

Symbolism in the Great Gatsby

Atika Mohammad Hasan Ismael and Muntaha Farah Sulieman Samardali
Instructors at Al-Balqa' Applied University, Al-Salt, Jordan
Al-Salt College for Human Sciences.

Abstract.

This is a paper that focuses on different symbols in F. Scott's Fitzgerald novel *The Great Gatsby*. The novel makes a link between different symbols employed in the novel, the Jazz Age and The American Dream. The major symbols that the paper focuses on are: the green light, the eyes of Doctor. T.J. Eckleburg and The Valley of Ashes. These symbols play an important role in developing the plot of the novel and distinguish it as a great masterpiece in English literature.

Key Words: *Symbols, Gatsby, Daisy, American Dream, Jazz Age, Fitzgerald.*

Introduction.

1. The Jazz Age:

The Jazz Age is a term that was coined by F. Scott Fitzgerald to describe America's situation in the 1920s. The period was characterized by wealth, corruption, lack of morals, materialism and neglect (www.shmoop.com/f-scott-fitzgerald/jazz-age.html). This age was also called The Roaring Twenties. Chaos and show-off parties show the conflict between traditional values and modern values.

The Jazz Age began in 1919 and ended in 1929 (Way, 1980, p. 9). It gave Fitzgerald different views of youth, romance, madness and violence (Way, 1980, p. 9).

Fitzgerald uses parties to illustrate the type of society at that time and the nature of people who used Gatsby and at the end did not even attend his funeral.

Critics agree that this novel is not a mere love story between a man and a woman but a commentary on the American Dream (Mizener, 1963, p. 125). Gatsby represents the decay of this dream and "the conflict between illusion and reality at the heart of American life" (Mizener, 1963, p. 128).

The Jazz Age, according to Fitzgerald, "was an age of miracles, it was an age of art, it was an age of excess, and it was an age of satire". (Minter, 1996, p. 82).

Fitzgerald in *The Great Gatsby* conveys to the reader the idea of corruption through illustrating people's lust for parties, their obsession to be wealthy, the difference between people who are newly rich and those who inherited their money on one hand, and the class contrast between the upper class and the lower class. Fitzgerald uses places as a tool to clarify his idea. The West Egg represents Gatsby who has new money, The East Egg represents the Buchanans who inherited their money and The Valley of Ashes represents the plight of poor people like George Wilson.

Recognizing the fact that the 1920s was a period of political and social change, many Americans witnessed changes in the way they lived. This converted the American society into a consumer society and affected people's ways of understanding life (Minter, 1996, p.83).

The American Dream:

"The American Dream is a national ethos of the United States, the set of ideals that include liberty, opportunity and equality". (https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Dream). Liberty includes prosperity and success for all people.

The American Dream is not only a dream of an individual but a dream of a nation and a whole age. The novel portrays Gatsby's disillusionment of this Dream since he regards Daisy as his American Dream and his goal that he wants to reach.

In Gatsby's vision, the only way to reach Daisy is by being wealthy especially that Daisy left him and married Tom because of his social status. Gatsby engages himself in illegal activities like crime and bootlegging to win her heart. All what Gatsby does is for the sake of having the feeling that he is wealthy like Tom, and thus being able to impress her.

Fitzgerald criticizes America where anyone can rise to the top. Originally, the American Dream is the notion

of success and equality to all people regardless of their gender, race or class. On the surface, the American Dream seems as an ideal belief but the reality is that equality is a myth.

The 1920s witnessed different economic changes that made anyone able to rise and be rich. Gatsby's parties present the decay of the 1920s in America. Gatsby himself pursues the American Dream especially that the reader learns about his sudden wealth.

The American Dream asserts that wealth can be gained through hard work. Yet, the reader learns that Gatsby's money comes from crime and illegal activities like bootlegging. Gatsby buys a luxurious mansion in the West Egg but he remains strange from the world of the East Egg that is a world for old money. That's why the novel ends with Nick's sad contemplation of the American Dream.

