

Representation of Social Class and Economic Inequality in The Great Gatsby by F. Scott Fitzgerald

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Abstract

This research explores the portrayal of social inequality and how social inequality influence the social interactions and dynamics within each social class as depicted in the novel in F. Scott Fitzgerald's iconic novel, The Great Gatsby (1925). Drawing upon Goldmann's genetic structuralism approach, the study delves into the socio-historical context of the novel to unravel the underlying structures governing characters' behaviors and narrative themes. The analysis identifies four key aspects of social inequality: 1) the American Dream, 2) economic inequality, 3) class distinction, and 4) gender inequality. Each aspect is shown to play a pivotal role in shaping the narrative and providing insights into the complexities of the social fabric of the time. Furthermore, the research examines how these aspects of social inequality influence social interactions and dynamics within each social class. It is revealed that social inequality not only dictates relationships and hierarchies but also perpetuates a cycle of aspiration, disillusionment, and moral decay. The characters' interactions are marked by a constant struggle for recognition, acceptance, and fulfillment within a system that values wealth and status above all else. Overall, this study is expected to offer a comprehensive analysis of social inequality in Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby (1925), shedding light on its sociocultural significance and its enduring relevance in understanding societal dynamics.

Keywords: Social Inequality, Economic Inequality, Social Class, Social Inequality.

INTRODUCTION

Literature attempts to depict human life, it is because in literary works, there are various stories that tell about social life that are not far from what happened in the real world (Rahman et al., 2019; Suma et al., 2023). Literary works are usually based on life events or problems, some issues related to relationships with other people, and the relationship between people and the environment (Tenrisanna et al., 2024; Junaid et al., 2023; Rahman, 2024).

Literature serves as a powerful medium for examining and critiquing social structures, offering insights into the complexities of human society and the pervasive issues within it (Junaid et al., 2024; Abbas et al., 2024). Through its narratives and characters, literature reflects the nuances of social hierarchies, economic disparities, and cultural conflicts, allowing readers to engage with and understand these issues on a deeper level. By portraying the lived experiences of individuals across different social strata, literary works can highlight injustices, challenge societal norms, and inspire empathy and critical thinking. This unique ability of literature to mirror and dissect social realities underscores its importance not only as a form of artistic expression but also as a vital tool for social commentary and change (Dahlin et al., 2023; Rahman et al., 2023).

According to Goldthorpe (2010), social inequality is a social imbalance in society that makes a very clear distinction. Or which can be seen as a state where the rich are in a higher and more powerful position than the poor. Social inequality has arisen in society, which cannot be avoided. Likewise, in the world of literature, many literary works are inspired by the question of how social inequality actually occurs and how it affects community life in general.

A novel The Great Gatsby (1925) is a novel by American author F. Scott Fitzgerald. Set in Jazz Age, Long Island near New York City, the novel talks about Nick Carraway's interactions with mysterious millionaire Jay Gatsby and his obsession with seeing his former lover Daisy Buchanan again (Fitzgerald, 2012). Upon its release

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from Scribner's in April 1925, *The Great Gatsby* received generally positive reviews and then continues to attract public and scholarly attention. Scholars emphasize the novel's treatment of social class, inherited versus one's own wealth, gender, race, and environmentalism, as well as its cynical attitude toward the American Dream (Eleftherakis, 2022; Vogel, 2015; Amireh, 2022). A persistent element of the criticism is the accusation of anti-Semitic stereotypes. *The Great Gatsby* is widely regarded as a literary masterpiece and a contender for the title of Great American Novel (Pujadas-Mora et al., 2023).

In the context of social inequality analysis, the novel "The Great Gatsby" by F. Scott Fitzgerald offers deep and critical insights. Through detailed and symbolic exposure, the novel succeeded in capturing the essence of deep social polarization in America in the 1920s. Geographical locations such as East Egg and West Egg, along with its complex characters, depict the wide gap between 'old money' and 'new money'. The novel also criticizes the empty hedonistic life and obsession with social status, which focuses in American dream as an unattainable illusion, especially for those born without socioeconomic privilege. Thus, "The Great Gatsby" is not only a compelling literary work, but also a poignant social document, which provides valuable insights into the dynamics of social differences and their impact on individuals and society."

