

An Interpretation of *The Great Gatsby*

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The Great Gatsby is the most brilliant novel of F. Scott Fitzgerald's works. This story is often said to be the story of the East and the West. At the end of the story, the narrator Nick Carraway states as follows:

I see now that this has been a story of the West, after all——Tom and Gatsby, Daisy and Jordan and I, were all Westerners, and perhaps we possessed some deficiency in common which made us subtly unadaptable to Eastern life. (*The Great Gatsby*, p. 177) (I used Charles Scribner's Sons edition as text. All subsequent references to this novel are to this edition. From now on, I will omit the name of the novel.)

In this short thesis, I would like to consider how the theme of the East and the West is developed in this novel and who are the real Westerners among five main characters.

First of all, the narrator of the novel, Nick Carraway comes from a Middle Western city. His family has been prominent, well-to-do people in the Middle Western city for three generations. His father is engaged in the wholesale hardware business. The whole story is narrated by this narrator who comes from the Middle West and all dramatic actions are filtered through his consciousness. Therefore the role of the narrator in this novel is very important, when we consider the theme of the East and the West.

Nick Carraway graduates from Yale University in 1915 and after World War I he comes to the East to learn the bond business. Nick states that the Middle West seems like "the ragged edge of the universe" instead of "the warm center of the world" (p. 3), at the beginning of the story. But at the end of the story Nick decides to go back to this Middle West. What makes Nick decide to go back to the Middle West from the East? What does the East mean to Nick in this novel? I want to trace the theme of the East and the West considering these questions.

Nick rents a house in West Egg of Long Island. Across the bay is East Egg. The contrast of West Egg and East Egg is, I think, one of the contrasts of the East and the West we can see in this novel. West Egg is the less fashionable of the two. East Egg is fashionable and at East Egg the white palaces glitter along the water. Next to Nick's house is Jay Gatsby's house which is "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" (p. 5). Nick's relative Daisy Buchanan and her husband who is Nick's friend live in East Egg. And their house is "a cheerful red-and-white Georgian Colonial mansion" (p. 6).

All these people are, as Nick mentions, Westerners. Gatsby comes from North Dakota. Tom comes from Chicago. Daisy comes from Louisville. At present all live in the East. But Nick and Gatsby live in West Egg and Tom and Daisy live in East Egg. It seems to me that Fitzgerald wants to suggest the difference between these two groups——Nick and Gatsby, and Tom and Daisy. Real Westerners seem to be only Nick and Gatsby who live in West Egg.

One day, Nick is invited to the Buchanans' house for dinner. At the dinner party, talking with Tom and Daisy, Nick says to Daisy, "You make me feel uncivilized, Daisy" and "Can't you talk about crops or something?" (p. 13). And Nick feels that Tom and Daisy belong to a secret society to which Nick does not belong:

The instant her voice broke off, ceasing to compel my attention, my belief, I felt the basic insincerity of what she had said. It made me uneasy, as though the whole evening had been a trick of some sort to exact a contributory emotion from me. I waited, and sure enough, in a moment she looked at me with an absolute smirk on her lovely face, as if she had asserted her membership in a rather distinguished secret society to which she and Tom belonged. (p. 18)

Fitzgerald intends to show us that Tom and Daisy are different from Nick. Nick decides to go back to the Middle West finally. But Tom really likes to live in the East. And Jordan Baker, Daisy's friend who also comes from Louisville likes to live in the East, too. The following conversation shows it clearly:

"Oh, I'll stay in the East, don't you worry," he said, glancing at Daisy and then back at me, as if he were alert for something more. "I'd be a God damned fool to live anywhere else."

At this point Miss Baker said: "Absolutely!" (pp. 10-11)

And Fitzgerald's intention to show us that Daisy is not a real Westerner is seen in the description of her life in Louisville. Her life in Louisville is like a fashionable life in the East:

For 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. All night the saxophones wailed the hopeless comment of the *Beale Street Blues* while a hundred pairs of golden and silver slippers shuffled the shining dust. At the gray tea hour there were always rooms that throbbed incessantly with this low, sweet fever, while fresh faces drifted here and there like rose petals blown by the sad horns around the floor. (p. 151)

This description reminds us of a fashionable life in the East. I think that Fitzgerald wants to suggest that Daisy is not a real Westerner.

