone of the novel could be understandably related to the mansions, houses, and placed where they are located. The aristocrat Tom Buchanan lives in the fashionable East Egg; Gatsby has a mansion in the less fashionable of the nouveau riche in West Egg; the Wilsons live in the ash heaps with a garage. The narrator Nick Carraway lives in a small rented house as a neighbor to Gatsby. Jordan Baker, the golf player who cheats at golf tournaments, who is introduced to Nick Carraway by the Buchanans, sneers at Nick being a resident of the West Egg: "you live in West Egg, she remarked contemptuously." (Gatsby 15)

Clearly 'class distinctions' are drawn revealing 'tastes' of each character.

Tom Buchanan has a blue coupe; Gatsby has a gorgeous and splendid Rolls Royce that Nick admires: "It was a rich cream color, bright with nickel, swollen here and there in its monstrous length with triumphant hatboxes and supper-boxes and tool-boxes, and terraced with a labyrinth of windshields that mirrored a dozen suns." (Gatsby 68). Tom Buchanan, however, with his aristocratic disdain sneeringly calls Gatsby's Rolls Royce "this circus wagon." (Gatsby 128). His distaste toward Gatsby, his background, his ill gotten wealth that evidently competes with his aristocratic inheritance finds expression in condescension, repulsion, arrogance.

"I've made a small investigation of this fellow," . . . I could have deeper if I'd known...

(a deliberate ellipsis)

"An Oxford man!" He was incredulous. "Like hell he is" "He wears a pink suit."

"Oxford, New Mexico, snorted Tom contemptuously, "or something like that."

(Gatsby 128-29)

The intense dramatic exchange that takes place in New York's Plaza Hotel further exemplifies Tom Buchanan's 'distaste' and snobbishness of aristocracy. His philandering during his honeymoon and at Daisy's delivery of their daughter and his present 'open' affair with a woman from the 'ash heaps' of the Valley of Ashes may be read with his sanctimonious outbursts: "Nowadays people begin by sneering at family life and family institutions and next they'll throw everything overboard and have intermarriage between black and white." (Gatsby 137)

Tom further ridicules the lavish parties of Gatsby which he indulges in simply to attract the attendance of his love Daisy. Tom bemoans: "I know I'm not very popular. I don't give big parties. I suppose you've got to make your house into a pigsty in order to have any friends—in the modern world." (137) When Gatsby finally tells Tom that Daisy is leaving him, Tom in his inimitable smug fashion retorts: "Nonsense." "She's not leaving me!... "Certainly not for a common swindler who'd have to steal the ring he put on her finger." (Gatsby 140)

These few instances and episodes ironically reveal Tom's aristocratic attitude; his virulent attack of nouveau riche as personified or symbolically portrayed in Gatsby clearly brings out the novelist's understanding of 'class distinctions.'

George Wilson in his garage has a dusty old Ford sitting. Nick Carraway has 'old Dodge.' The automobiles further speak of 'class distinctions' as well.

What Joseph Addison, Immanuel Kant, David Hume have scrupulously presented in their considered literary and philosophical essays and discourses on literary and aesthetic matters seem to miss on the variegated aspects of 'taste.' 'Taste' is more than 'liking' or 'disliking.' To define 'taste' is to confine the word and to limit it. It radiates innumerable shades. It incorporates cultures, societies, caste distinctions. 'Taste' in Sanskrit, the ancient classical language of India, and Telugu, a Dravidian language of South India, means 'ruchi.' But 'ruchi' has multiple shades and connotations. Though the immediate and recognizable denotation takes one to one's palate, yet it stretches far and beyond. What F. Scott Fitzgerald in his masterpiece *The Great Gatsby* presents is 'social class distinctions.' And these distinctions are adumbrated particularly in the aristocrat Tom Buchanan's sallies.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

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Summary

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After exploring the variegated aspects of 'taste' such as aesthetic, visual, aural, sartorial, olfactory, gastronomical, classical and modern, drawing peripherally from Immanuel Kant, David Hume, Joseph Addison, I wish to examine critically the famous 20th century American F. Scott Fitzgerald's classic *The Great Gatsby* in the context of 'class distinctions,' specifically the characters of the aristocrat Tom Buchanan and the nouveau riche Gatsby, their attitudes that reflect their 'taste,' their behavior, the automobiles they drive, the mansions they inhabit and their locale, the language they use.

The novel "has become an international source for American social history and is read as a record of American life at an actual time and place." F. Scott Fitzgerald ironically brings out with his 'double vision' the characters of Tom Buchanan, the inherently wealthy, arrogant and smug aristocrat and the nouveau riche dreamer and idealist Jay Gatsby, the vague and mysterious tragic protagonist because of his 'shady dealings' who materializes from the "Platonic Conception of himself"—the novelist's sympathetic projection of the Horatio myth from 'rags to riches' idea—the all-embracing American Dream. Surely the novelist evidently delineates the characters with 'taste' as the barometer.