The aim of the study is to analysis of the multifaceted representations of social inequality as depicted by F. Scott Fitzgerald in "The Great Gatsby" (1925), examining its forms and nuances within the context of early 20th century American society. To critically assess the impact of social inequality on the interactions, relationships, and social dynamics of the various social classes portrayed in the novel, elucidating the broader sociocultural implications.

The Great Gatsby (1925): The Work and Author

F. Scott Fitzgerald's "The Great Gatsby," published in 1925, is a seminal work in American literature that captures the essence of the Jazz Age, a period marked by unprecedented economic prosperity, cultural shifts, and a distinct social dynamic in the United States. Set in the fictional towns of West Egg and East Egg on Long Island, the novel delves into the lives of the wealthy and the complexities of their relationships. Through the eyes of the novel's narrator, Nick Carraway, readers are introduced to the enigmatic Jay Gatsby, whose mysterious past and grandiose parties epitomize the era's excesses. The novel's exploration of themes such as the American Dream, social stratification, and the illusion of happiness continues to resonate with readers and scholars alike, cementing its status as a timeless classic (Mogea, 2023).

F. Scott Fitzgerald, born in 1896 in St. Paul, Minnesota, is often regarded as one of the greatest American writers of the 20th century. His works, which include novels, short stories, and essays, often reflect his own experiences and observations of the societal changes during the Roaring Twenties. Despite his talent and initial success, Fitzgerald's life was marked by personal struggles, including financial difficulties and tumultuous relationships, particularly with his wife, Zelda Sayre. "The Great Gatsby" is considered Fitzgerald's magnum opus, showcasing his keen insight into human nature and his ability to capture the zeitgeist of an era (Warzycki, 2023). The novel's enduring popularity has solidified Fitzgerald's legacy as a master storyteller whose works continue to be studied and celebrated for their literary and cultural significance.

Historical Background

The 1920s were a prosperous and opportunity-filled post-World War I era. The middle class saw an increase in their standard of living as the economy flourished. The ability to vote was granted to American women, which instilled a new sense of empowerment in many young women. Speakeasies—illegal saloons where people could enjoy alcohol and jazz—rose as a result of the Volstead Act, which outlawed alcohol (Pethokoukis, 2023). Two monikers were given to the decade: "The Jazz Age"

Many people think that the 1920s were one enormous party, during which everyone drove new Fords, drank gin, purchased stocks, danced the Charleston, and had a great time. Naturally, we are aware that this is overly dramatic. The majority of individuals did not lead the dazzling lives of athletes and movie stars, but rather regular, boring lives. This chapter looks at some of the social shifts that occurred in the 1920s, with an emphasis on African-American poets' works. Millions of people in the western globe also saw the creation and widespread

usage of cars, phones, radios, movies, and electronics during the 1920s. Because of its quick expansion, aviation became a business very quickly.

This era is often mentioned as “The Roaring Twenties” which was a decade of economic growth and general prosperity, fueled by recovery from the devastation of war and deferred spending, a construction boom, and the rapid growth of consumer goods such as automobiles and electricity in North America and Europe, as well as some other developed countries such as Australia.

Furthermore, The United States economy, successfully transitioning from a wartime to a peacetime economy, prospered and also provided credit for a European boom. Some sectors stagnated, notably agriculture and coal mining. The United States became the richest country in the world per capita and had the highest combined GDP since the late 19th century. Its industry was based on mass production and its society acculturated to consumption (Goldberg, 2024). In contrast, European economies had a more difficult post-war adjustment in and did not recover until around 1924.