How does Gatsby in this novel reflect Fitzgerald?

Fitzgerald depicts destructive love in this novel particularly in the Jazz Age.

We can say that Jay Gatsby mirrors F. Scott Fitzgerald because both Gatsby and Fitzgerald were able to make money after having difficult times. (Way, 1980, p. 11).

Both were soldiers in the army. Zelda (Fitzgerald's wife) and Daisy resemble each other in what they did. Both men did their best to win the ladies they loved by impressing them of their wealth and success. A slight difference between them is that Fitzgerald marries Zelda but Gatsby does not marry Daisy since she chooses to stay with Tom, but they come at the end to have similar cases when Fitzgerald loses Zelda after her mental illness (suffering from anxiety and hearing imaginary voices). <https://www.theodysseyonline.com/jay-gatsby-mirrors-scott-fitzgerald>).

Fitzgerald possessed an understanding of various social notions and values that developed his understanding of life and the circumstances around him (Way, 1980, p. 1). His life is divided into three stages; his childhood and adolescence through which he gained knowledge about "wealth, class and morality" (Way, 1980, p.1).

The second stage of his life is the decade of the 1920s and the third stage is his last years at Hollywood when he was in contact with American people who represented the modern American life (Way, 1980, p. 1).

Fitzgerald is described as a representative writer of America in the 1920s. He wrote about changes in the behavior of people like Tom's parties which are "coarse and brutal" like Tom himself (Way, 1980, p.13). "Fitzgerald treats the age itself as if were a party-the kind of party that starts marvellously, but gets steadily more and more out of hand and ends in disaster". (Way, 1980, p. 13).

In A Letter on *The Great Gatsby*, Maxwell Perkins writes to Fitzgerald and tells him that he is right to be proud of this literary work for his brilliant way of choosing a narrator who is a spectator and for making the reader an observer of characters' actions ((Kazin, 1967, p.85).

Fitzgerald chooses this novel to speak about his personal life and the era that he witnessed in a way that makes the novel a realistic one.

Meanings of the symbols in *The Great Gatsby*:

A. The Green Light:

The green color usually symbolizes hope, spring and vitality.

The green light in the novel symbolizes the hope and optimism for Gatsby to have Daisy and reunite with her. When he looks at this light, he feels confident and hopeful that his dream will be fulfilled.

This green light glows at night and is emphasized in the novel. In the first chapter Gatsby describes this light and says:

"Involuntarily I glanced seaward-and distinguished nothing except a single green light, minute and far way, that might have been the end of a dock." (Fitzgerald, 1993, p. 16).

From this quotation, the reader understands that this light is at the end of Daisy's dock, so in a way it represents Daisy in Gatsby's pursuit of happiness by being with her. In chapter 1, Gatsby looks at this light as a guidance at night to lead him. Gatsby compares this green light to America that gave hope for its people about prosperity.

The green light is a concrete object that represents abstract concepts of yearning and nostalgia.

The green light is noticed again in the last chapter of the novel, but here it indicates the disillusionment of the American Dream.

"Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then." (Fitzgerald, 1993, p.115).

In a narrow vision, the green light is a symbol for Gatsby's love to Daisy but in a broader context, it symbolizes America in general and the failure of the American Dream. The above quote shows the failure of the American Dream. Gatsby at the beginning of the novel has hopes and wills to be wealthy and successful but at the end he fails to achieve his hopes and desires. The quote asserts the idea that even if we keep trying, we do not always achieve our goals. This can be applied to many characters like Nick who returns to the Midwest and Daisy who continues her life with Tom. (<https://www.enotes.com/homework-help/gatsby-believed-green-light-orgiastic-future-that-744168>).

It also seems that the green light at the beginning of the novel foreshadows the tragic end in the last chapter, when we find Gatsby dead. Now, the green light only exists in Nick's memories. Mizener describes the effect of this green light on Gatsby's life by saying: "For Gatsby Daisy does not exist in herself. She is the green light that signals him into the heart of his ultimate vision". (Mizener, 1963, p. 133).

