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AP US History

10 August 2020

Existentialism and American Social Values in the narrative of *The Great Gatsby*

The Existentialist cultural movement, which focused on how an individual confronts alternatives and possibilities, and subjectively defines the meaning of personal existence accordingly, surfaced during the twentieth century primarily in Europe within the Postwar Era (Abbagnano). I believe the Existentialist philosophy reflects upon the shift in a broader social and cultural context as a result of the destruction and disillusionment of progress brought by the First World War and the subsequent economic revival and materialistic capitalism during the postwar period, and it has significant impacts upon modernist and expressionist writers during that period. It appears to me that *The Great Gatsby*, a novel set in the Roaring Twenties written by F. Scott Fitzgerald, is a great example of American literature that explores the shifting cultural identity of the American society through the lens and experiences of narrator, Nick Carraway, who express an Existentialist attitude towards convention and look for meaning by making self-conscious choices in this seemingly pointless world.

With F. Scott Fitzgerald being a part of the Lost Generation, I observe that he rejected conventional values of society and explored an Existentialist understanding of the world via *The Great Gatsby*, as reflected by the characters in this novel taking on different pursuits and standpoints to perceive and interpret the world and make subjective decisions in defining the meaning of their existence. I also recognize *The Great Gatsby* is characterized by a sense of disillusionment and hopelessness as the characters, particularly the narrator, focus on distancing and isolation. I attribute the novel's mood to the narrator's doubt towards the cultural identity of the American society during this period, and this helps demonstrate how sociocultural values and

historical events can shape the form of an individual's personal Existentialist pursuit by influencing what factors an individual focuses upon. This paper aims to relate the historical contexts and the narrative of *The Great Gatsby* to the emergence of Existentialism during the Roaring Twenties and analyze the shifting social values of the American society via the Existentialist point of view of narrator, Nick Carraway.

The twentieth century saw many changes to the way of life through rapid technological and cultural development that supported an increasingly consumerist western culture as well as the world wars that ravaged both nations and faith in human progress, and it was under such conditions of materialistic consumerism and disillusionment that intellectuals started questioning conventional values, which brought forth the Existentialist movement. Existentialism incorporates a variety of emerging philosophies during the mid twentieth century that focused upon the "interpretation of human existence in the world that stresses its concreteness and its problematic character", and its central thought is that all individuals are defined by the fact of their existence and must choose their own definitions of their existence according to the various possibilities they face in life (Abbagnano). Due to its definition, Existentialism can take many forms in different directions, depending on how an individual perceives one's relationship with the world and one's meaning of existing based upon personal interest.

In the novel, *The Great Gatsby*, the narrator Nick Carraway constructs a depressing mood via a grey imagery of the industrialized world to express his criticism towards the void in conventional social values over the pursuit of wealth and his melancholy over the fragile dreams of men, and in turn to illustrate his own Existentialist attitude towards the pursuit of meaning in life by denouncing the hedonistic pleasure material wealth has to offer and instead look up towards romantic nihilism. The most significant mood that Nick Carraway's narrative creates is a sense of hopelessness expressed through his constant portrayal of the world he perceives using the color grey and the imagery of ash to reveal the theme of spiritual or emotional isolation (Sameen 1).<sup>1</sup> This is

exemplified by his description of the valley of ashes, where he talks of growing ashes, rising smoke, powdery air, gray cars, and ash-gray men (Fitzgerald 23). The valley of ashes itself is positioned between the East Egg where the traditional wealthy like Tom Buchanan resides and the West Egg where the newly wealthy like Jay Gatsby inhabits, and it is a perfect place that represents Nick's place in the world as an intermediate between the two and his attitude towards the American society shown through Nick's vivid downcast portrayal of the gray land between the two parts of Long Island (Sanders 25). Considering Nick is telling his story as a past memory, his melancholy attitude in his description reveals his current state of mind after realizing the emptiness in the physical world men occupy. This gray theme contributes to an increased sense of detachment and isolation, and this feeling reflects upon Nick's Existentialist choice in denouncing the capitalist ideals of the American Dream and conveying sorrow towards the pathetic and hopeless reality that binds men from reaching their true romantic desire. The isolation contributes to Nick's position in the novel as that of an observer, because he is inclined to reserve judgements although he actively takes a stance in evaluating other characters (Fitzgerald 1). When Nick, Tom and Jordan are driving into town, Nick observes "over the ashheaps the giant eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg kept they vigil" and was regarding them with great intensity, as if they are not only observing but also examining or evaluating those who pass before them (Fitzgerald 124). The eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg on a billboard serves as a symbol in Nick's pessimistic and gloomy perspective of the world, and it reflects upon Nick's own projection of his detached yet critical position as an observer onto the blue and gigantic eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg behind the "enormous yellow spectacles" in this valley of ashes (23). The billboard itself is an advertisement and reflects upon the growing consumerism, capitalism and materialism in America, and the spectacles of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg symbolizes corrective lenses for the American public in seeing the reality of this world, reflecting on Nick's as well as Fitzgerald's belief that the materialistic values of the American society during the postwar period is a distortion of, a deviation from the essence of human spirit (Sanders 26). The pair of