At the dinner party, Nick happens to know that Tom has a mistress. Nick feels confusion about the Buchanans and comes back to his house in West Egg. And when he enters his house, he sees the mysterious figure of his neighbor Jay Gatsby for the first time:

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. When I looked once more for Gatsby he had vanished, and I was alone again in the unquiet darkness. (pp. 21-22)

When Nick sees this scene, he does not know anything about Jay Gatsby. But later Nick comes to know about Gatsby and "the green light."

When Tom and Nick go to New York by train, Nick sees a certain desolate area of land which is often said by many critics to be an image of T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*:

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 ash-gray 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. (p. 23)

This desolate land represents the rich, powerful, and mechanized society of the East. The other kind of image of the rich, powerful, and mechanized society of the East is seen in the following description:

Every Friday five crates of oranges and lemons arrived from a fruiterer in New York—every Monday these same oranges and lemons left his back door in a pyramid of pulpless halves. There was a machine in the kitchen which could extract the juice of two hundred oranges in half an hour if a little button was pressed two hundred times by a butler's thumb. (p. 39)

From these two descriptions, we know that the East represents the rich, powerful, and mechanized but desolate urban society in this novel.

Fitzgerald describes people who live in this East as sophisticated people. Daisy is described as a person who is very materialistic. She cries when Gatsby shows her his various kinds of shirts:

Suddenly, with a strained sound, Daisy bent her head into the shirts and began to cry stormily.

"They're such beautiful shirts," she sobbed, her voice muffled in the thick folds. "It makes me sad because I've never seen such—such beautiful shirts before." (pp. 93-94)

And Jordan Baker who likes to live in the East is described as a dishonest person:

She was incurably dishonest. She wasn't able to endure being at a disadvantage and, given this unwillingness, I suppose she had begun dealing in subterfuges when she was very young in order to keep that cool, insolent smile turned to the world and yet satisfy the demands of her hard, jaunty body. (pp. 58-59)

Nick hears various kinds of gossips about Jay Gatsby's identity at Tom's mistress' apartment in New York. After that, one day, Nick is invited to lunch by Gatsby and Gatsby tells Nick about his family background on the way to the restaurant. But Gatsby does not tell the truth. Later he tells Nick the truth about his background. Gatsby comes from a poor family in North Dakota. His parents are shiftless and unsuccessful farm people. He sees Dan Cody when he is seventeen and he changes his name from James Gatz to Jay Gatsby. And Gatsby's imagination does not accept his parents as his parents at all:

... his imagination had never really accepted them as his parents at all. The truth was that Jay Gatsby of West Egg, Long Island, sprang from his Platonic conception of himself. He was a son of God—a phrase which, if it means anything, means just that—and he must be about His Father's business, the service of a vast, vulgar, and meretricious beauty. (p. 99)

Such Gatsby falls in love with Daisy when he is a young lieutenant. Daisy is the first "nice girl" for Gatsby. Daisy becomes the symbol of Gatsby's dream and desire, or in other words, his ideal. Daisy is "a vast, vulgar, and meretricious beauty" to which Gatsby as "a son of God" has to serve. After Gatsby falls in love with Daisy, he makes every effort to become rich. Daisy is a daughter of a rich family in Louisville. And so Gatsby wants to become rich so that he can get her. Unless he is rich he is not suitable for her. In order to become rich he does everything including bootlegging. But his ultimate dream is to get Daisy. That is to say, he is faithful to his dream to the end.

Gatsby's dream of ideal is symbolized by "the green light" at the end of Daisy's dock. And it is like "a fresh, green breast of new world" (p. 182) for Dutch sailor's eyes. It is "the last and greatest of all human dreams" (p. 182). Fitzgerald seems to emphasize that Gatsby's dream or ideal is an unsophisticated one by comparing it to a Dutch sailor's ideal.

Gatsby becomes rich and buys a house in West Egg so that Daisy may be just across the bay. Gatsby asks Nick to invite Daisy to Nick's house and let him come to his house. When Gatsby meets Daisy at Nick's house, he is happy because his ideal seems to have been actualized: "He literally glowed; without a word or a gesture of exultation a new well-being radiated from him and filled the little room" (p. 90). But Gatsby's ideal cannot be actualized. Daisy as she is now is different from Daisy as she was five years ago. As Nick states at the end of the story, his ideal is "already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night" (p. 182). But Gatsby does not notice it. He firmly believes that he can repeat the past:

"I wouldn't ask too much of her," I ventured. "You can't repeat the past."