B. The Valley of Ashes:

The ashes are made by industry that helps others to be rich. Thus, it shows the impossibility of the American Dream.

"Where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and, finally, with a transcendent effort, of ash-grey men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air" (Fitzgerald, 1993, p.16) .

Symbolically, the Valley of Ashes is a wasteland of human desires and human life. Myrtle hopes to escape after being imprisoned in it. It seems that this place has deprived many characters of their dreams (Wulick, 2016).

C. The Eyes of Doctor. T. J. Eckeburg:

The Eyes of Doctor. T. J. Eckeburg can be interpreted in different Ways. They can be seen as God's eyes judging and looking at people who have lost their morality. They look down upon humanity and the human condition. (Kazin, 1967, p.85).

Making a connection between God and the eyes exists in Wilson's imagination. They can also be interpreted as the meaninglessness of this world. <http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/gatsby/symbols/>.

Nick Carraway describes the billboard as a huge pair of blue eyes. He says in chapter two: "The Eyes of Doctor. T. J. Eckeburg are blue and gigantic- their retinas are one yard high". (Fitzgerald, 1993, p. 16).

Maxwell Perkins tells Fitzgerald that the eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckeburg give a touch to the book due to the fact that they are great but unblinking and expressionless. (Kazin, 1967, p. 85)

Dr. Anna Wulick asks a question about why these eyes have an effect on the characters who look at them and the answer is that those eyes observe what people do and their moral decay. Fitzgerald uses a remarkable place for these eyes, along the road from West Egg to Manhattan, near George Wilson's garage (Wulick, 2016).

The first time we encounter these eyes is in chapter 2. "They look out of no face, but, instead, from a pair of enormous yellow spectacles which pass over a nonexistent nose". (Fitzgerald, 1993, p.16). Anna states that the description has horror elements since they are huge with "no face" and a "nonexistent nose" (<http://blog.prepscholar.com>).

The second time we encounter these eyes is in chapter 7 when Tom, Nick and Jordan stop at George Wilson's garage "over the ashheaps the giant eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckeburg kept their vigil, but I perceived, after a moment, that other eyes were regarding us less than twenty feet away" (Fitzgerald, 1993, p. 79). The word "vigil" suggests that the eyes stay awake, maybe for a religious purpose. Although the eyes do not interact with the characters, they point to a sense of caution.

The third time we encounter these eyes is in chapter 8 when Michaelis talks to George Wilson then Michaelis gives details to Nick after Myrtle's death.

"Standing behind him, Michaels saw with a shock that he was looking at the eyes of Doctor. T. J. Eckeburg, which just emerged, pale and enormous, from the dissolving night". (Fitzgerald, 1993, p. 102).

"God sees everything", repeated Wilson (Fitzgerald, 1993, p. 102).

As Dr. Anna analyses in her article, it seems that George Wilson wants to convert the eyes of the billboard into God that will judge people for what they do (Wulick, 2016).

In an implicit way, George Wilson explains that these are the eyes of God referring to his wife's infidelity. He says, "God knows what you've been doing, everything you've been doing. You may fool me, but you can't fool God" (Fitzgerald, 1993, p. 102).

Conclusion:

The Great Gatsby is one of the best novels in the 20th century. Symbols in the novel play an important role in giving the reader an idea about the 1920s and make the reader understand how concrete things stand for abstract ideas.

The novel succeeds to combine imagination and vitality in an analysis of the American culture via using important symbols. It is a remarkable novel because it emphasizes the glittering surface of America that fascinated people but came to be superficial expressions. Nick's first-person narration makes the narrative gorgeous. He adds radiant brilliant images to show the effects of Gatsby's destructive love that is so sentimental but leads to his tragic end.

The contextual symbols used by Fitzgerald in this novel evoke the reader's imagination due to the fact that they carry different interpretations. They are an integral part of this literary work that make the reader go beyond this world and reach far horizons to discover their hidden meanings.

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