

English B

Extended Essay

Contrasting Characters Gatsby and Tom In The Novel “The Great Gatsby”

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Research Question: How did F. Scott Fitzgerald create the contrast between Tom and Gatsby in the novel “The Great Gatsby”?

Table of Contents

Introduction **2**
Development **5**
 The Use of Color 5
 Presentation of Lifestyle 8
 Perception of Daisy 10
Conclusion..... **12**
Bibliography **13**

Introduction

Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald was born on September twenty-four, 1896, in St Paul Minnesota. He left Minnesota for Princeton and later moved to New York City. He married socialite Zelda Sayre after publishing his first novel “The Side of Paradise” in 1920. After his career took off, he suffered alcoholism and depression that contributed to his death. He died at the age of 44 in 1940 caused by a heart attack. Many aspects of his life are mirrored in the novel in the form of character traits and story settings.

The novel takes place in 1920s America. The 1920s was a decade that experienced cultural and economic change. The era is also known as “The jazz age”.¹ First World War ended, and the economy faced growth; as a result, the US became the wealthiest country. The changes were easy to recognize which were women earning the right to vote, women playing a role in the workforce, widespread automobile ownership... With the development of technology, people migrated to cities and that was the first-time urban population outnumbered the rural population.² These changes led to different societal characteristics such as more freedom, more free time, and more disposable income. Socially and politically rich people had power in society. They were awarded tax benefits and were highly admired by lower-level societies which are also seen in the novel many times. While wealth had power, the middle and lower classes suffered greatly. Luxuries such as automobiles, houses, radios, and telephones were outside of reach for many citizens. The novel “The Great Gatsby” echoes and represents the societal presence present in the Jazz Age. Characters embody variant classes, different

¹ History.com Editors. (2010, April 14). *The roaring twenties*. History.com. Retrieved March 10, 2022, from <https://www.history.com/topics/roaring-twenties/roaring-twenties-history>

² Bellot , G. (2019, May 8). *What the Great Gatsby reveals about the jazz age - jstor daily*. jstore. Retrieved March 10, 2022, from <https://daily.jstor.org/what-the-great-gatsby-reveals-about-the-jazz-age/>

values, behaviors, lost ideals, and ethics. The novel shows two classes that conflict with each other both chasing the “American Dream”.

The novel adopts the first-person point of view from the perspective of Nick Carraway who recently moved to New York City from Minnesota. The story mainly tells about the disillusionment of Gatsby’s “American Dream”. Gatsby is a poor young man who falls in love with Daisy who is a rich girl. Daisy marries Tom Buchannan who is a rich man coming from a wealthy family that has high social status. The climax of the novel starts as Tom learns about his wife’s affair and confronts Gatsby on a New York City trip with Daisy, Gatsby, Tom, and Nick. Gatsby’s car hits Myrtle who is the love interest of Tom and kills her. They rush back to Long Island where Nick learns Daisy was the one driving. Tom tells Myrtle’s husband George that Gatsby is the killer, and he was her secret affair. George finds Gatsby in his pool in his mansion and shoots him then himself following. Nick stages a small funeral for Gatsby and moves back to Midwest.

The fictional flow of the novel created by Fitzgerald affects the reader’s view on characters and the values they hold. The two characters that represent opposite values are Tom and Gatsby who are represented to the reader by the choices of literary devices, symbolism, imagery, and fictional choices. Fitzgerald associated symbols and themes with the characters creating the contrast between Tom and Gatsby. The two characters are representations of two different social groups during the jazz age which is the main setting of the novel. Characterization of Tom and Gatsby creates a vision for the reader where the jazz age created people from different backgrounds and social statuses. So “How did F. Scott Fitzgerald create this contrast between Tom and Gatsby?” is the main question of this essay.

Fitzgerald used symbolism throughout the whole novel to create the plot, shape the personalities of characters and deepen the theme. Symbolism in novels is used to emphasize images and themes without using direct descriptions but rather specific images and symbols to

let the reader create ideas and concepts from their understandings. These symbolisms also create contrast between Tom and Gatsby as they are used throughout the novel.

The novel “The Great Gatsby” has been read for over decades. In this novel, the two conflicted characters Tom and Gatsby are shown detailed and vividly. Jay Gatsby is the protagonist of the novel who is portrayed as the classy, attractive figure who has been discussed and studied many times. Tom Buchanan is portrayed as an antagonist who is an important figure to show the contrast between different societal groups and the contrast between old money and new money. This is why Tom and Gatsby are chosen for the two contrasting characters as they are significant to analyze.

