The Great Gatsby Essay, Research Paper

Reflections of the Era in The Great Gatsby

The Great Gatsby, F. Scott Fitzgerald s classic twentieth-century story of Jay Gatsby s quest for Daisy Buchanan, examines and critiques Gatsby s particular vision of the American Dream, and the downfall of those who attempt to reach its illusionary goals. The attempt to capture the American Dream is central to many of the novels written in the 1920 s. The Great Gatsby is about what happened to the American Dream during the 1920s, an era when the dream had been corrupted by the relentless pursuit of wealth. In this novel, the pursuit of the American Dream and the pursuit of a romantic dream are the ultimate cause of the downfall of the book s title character, Jay Gatsby. Written in 1925, the novel serves as a bridge between the World War I and the great depression of the early 1930 s. Although Fitzgerald was an avid participant in the stereotypical Roaring Twenties lifestyle of wild parting and bootleg liquor, he was also a critic of his time period. The Great Gatsby certainly serves more to detail society s failure to fulfill its potential than it does to glamorize Fitzgerald s Jazz Age.

On one level the novel comments on the careless gaiety and moral decadence of the period. It contains innumerable references to the contemporary scene. The wild extravagance of Gatsby s parties, the shallowness and aimlessness of the guest and the hint of Gatsby s involvement in crime all identify the period and the American setting. But as a piece of social commentary The Great Gatsby also describes the failure of the American Dream, from the point of view that American political ideals conflict with the actual social conditions that exist. American democracy is based on the idea of equality among people, the social discrimination still exists and the divisions among the classes cannot be overcome. Myrtle s attempt to break into the group to which the Buchanans belong is doomed to fail. Taking advantage of her vivacity, her lively nature, she seeks to escape from her own class. She enters into an affair with Tom and takes on his way of living. But she only becomes vulgar and corrupt like the rich. She scorns people from her own class and loses all sense of morality. And for all her social ambition, Myrtle never succeeds in her attempt to find a place for herself in Tom s class. When it comes to a crisis, the rich stand together against all outsiders. Myrtle s condition, of course, is a weaker reflection of Gatsby s more significant struggle. While Myrtle s desire springs from social ambition, Gatsby s is related more to his idealism, his faith in life s possibilities. The book also seems to investigate how Americans lost their spiritual purpose as material success wiped out spiritual goals. The lives of the Buchanans, therefore, filled with material comforts and luxuries, and empty of purpose, represents this condition.

Fitzgerald stresses the need for hope and dreams to give meaning and purpose to man s efforts. In my opinion Fitzgerald also goes on to state that the failure of hopes and dreams, the failure of the American Dream itself, is unavoidable, not only because reality cannot keep up with ideals, but also because the ideals are in any case usually too fantastic to be realized. Gatsby doesn t rest until his American Dream is finally fulfilled.

However, it never comes about and he ends up paying the ultimate price for it. The idea of the American Dream still holds true in today s time, be it wealth, love, or fame. But one thing never changes about the American Dream; everyone desires something in life, and everyone, somehow, strives to get it. Gatsby is a prime example of pursing the American Dream. So to answer the question about whether or not the novel reflects the times of the twenties, I would have to say that my belief is that the novel definitely reflects the 1920 s.