"Can't repeat the past?" he cried incredulously. "Why of course you can!"

He looked around him wildly, as if the past were lurking here in the shadow of his house, just out of reach of his hand.

"I'm going to fix everything just the way it was before," he said, nodding determinedly.

"She'll see." (p. 111)

And he even tries to deny reality. He says to Tom, "She's never loved you. She loves me" (p. 131).

Gatsby who is unsophisticated and makes every effort to actualize his ideal is killed finally. Though the person who murders Gatsby is George Wilson, Tom and Daisy indirectly kill Gatsby. Because when Wilson's wife is run over, Daisy is driving Gatsby's car and it is Tom that informs Wilson of Gatsby's car. Gatsby himself is faithful to his ideal to the end and tries to protect Daisy. After Nick knows everything about Gatsby and after Gatsby's death, he thinks of Tom and Daisy as follows:

It was all very careless and confused. They were careless people, Tom and Daisy—they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made (pp. 180-181)

Tom and Daisy are careless, rich people and the East is the place where those people live. Those careless, rich people destroy Gatsby, a real Westerner, who has an unsophisticated dream and continues to be faithful to it to the end. And though Gatsby represents everything for which Nick has an unaffected scorn, he turns out all right at the end. Gatsby is, for Nick "worth the whole damn bunch put together" (p. 154). Nick feels deep sympathy with Gatsby at the very end of the story:

Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgiastic 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. (p. 182)

And Nick goes back to the Middle West from the East. Though first the Middle West seems to Nick like "the ragged edge of the universe" instead of "the warm center of the world" (p. 3), the Middle West means to him more than that when he goes back home. And Nick's knowing about Gatsby makes him go back to the Middle West.

Finally, considering these facts mentioned before, I want to say again that among five characters the

real Westerners are only Nick and Gatsby, and Tom, Daisy, and Jordan are too sophisticated to be real Westerners though they come from the Middle West. And it seems to me that Fitzgerald suggests it at the beginning of the novel by the contrast of East Egg and West Egg: Only Gatsby and Nick live in West Egg.

要 約

「偉大なギャツピイ」は中西部出身の青年ニックによって語られている。ニックは大学を卒業してから、債券の勉強をするために東部へやってきている。ニック、ギャツピイ、トム、デイジー、ジョーダンの五人はみな中西部の出身で、語り手ニックものべているように、一応はみな西部人である。現在はみな東部に住んでいるが、トム、デイジー、ジョーダンはロングアイランドの東エッグに、ニックとギャツピイは西エッグに住んでいる。東エッグに住んでいる三人は、本当に東部に住むことが好きである。東エッグは西エッグよりもっと流行を追い求める場所である。そこに住んでいるトム、デイジー、ジョーダンの三人は、物質的豊かさのみを求める人間、自分勝手に不注意な人間、不正直な人間として描かれている。西エッグに住んでいるギャツピイは純粋な一面をもっている。彼は貧乏な百姓の子として生まれるが、少年のころから出世を志す。若い将校であるころ、金持の娘デイジーと恋をし、彼女を手に入れるために、あらゆる努力をして富を得る。ところがそのころ、デイジーはすでにトムの妻となっている。「過去はくり返すことができる」と純粋に考える彼は、自分の理想であるデイジーとの生活を夢みる。デイジーが彼の車でトムの情婦をひき殺してしまった時、彼はあくまでもデイジーを守ろうとする。ところが、トムとデイジーの自分勝手なやり方のために、ギャツピイは殺されることになる。ニックはこのギャツピイの純粋な一面にふれて、中西部に愛着を感じると同時に、東部がいやになり、東部をすてて再び中西部にもどる決心をするのである。こうして考えてみると、五人のうち本当の西部人はニックとギャツピイのみであり、トム、デイジー、ジョーダンは西部人であるにはあまりにも純真さが無い。作者は東エッグと西エッグの対照によってこのことを暗示しているように思われる。

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