Tom is represented as the issue standing between Gatsby and Daisy’s reunion who also was an idea in Gatsby’s mind and portrayed from his eyes. Tom does not like the idea of Daisy leaving him for a lower-status man which is how he sees Gatsby as he came from a poor background. The crucial aspect of the setting is highly reflective of the characters. Class structural society is expressed by characters’ backgrounds. Tom is representative of the old money while Gatsby reflects the newly rich. The contrast is reflected throughout the novel. An example may be Gatsby living in West Egg where the newly rich live while Tom lives in East Egg where old money aristocracy lives both in Long Island near New York City. The two figure’s dialogues are an important way to compare the roles. Daisy choosing to remain with Tom is an important aspect of comparing the two figures. Gatsby’s main motivation for becoming rich was his love for Daisy who promised to wait for Gatsby during First World War but married Tom. Daisy is an aspect of the comparison between Tom and Gatsby as their approaches to Daisy differ therefore Fitzgerald portrays these two characters as conflicted characters representing different things.

Development

The Use of Color

Symbolism refers to an item, in this aspect colors, which represents ideas and holds deeper meanings when coming together in a literary piece. Fitzgerald uses symbolism in the novel to integrate personal emotion and the social environment. In his understanding and representation of the age, he sees Gatsby's dreams as superficiality as well as the failure of his American dream which is emphasized at the end of the novel when Daisy chooses Tom over Gatsby. The colors have a significant place as they hold deeper layer meanings every time they occur in the novel. The three important colors for the comparison of Tom and Gatsby are green, white, and red.

The green color appears three times in the novel as the green light at the end of the dock at Tom and Daisy's mansion. This green light is for warning the boats at night or at inclement weather to prevent crashes to the dock and this is why it is always on. The first time the color is seen is in the first chapter: *"But I didn't call to him for he gave a sudden intimation that he was content to be alone—he stretched out his arms toward the dark water in a curious way, and far as I was from him I could have sworn he was trembling. 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."* (Fitzgerald, 23-24). The quote states that the act of Gatsby holds an "intimation". The act being he reaching out as if he will touch the green light shows that the act holds a deeper meaning and done with an intimacy that is private to Gatsby. As Fitzgerald describes the green light as a far light that is the only thing visible it creates a metaphor of unreachable dreams. The light is at the end of the deck to Daisy and Tom's mansion expresses that Gatsby longs to be with Daisy; however, it is an unreachable, faux dream as she is married to Tom. So, the color green symbolizes the dream, hope, and life of Gatsby. The green color is also generally associated with envy. In the novel green light is also a representation of envy and

jealousy of Gatsby. As the light is at the end of the dock of Daisy and Tom's mansion Gatsby longs to be with Daisy like Tom is. Gatsby believes that Daisy married Tom because he is rich and wealthy as result, he hopes that when he becomes rich Daisy will get back together with him. This is an example of envy being represented by green light. The green light is too far away representing that this hope and dream is doomed to fail.

At the end of the novel green light occurs again this time after Gatsby's death. "*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.*" (Fitzgerald, 180) The "orgastic future" means a future with promise and hope. In the first quote, Gatsby is reaching for the green light and the last quote suggests a promise of reaching out farther despite the impossibility of reaching it. These two link the green color symbolizing the hope of the future and the eternal optimism which for Gatsby is the love and the American dream. However, at the end of the novel green loses its meaning of hope to something less hopeful and leaves it to acceptance of the present. Boats against the current do not go a long way and keep being pushed back. The back being referred to as the past which is an abstract phrase suggests there is a metaphorical meaning. This concludes that as much as we strive, we could never be separated from the past, and leaving the past behind is like sailing a boat against the current. The quotation clearly expresses Gatsby's beliefs and perspectives of life. Gatsby is represented as a profound person with many values in life.

Where Gatsby can be associated with green, we can see that red is associated with Tom which are two contrasting colors in the color wheel. Fitzgerald uses these contrast colors to solidify this contrast in readers' minds. This gives readers an insight into the novel where Tom and Gatsby are created to be two conflicted characters. Red occurs in the novel mostly as a description of blood. It also occurs in the description of Daisy and Tom's mansion. "*a cheerful*

red-and-white Georgian Colonial mansion, overlooking the bay. (...) The front was broken by a line of French windows, glowing now with reflected gold..." (Fitzgerald, 9). The color red symbolizes rage, violence, and danger in many resources. The color of their mansion is white and red. Since white is associated with Daisy as the color is pure and hollow the color red symbolizes Tom with his arrogance, selfishness, and cruelty because of the characterization of Tom. Red is seen as the color of the blood of Myrtle and Gatsby in the novel also where Tom was responsible for Gatsby's death. Because of Tom's wealth and superior family background, he is portrayed as arrogant and selfish. He is disloyal to his marriage as he spends time with his mistress Myrtle. However, after finding out about Gatsby's and Daisy's affair he takes her to Gatsby only to show how he is superior to Gatsby. He then tricks the husband of Myrtle to kill Gatsby which shows his cruelty and arrogance. The fictional aspect shows that Fitzgerald chose red to be associated with Tom and creates powerful imagery where it shows the cruelty of Tom as red is a color that gives bright, alert emotions to an observer or a reader in this novel.

