

The only respectable thing about you, *old sport*, is your money

It's very rare that one finds that the last line of a book sums it up perfectly. F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* is one such example. "So, we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past." *The Great Gatsby* intricately weaves the great tale of the Great Gatsby.

The book paints a picture of an acidic love story amidst the fumes of the American dream.

A millionaire New Yorker, pining after the love of his life. A next-door neighbour who serves as a friend, the only friend, and a narrator. A despaired woman crushed between the love for her husband and the love for the first love she ever had. An adulterer husband, who, quite simply, wants to have it all. All set in the shimmering and sweltering backdrop of the "Roaring 20s". That is the Great Gatsby.

Although advertised in that manner, the love story is not the main premise of the book. It is a peek into the indulgent lifestyle of the twenties and the crippling loneliness that accompanied this lavishness. The parties that Gatsby throws are a means of combating this loneliness by projecting himself into the limelight and immersing himself into what was the blasphemous 20s New York High Society. Daisy, despite being the wife of one of the richest men the American East has seen and having next to everything at her fingertips, is forlorn and lonesome, looking for and accepting affection from everywhere.

The book subtly points out the deception of the glitz and glamour – behind the alluring façade lies the despondency and dejection of being alone in an enormous empty space, both literally and metaphorically. Gatsby's case is literal – he is alone and lonesome in his giant castle, alone with space and emotions that he does not know what to do with. Daisy's case is more metaphorical – she is alone in her marriage for her husband's fidelity has been compromised and he has moved on from her, despite remaining in the relationship. She is lonesome within her own world.

In its setting and creation, the book seems to be a reflection of the tumultuous marriage F Scott Fitzgerald shared with his beloved wife Zelda. Gatsby, from being an officer in the armed forces to moving to New York in hopes of persuading Daisy to marry him, from being infatuated with Daisy upon first setting eyes on her to being depressed and forlorn due to her rejection, seems to be the mirror image of his creator. Daisy, from being an aloof young girl in love with a military officer to both accepting and rejecting his affections, and from being unhappy in her marriage to the very words she utters upon the birth of her only daughter, is a reflection of Zelda.

Fitzgerald uses several literary devices to his benefit, making his characters come to life and his scenes seem strife with action. He makes use of vibrant imagery to display the personalities of his characters and give to them a three-dimensional feel. He employs Symbolism to depict the emotions his characters are feeling and to represent their pasts and relationships. The Green Light at the end of the dock is one such example. It represents Gatsby's hopes and dreams for the future - he associates it with Daisy and treats it like a guiding light. The author uses personification to add drama and depth to the plot: Gatsby is the American dream personified.

Fitzgerald makes use of the weather in order to set the tone and mood for a particular plot point – it matches the emotional and narrative tone of the story. It completely sets the mood and tone

for every scene that it is mentioned in. The book also epitomizes the various aspects of the Roaring 20s, in the form of the East and West Egg. The East egg is a representation of the moral decay and inherent social cynicism of New York and the old aristocracy, while the West Egg represents the more traditional values and the newly rich who grow from the ashes of the moral decay and social cynicism.

The characters of the book are what truly make the book worth a read. Fitzgerald weaves larger than life characters that seem to encompass every sense of the reader's comprehension. Gatsby is imposing yet welcoming, grandiose yet miniscule and open yet extremely mysterious. Tom is sturdy yet turbulent, loving yet acrid and loving yet disgruntled. Daisy is depicted as a desolate and despaired woman, care-free and spirited yet heavy and reserved. Carraway, the narrator, is in his own words open-minded, quiet and tolerant – qualities that make him easily approachable, easy to talk to, and the perfect narrator. This balance, however is thrown off when you understand that Nick is Gatsby's friend and Daisy's cousin – while this may give him a vantage point to observe the story from, it reveals him to be emotionally involved and thus, an unreliable narrator.

The characters are not, in any sense, perfect. They are deeply flawed and are not easy to sympathise with. Gatsby, projected to be the balanced and rich love-sick man, is insecure, jealous and controlling. He may be loving to Daisy, but expects far too much from her – it is not enough for him to hear that she loves him, she must tell him that she has never loved her husband in the period of their five-year long marriage. He is depicted as a forlorn, languishing man who only wishes to be reunited with the love of his life, but he is in truth, a cunning man involved in illegal activities, who acquired his fortune under mysterious circumstances and through dubious means.

Daisy, the despaired yet doting and loving wife, is hypocritical in her activities with Gatsby. While she is deeply affected by her husband's affairs, she maintains one of her own. While she wishes that she may be the only woman Gatsby ever loved, she refuses to tell him that he is the only one for her as well. She wishes her husband left her so that she may be put out of her misery, but hesitates and then refuses to leave her husband when she is expected by Gatsby to do so. At her best, she is Gatsby's impressionable and rather puerile innamorata and Tom's doting, despaired and naïve wife. At her worst, she is pathologically selfish and careless.

It is these aspects of the characters that makes their love story so acrid and acidic rather than romantic and passionate. The author focusses on the love that Gatsby and Daisy had for each other in the past and tries to pass off Gatsby's actions with the justification that he acted in those manners in order to be with his beloved Daisy, but the offering falls flat and we are left with a languished, slightly obsessive man looking to be in a relationship with a selfish, self-victimising and naïve woman. Thus, the book becomes an exercise in what not to do when you fall in love.

But most importantly, *The Great Gatsby* is simply an exercise in Hedonism. It is a reflection of the self-indulgent, slightly, for the lack of a better word, epicurean American society of the 1920s. It is a depiction of Capitalism at its height, right before the advent of the Great Depression. While it may seem like a celebration of the 20s, what with the book projecting Gatsby's lavish lifestyle as something to be deeply envied and desired, it is obvious that his is a life of vanity and a life in vain. To quote Fitzgerald himself, the roaring 20s were "a whole race going hedonistic, deciding on pleasure." *The Great Gatsby* is a reflection of that sentiment.

Through the progression of the story, the novel seems to point out that a life of vanity is not one that can be sustained, even while one may reap its benefits until their very death. It ridicules the reckless jubilation that led to decadent and louche parties, which finally leads to the decay and degradation of what used to be the American Dream.

It portrays the 20s as an era of decayed social and moral values, substantiated by the overarching cynicism, greed and hedonistic nature of the book's characters. It represents a world where class permeates everything, especially love. The very pursuit of love in the book is bound up in class conflicts and class dynamics dictate the survival of a relationship – only the richest couple manages to keep their head over murky waters. It depicts perfectly the “my actions have no consequences” attitude of the rich, best represented by the heedless, impulsive actions of the Buchannans and how these actions act as the catalyst to the reactions that become the premise of the book.

While Gatsby may seem like the poster boy for the American Dream, the book makes a larger point about how he will never be able to transcend his inferior status no matter how much wealth he gains simply because of the circumstances of his birth parents. He may succeed in acquiring wealth and becoming the richest man in all of the American East, but he will never be viewed as an equal. Thus, the book, while on the surface may seem to be a flowery yet doomed love-story where the protagonists are bound to fail due to the actions of those around them, it is truly a depiction of the very nature of a vain and pleasure-inclined culture. While it may be advertised as a love story, albeit acidic, it is an exercise in Hedonism. That is what makes the book worth a read.