In 1924, former sailor and stuntman Alvin Aloysius "Shipwreck" Kelly drew crowds in Los Angeles where he spent 13 hours on a pole with a specially constructed platform supported by thumb holes like a bowling ball. The stunt brought him national fame, and as word got around, sitting on the flagpole became a nationwide trend. In this era, people were tired of making sacrifices and "saving the world for democracy". For many there were wild times with lots of partying and silliness. The trend of the dance was the Charlestown and the skirts reached to the knees.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this study are formulated as follows; 1) to examine how F. Scott Fitzgerald portrays the concept of the American Dream in "The Great Gatsby" and analyze its implications on social inequality within the narrative, and 2) to investigate the representation of economic inequality in "The Great Gatsby" and their collective influence on the novel's depiction of social inequality.

In this study, the analysis identifies four key aspects of social inequality. They are: 1) the American Dream, 2) economic inequality, 3) class distinction, and 4) gender inequality. Each aspect in this novel is shown to play a pivotal role in shaping the narrative and providing insights into the complexities of the social fabric of the time.

Method And Sources of Data

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach, emphasizing textual analysis to explore social inequality in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. The raw data for this analysis were extracted directly from the novel, with a focus on instances that illustrate various forms of social inequality. The selected excerpts were systematically analyzed and interpreted using Lucien Goldmann's Genetic Structuralism framework or theory. Goldmann is a Romanian-French philosopher and sociologist. His method is one of the popular literary research methods used in analyzing literary works such as novels, drama, short stories, and poetry. The theory of Genetic Structuralism posits that literary works can be analyzed through the relationship between their content and external aspects such as history, social conditions, culture, politics, and the worldview of a society. Genetic structural analysis in this study context focuses on examining the origins of a literary work in relation to the external circumstances at a specific time. The result of this research reveals literary facts that uncover Social Class and Economic Inequality from a historical situation.

Worldview is a component of genetic structuralism that encompasses the author's aspirations, ideas, and feelings about events occurring in society in a complex manner. This worldview becomes a mental tendency that is implicitly unconscious to members of a social class, as depicted in this work.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The social inequality depicted in Scott F. Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby* encapsulates the complex nuances of class differences in the 19th century. Through characters with different backgrounds and aspirations, Fitzgerald highlights the injustices and tensions that arise from wide gaps in economic and social status. The stories of Gatsby and Daisy, as well as other characters, reflect social dynamics filled with ambition, wealth, and

suffering, revealing the harsh reality of the American dream that is not always achieved by everyone. Thus, this novel not only offers a story of love and tragedy, but also a sharp critique of social structures that limit mobility and equality.

This novel examines the representation of social class and economic inequality in the 19th century. As one of the most influential works of American literature, the novel offers a critical look at American society in the 1920s, where class differences and economic inequality were central themes. Through character, setting and narrative analysis, this research aims to reveal how Fitzgerald depicts the impact and implications of socio-economic inequality on individuals and society as a whole.

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The passage above touches on economic inequality in *The Great Gatsby* by highlighting the leisurely, aimless lifestyle afforded only to those at the highest tiers of wealth. Daisy and Tom Buchanan's ability to spend a year in France "for no particular reason" and to drift "wherever people played polo and were rich together" exemplifies the extreme privilege and mobility exclusive to the socio-economic elite. Their lifestyle is detached from the financial and occupational concerns that preoccupy the vast majority of society, including those striving for a piece of the American Dream, like Gatsby.

Extract 1

"Why they came East I don't know. They had spent a year in France for no particular reason, and then drifted here and there unrestfully wherever people played polo and were rich together. This was a permanent move, said Daisy over the telephone, but I didn't believe it — I had no sight into Daisy's heart, but I felt that Tom would drift on forever seeking, a little wistfully, for the dramatic turbulence of some irrecoverable football game." (p. 5)

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The Buchanan's escapades across Europe, indulging in a life of leisure and luxury without any apparent purpose, sharply contrast with the lives of those who work tirelessly to achieve financial security and social status. This sense of aimless drift, free from the constraints of work or financial obligation, is a hallmark of their aristocratic lifestyle, revealing a deep chasm between them and those who must plan and toil for their future. It underscores the ease with which the wealthy navigate their world, buoyed by inherited wealth and societal connections that grant them a sense of permanence and security. This stark contrast between the Buchanan's carefree existence and Gatsby's relentless pursuit of success exemplifies the novel's critique of the American Dream, revealing its inherent inequalities and the unattainable nature of its promises for many.