These colors and many more represent deeper layers in the novel making it vivid, profound, and dreamlike. Colors are used as symbols where they create the visual contrast between Gatsby and Tom which becomes physical contrast in the reader's mind. This is an evident aspect of the creation of contrast by the writer.

Presentation Of the Lifestyle

Another way of creating contrast and representing it to the reader is by giving them an insight into the characters' way of living and how it differs. Fitzgerald does that by visual imageries and descriptions through Nick's perspective. The biggest contrast between Tom and Gatsby is their wealth. Tom and Gatsby have different ways of living and social status. The creation of the setting by the writer has a crucial effect on showing social status. Tom lives in East Egg where the old money and aristocracy live, and Gatsby lives in West Egg where the newly rich live as it is less popular, both in Long Island near New York City. This is another

symbolism Fitzgerald creates as the two places have deeper meanings and connotations linked to them. The contrast between East and West Egg also represents the contrast between characters Tom and Gatsby.

East Egg is where Tom and Daisy's mansion is located. The writer describes this place by using visual imagery and pleasant adjectives from Nick's point of view: "*Along the courtesy bay, the white palaces of the fashionable East Egg glittered along the water.*" (Fitzgerald, 9). The description and the words "white palaces", "glittered along the water" states the glamorous life of the East Egg. The Georgian Colonial mansion of Tom and Daisy is also described as a beautiful, elegant mansion. The mansion is fashionable in a way it represents old aristocracy with its "French windows" and general appearance. The usage of plural nouns adds to the description of the mansion making it grander and suggesting wealth. When plural nouns are used it is suggested that there is more than one. Considering this usage, the expressions "*sundials and brick walks and burning gardens*" increase the wealth's significance. "*(...) and Tom Buchanan in riding clothes was standing with his legs apart on the front porch*" (Fitzgerald, 9). This quotation is at the end of the description of the mansion stating that Tom owning this colonial mansion represents him with power and elegance. The stance of his position of standing with his legs apart shows and proves his authority and power coming from well-established wealth. East Egg incorporates many more well-known wealthy families that have had inherited wealth and are not eager to show it.

West Egg is where Gatsby and Nick live. Written from the point of view of Nick West Egg is described as "*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.*" (Fitzgerald, 9) The adjective "*less fashionable*" states that it is not as prestigious and beautiful as the East. While West Egg has similar extravagances as the East the quotation expresses that it seems pretentious and out of place in the West Egg. Gatsby's mansion in the West Egg is described as "*Green The one on*

my right was a colossal affair by any standard—it was a factual imitation of some Hôtel de Ville in Normandy, with a tower on one side, spanking new under a thin beard of raw ivy, and a marble swimming pool, and more than forty acres of lawn and garden. It was Gatsby's mansion." (Fitzgerald, 9) Nick's description of Gatsby's mansion suggests as it is an imitation of a building in France while being massive and luxurious. France is used as an indicator of the old aristocracy being imitated by Gatsby. This states that the mansion represents how new money imitates old-world wealth and status. On a deeper level, this also suggests how Gatsby is an imitation with no heritage. Tom mocks Gatsby for his imitating calling him "*Mr. Nobody from Nowhere*" meaning that he does not have a wealthy and known background. The personification used in "a thin beard of raw ivy" suggests a comparison between East and West. The word "raw" means new and youthful just like an adolescent boy's beard suggesting that the mansion is pristine looking with sparse ivy growing and concealing it. While the mansion is ironically funny looking it still preserves its youth and want of concealing just like Gatsby conceals himself. The wealthier side of West Egg has a loud and obnoxious taste while the East Egg are more private in their wealth. As Tom and Gatsby are contrasted by their way of living the setting symbolizes the lifestyles of each of them. Gatsby just like the West Egg has an obnoxious taste and Tom just like the East Egg is more private in his wealth.

Fitzgerald uses West Egg and East Egg as metaphors to speak on American society at the time of the twenties. People in East Egg were established with their wealth. Tom was one of those people that had a known name in old aristocracy. However, Gatsby was known for his lavish parties, and no one truly knew of him and his wealth. It can be seen that Fitzgerald provides society's view of the newly rich as unrefined and distasteful because of the way of spending their money. Gatsby is the character representing the newly rich while Tom represents the old aristocracy. The writer creates the contrast between the characters by their belongingness to a place and how they are seen and described by the narrator Nick Carraway.