spectacles of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg is advertising for change in social values of the American society, and thus reveals Nick's evaluation and disappointment towards current values. Nick made the Existentialist choice of choosing romanticism over materialism, yet the prevalent American social value of materialistic consumerism has brought him a sense of disillusionment which forces Nick to incline towards a sense of nihilism. Nick's active choice is romanticism and reactionary or passive choice in nihilism further testifies to the nature of Existentialism, because he has defined his existence based upon his experience and will as well as the possibilities laid before him by the society.

During the early stages of the twentieth century, the destruction brought by World War I is followed by the "Return to Normalcy" policies led by President Warren G. Harding, which ushered in a period of international isolationism and economic recovery for the American Society that contributed to the growth in materialistic consumerism (Wallenfeldt). Through the social mobility created by the war, the rigid prewar social structure was challenged as feminism and Harlem Renaissance drove the way towards eliminating gender and racial inequalities. Because of the destruction and rapid changes in social values caused by the war, many Americans felt disconnected to their previous ideals and values. In his novel, *The Great Gatsby*, which was set in this post-war period of materialistic growth and cultural changes, F. Scott Fitzgerald uses the perspective from Nick Carraway, the narrator, to explore the social identity as an American and criticize the hollowness in the consumerist pursuit of the conventional ideal of the American Dream through an Existentialist attitude in analyzing the possibilities laid before Carraway and his self-defined values of life after encountering Jay Gatsby. World War I, also called the Great War, was an international conflict "virtually unprecedented in the slaughter, carnage, and destruction it caused" (Royde-Smith et al.). New technologies, like the machine gun that offered rapid-firing, rendered traditional strategies such as frontal assaults by either infantry or cavalry useless, and they contributed to the trench warfare that created military deadlocks, resulting in heavy losses on

both sides and little progress of either side, making the conflict a war of attrition on particularly the western front. The Great War ended in 1918 after four years of conflict, bringing great demolition to many countries and leading to the fall of several powerful imperial dynasties. After the war, much economic and infrastructural reformations are required to rebuild the once proud societies, and it was in this pretext of a broken world that Existentialism started to emerge, with intellectuals questioning conventional sociocultural values and optimism regarding human progress, struggling to gain a sense of existence in a world falling apart.

F. Scott Fitzgerald is a part of the Lost Generation, “a group of American writers who came of age during World War I and established their literary reputations in the 1920s”, and this literary group saw the contemporary policies of “back to normalcy” by President Warren G. Harding as “hopelessly provincial, materialistic, and emotionally barren” (Encyclopedia Britannica). The Lost Generation writers, after observing the devastation in WWI, have dismissed the value in materialism, and created their Existentialist attitude through acknowledging not only the hollowness of human progress but also the true meaning created by one’s emotional pursuits. The loss of faith in humanity’s progress built upon wealth and scientific advancements is in accordance with the concept of “nihilism” signified by the attitude of indifference and the destruction of traditional value, which Friedrich Nietzsche argued this state of mind can “destroy all moral, religious, and metaphysical convictions”, and the gloom surrounding the anxiety and terror caused by the apocalyptic destructions in the twentieth century fueled that sentiment (Pratt). Fitzgerald described himself as romantically imaginative, and in his greatest achievement, *The Great Gatsby*, he uses both romantic and nihilistic factors to examine the possibilities of the the American Dream and reveal his own Existentialist attitude towards life formed by both his amorous personality and the void of materialistic pursuits of men through the eyes and thoughts of Nick Carraway (Mizener). In the novel, the narrator Nick Carraway has also participated in the Great War, or WWI, and the war made him restless, so he decided to learn the bond business in order to attain wealth in the East

(Fitzgerald 3). However, the destruction brought by WWI made Nick want “no more riotous excursions with privileged glimpses into the human heart”, revealing his disillusionment towards conventional social and emotional values because of his experience, yet he found a unique romantic readiness in Gatsby which made Gatsby’s personality gorgeous, and Nick lamented the foul dust that marked the cruel world which shattered Gatsby’s romantic pursuit and criticized the emptiness in “the short-winded elations of men” (2). Although Nick was initially pursuing after a lonely and materialist dream, the American Dream, to attain great wealth because the war dulled his empathy towards human emotions, his interaction with Gatsby changed his attitude towards life as he realized the vacancy in materialism, and while lamenting the cruelty of the world, Nick also praises the Existentialist choice of Gatsby in pursuing love, and in doing so he created his own Existentialist perspective towards the world by defining according to his past experiences as well as the desolate materialistic choices that lay before him.