Moreover, Tom and Daisy's lifestyle also reflects a moral and ethical detachment that accompanies their economic privilege. Their ability to leave places and people behind without consequence or reflection speaks to a broader theme of irresponsibility and moral carelessness. Their wealth affords them the luxury of evading the repercussions of their actions, whether it's Tom's infidelities or Daisy's involvement in the tragic accident that kills Myrtle Wilson. This detachment is vividly illustrated in their flight to Europe, abandoning the chaos

and devastation they leave in their wake. Their actions reveal a profound disregard for those around them, illustrating how their social status allows them to remain unscathed by the turmoil they cause.

In addition, their participation in elite activities such as polo further emphasizes their separation from ordinary concerns. Polo, a sport historically associated with aristocracy and exclusivity, symbolizes their integration into a social circle that values leisure and status above all else. This inclusion in such rarefied circles reinforces their identity as part of an untouchable elite, reinforcing the barriers between them and those outside their class. The casual mention of their activities and travels in conversation further normalizes this vast disparity, subtly underscoring how embedded these social divisions are within their worldview and daily life.

Through Daisy and Tom, Fitzgerald paints a broader picture of the societal structure that privileges a select few while marginalizing the majority. Their ability to live without consequence or meaningful purpose stands as a critique of a society that allows such extreme disparities to exist. Their lives of luxury and detachment serve as a mirror to the American Dream's darker side, where the promise of prosperity and success is often overshadowed by the realities of entrenched social and economic inequality. By highlighting these disparities, Fitzgerald invites readers to question the true nature of wealth and privilege and to consider the broader implications of a society that allows such inequities to persist.

Extract 2

“Her voice is full of money,” he said suddenly. That was it. I’d never understood before. It was full of money — that was the inexhaustible charm that rose and fell in it, the jingle of it, the cymbals’ song of it... high in a white palace the king’s daughter, the golden girl...” (p. 92)

The extract above shows the profound impact of social class on personal relationships and perceptions in "The Great Gatsby." When Gatsby describes Daisy's voice as "full of money," he is not just commenting on Daisy's voice's quality but is metaphorically linking her entire being to wealth and the privileges it brings. This realization makes it clear that Daisy embodies the allure of wealth, not just in her actions or possessions, but in her very essence. Her voice, carrying the charm of affluence, captivates those who are drawn to the luxurious lifestyle she represents. Nick Carraway's famous observation that Daisy's voice is "full of money" encapsulates this idea perfectly. It is not merely the physical trappings of her wealth—her clothes, her home, her jewelry—but the intangible aura that surrounds her, making her a living symbol of the opulence and status that characters like Gatsby so desperately seek. This observation reflects the broader theme of the novel, where social status and wealth dictate interactions and desires, illustrating the deep divisions and the magnetic attraction that money can create between individuals from different social classes.

Daisy, as the "golden girl" living in her "white palace," is set apart, elevated by her wealth to a nearly mythical status, which shapes not only how she interacts with the world but also how the world, including Gatsby, responds to her. Her lifestyle, marked by ease and privilege, stands in sharp contrast to Gatsby's humble beginnings and relentless pursuit of wealth. Gatsby's infatuation with Daisy is inextricably linked to his desire for the world she represents—a world of effortless grace, boundless possibilities, and the security that comes with old money. This dynamic underscores the novel's critique of the American Dream, revealing how the dream is often tied to materialism and the pursuit of an unattainable ideal.

Furthermore, Daisy's characterization exposes the superficiality and emptiness that often accompany great wealth. Despite her allure and the life of comfort she leads, there is a profound sense of dissatisfaction and moral ambiguity in her character. Her decisions and actions throughout the novel demonstrate a lack of responsibility and depth, suggesting that the wealth she embodies does not equate to true happiness or fulfillment. This duality in Daisy's character—her external charm and internal vacuity—serves as a poignant commentary on the deceptive nature of appearances and the hollowness that can lie beneath a glittering surface.