Perception of Daisy

Their association with Daisy is another indicator of contrast between Tom and Gatsby. Their interactions are described by the narrator Nick. When talking about what happened to Daisy initially after Gatsby left for the war Nick describes how she departure herself to the wealthy society of the Jazz Age: “*Daisy was young, and her artificial world was redolent of orchids and pleasant, cheerful snobbery and orchestras which set the rhythm of the year, summing up the sadness and suggestiveness of life in new tunes.*” (Fitzgerald, 151) This quotation in chapter eight is relevant because of the way Nick describes the wealthier society and Tom who is representative of the old aristocracy. The usage of the word “artificial” is used to describe the wealthier side of the society. The way this artificial world is described in a pleasant tone suggests that the wealth is captivating because being alluring and desirable while also being artificial and nongenuine in their relations and demeanors. The orchestras and the rhythm are musical metaphors for this hollowness. Jazz being the popular genre of music in the “Jazz Age” (1920’s) the art form reflected highly upon literary work. The “new tune” suggests the change and independence in the soundtrack of the society that came with the jazz age. The upbeat sounds and syncopated rhythms with the improvisation were some of the characteristics of jazz. The tune is said to be “summing up the sadness and suggestiveness of life” as there is this celebration with the mourning of the soldiers as they are leaving for the First World War in the tunes. This suggests an artificial charm that is hollow on the inside just like the wealthier side of the society which is representative of Tom. Gatsby is going to the army for the war as he is from an underprivileged family. Daisy being charmed into wealth with the leaving of Gatsby represents the structure of the society’s two sides one being reflected by Gatsby and the other by Tom. This way contrast is created which reaches the mind of the readers by the literary choices of the author.

An aspect of how Tom sees Daisy is like a property that he has, and Gatsby doesn't. One of the aspects, why he believes he is more powerful than Gatsby is because he has Daisy who is married to him. "*She is not leaving me, certainly not for a common swindler who'd have to steal the ring he put on her finger.*" (Fitzgerald, 132-133) In the quotation, Tom talks about Daisy leaving him for Gatsby after he learns and confronts them about their affair. The language is used in a commandment with an order for Daisy which suggests that Tom sees Daisy as a person in his command and not an individual. The way he speaks with long sentences as if he is trying to make himself assured shows his insecurity about Daisy leaving him for someone who he refers to as a "common swindler". Swindler means a person who cheats and is a fraud meaning the leaving of Daisy for Gatsby damages his self-confidence because of Gatsby's status in society being lower. Tom does not feel sadness and devastation for his love for Daisy but rather for his status in the society being under threat. Daisy represents power and almost a trophy of wealth in the eyes of Tom.

Gatsby however believes he is in love with Daisy since they met before the war which initially was a pure love turns into a dream and an idea in Gatsby's mind. Initially, the reason for Gatsby's wealth and enormous parties are the longing for Daisy. He becomes in love with the idea of Daisy which he met before being wealthy and going to war. When the affair begins this love turns into a competition between different social statuses as it is seen in the quote "*It was a terrible mistake, but in her heart, she never loved anyone except me.*" (Fitzgerald, 137) Fitzgerald uses love as not a powerful dreamlike emotion but a deformed expression in the era of Jazz. This dialog between Gatsby and Tom is an example of why. The expression referred to as the "terrible mistake" by Gatsby is the marriage of Tom and Daisy. He states the love of Daisy being only his in the quotation, suggesting that being loved by Daisy is a privilege. However, he does not express his love for Daisy himself. In the surface level the love between Daisy and Gatsby seems as a pure emotion but when looking deeper it can be seen that Gatsby

loses himself in the dream of being with Daisy and turns this love of Daisy into a prize. Gatsby and Tom's conflict that is reasoned by Daisy shows the contrast between the two characters. Their perception of Daisy shows their values in life are contrasting.

Conclusion

The novel "The Great Gatsby" captures the characteristics of the "Jazz Age" and represents certain themes through characters. Two characters that conflict with each other are Gatsby and Tom. The conflict between the characters comes from the distinguishing contrasts Fitzgerald created. The contrast between these two characters is created through symbolism and fictional choices in the relationship and communication narrated by the character Nick. A way Fitzgerald chose to create the contrast is the symbolism of colors in the novel. The colors enabled to create dreamlike visual imagery making the novel profound. The symbolism embodies the contrast between the characters and concretizes this distinction. Similar to the lifestyles and symbolizing of places West and East Egg which embodies the main contrast being old aristocracy and nouveau rich. These two characters symbolize people during the jazz age when they started to gain money and the term "American Dream" gained significance. The novel is based on this American dream of Gatsby's which is the idea of Daisy. Daisy represents the power and the wealth which would make the person being with her have that power. This is why Daisy is a significant character where both Tom's and Gatsby's association gives an insight into the characterization Fitzgerald created. These aspects show the choices Fitzgerald made to remark the contrast between these two characters.

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