Nick is experiencing a seemingly cold and meaningless world in which he perceives through an indifferent attitude because of his lamentation over the hollowness of material wealth and the easily shattered dreams of men, particularly the likes of Gatsby. The development of Nick’s personal values through his interactions with Gatsby, a truly marvelous individual who lived out the American Dream, reflects upon the changing social values towards material progress and pursuits in the period after WWI, and the subsequent absence of meaning in life that gave rise to an emergence of Existentialism. The American Dream is a social ideal that “anyone, regardless of where they were born or what class they were born into, can attain their own vision of success in a society where upward mobility is possible for everyone”, and its foundation is found in the Declaration of Independence, which proclaimed that all men are created equal and are given the rights to “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness” (Barone). Such a founding principle of the American society allows an individual to live life to its fullest as he or she defines it, which is in accordance to the core values of Existentialism, and thus demonstrates why the Existentialist movement in the

twentieth century is built upon ideal of the American Dream. Historically, many view financial success as an indication for achieving the American Dream, and that is why Nick Carraway began his journey in New York to pursue after wealth via the stock market. However, his interactions with the society's wealthy and Gatsby proved to be a turning point as afterwards he felt disillusioned towards material wealth. The Roaring Twenties and the Jazz Age in that time period were marked by increasing consumerism as productivity and wages increased along with the emergence of new consumer goods, like automobiles, radios and telephones (Zelinsky). The younger generation of Americans rebelled against the prewar social values and embraced a more hedonistic lifestyle, as represented by Gatsby's extravagant parties in the novel (Fitzgerald 39). However, Nick saw the emotional emptiness that lies underneath the materialistic nature of the parties, because during the party no one knew who Gatsby really is and Nick was one of the very few who were actually invited by Gatsby (42). And cold-heartedly, nobody besides Nick Carraway, not even Daisy whom Gatsby so dearly loved, came to Gatsby's funeral even though he threw such wonderful parties that attracted huge crowds of wealthy people, and this acts as a source of Nick's disillusionment towards the materialistic nature of the American society and its lack of romantic values (174). Nick does however praise the true romantic purpose behind Gatsby's parties, which was thrown in hope to catch Daisy's attention across on the other side of Long Island, and consequently Nick looks up to the romantic objectives of Gatsby rather than his materialistic achievement of acquiring great wealth. The novel ends in Nick Carraway's quote "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past" (Fitzgerald 180). I believe the boat symbolizes one's values and standpoints in life, and one beats on towards our chosen ideals or values, representing one's active decision; however, the current stands as time and society, environmental factors which impact one's behaviors and possibilities in life, and it drives one away from one's ideal like how Gatsby's romanticism is shattered because of this cruel materialistic and spiritually hollow world. This struggle between one's active free will and the society's restraining factors help shape Nick's

attitude towards life and his Existentialist definition of it, which shows itself in the form of romantic nihilism.

In conclusion, the American social values of the postwar period and the Roaring Twenties is represented by materialistic consumerism, and Nick Carraway's narrative in *The Great Gatsby* is a direct reaction to this prevalent social value and casts doubt over its emotional vacancy. Nick Carraway chooses to follow romanticism through his encounter with Gatsby, but is also forced into a state of nihilism because of the materialistic nature of the American society and its cruelty on those who pursued their romantic ideals. This exemplifies the founding principles of Existentialism, in which one must define one's meaning or ideals of one's existence based on both one's choices and the available possibilities that await in one's life. Fitzgerald uses Nick's Existentialist point of view to also criticize the emotionally hollow nature of the American Dream and materialistic wealth.

While I refer to Nick Carraway's attitude after his encounter with Gatsby as "romantic" for his remorseful and reminiscent mood in recounting his past and letting go of his ambition to pursue wealth, which loosely fits its definition of "not practical and having a lot of ideas that are not related to real life", some readers may take it simply as a sign of Nick's emotional acceptance towards the reality of this world, or even a nihilistic demeanor which he uses to cope with the void of meaning in human existence (Cambridge Dictionary).



## Notes

1. The words “grey” and “gray” are used interchangeably, and they both refer to a color of a neutral tone between black and white.

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