In essence, Daisy is not just a character but a symbol of the world Fitzgerald seeks to portray—a world where appearances are deceiving, and the pursuit of wealth often leads to moral and emotional bankruptcy. Her influence on Gatsby and the other characters reveals the pervasive power of wealth to shape desires and destinies, often with tragic consequences. Through Daisy, Fitzgerald invites readers to question the true value of the American Dream and to consider the costs of a society obsessed with material success.

Extract 3

“Why they came East I don’t know. They had spent a year in France for no particular reason, and then drifted here and there unrestfully wherever people played polo and were rich together. This was a permanent move, said Daisy over the telephone, but I didn’t believe it — I had no sight into Daisy’s heart, but I felt that Tom would drift on forever seeking, a little wistfully, for the dramatic turbulence of some irrecoverable football game.” (p. 17)

This vivid description of the Valley of Ashes in "The Great Gatsby" serves as a stark symbol of economic inequality and the devastating effects of industrialization. Situated between the opulence of New York City and the affluent suburbs of East and West Egg, the Valley of Ashes represents the grim reality of the working class, contrasting sharply with the lives of the novel's wealthier characters. The imagery of ashes growing "like wheat" and forming "grotesque gardens" illustrates a perverse parody of agricultural prosperity, signifying a landscape blighted by poverty and despair. The men who move "dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air" are dehumanized, reduced to mere extensions of the desolate environment they inhabit, their lives marked by toil and devoid of the glamour and leisure enjoyed by the novel's elite.

Fitzgerald's portrayal of the Valley of Ashes goes beyond mere description to evoke a powerful sense of entrapment and futility. The "ash-gray men" with their "leaden spades" further emphasize the weight of their existence, trapped in a cycle of endless labor that obscures their individual identities and hopes. These laborers are portrayed as ghostly figures, their humanity eroded by the relentless grind of their daily lives. The oppressive atmosphere of the valley, with its choking dust and relentless decay, serves as a grim reminder of the consequences of unchecked industrial progress and the exploitation of the working class. This environment starkly contrasts with the lush, carefree world of Gatsby's parties and the luxurious lifestyles of Tom and Daisy Buchanan, highlighting the profound social divide.

Through this bleak tableau, Fitzgerald critiques the societal neglect and moral decay underlying the American Dream, highlighting the chasm between those who reap its promises and those who bear its costs. The Valley of Ashes is not just a physical wasteland but a moral one, where the pursuit of wealth and success leaves behind a trail of human wreckage. By juxtaposing the desolation of the valley with the splendor of the Eggs, Fitzgerald underscores the illusion of the American Dream and the profound disparities that it conceals. This striking imagery and symbolism invite readers to reflect on the broader implications of economic inequality and the true cost of prosperity in a society driven by materialism and ambition.

CONCLUSION

In the novel "The Great Gatsby" by F. Scott Fitzgerald, economic inequality is a central theme depicted through the sharp contrast between the luxurious lives of the rich characters and the squalor experienced by those less fortunate. Through the character of Jay Gatsby, who despite his wealth remains excluded from elite social circles due to his humble origins, Fitzgerald highlights that material wealth does not guarantee social acceptance or true happiness. The characters Daisy Buchanan and Tom Buchanan, representing the old aristocracy, live in luxury built on privilege and inheritance, while George and Myrtle Wilson depict the suffering and helplessness of the working class. This inequality reflects Fitzgerald's critique of the American Dream, suggesting that dreams of success and social mobility are often illusions that cannot be achieved by everyone, and that existing social structures reinforce and deepen class differences and economic injustice.

Thus, the results of this research reveal several things: 1) through characters and narrative, Fitzgerald deeply explores the American Dream and demonstrates that material success does not always guarantee social acceptance or true happiness, and 2) the representation of economic inequality in the novel illustrates how existing social structures reinforce and deepen class differences and economic injustice. The implications of this study provide the understanding that literature can carry a moral mission, reflect social conditions, and offer readers new perspectives on the presence of literary works that critique the social realities of their time.

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