

Georgiana-Elena DILĂ

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AMERICAN LITERATURE. THE 20TH CENTURY

Curs universitar pentru învățământul la distanță



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Disciplina: Literatura americană

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Anul III Semestrul I

OBIECTIVELE DISCIPLINEI

- Cursul este conceput în așa fel încât să ofere informații menite să familiarizeze studentul cu literatura și cultura americană din secolul XX pentru a putea înțelege și dezvoltarea culturală americană, alături de cea britanică studiată anterior

- Cursul este astfel conceput pentru a familiariza studentul cu cele mai importante evenimente culturale și principalele curente literare din perioada anunțată mai sus folosindu-se de informațiile oferite referitor la scriitorii studiați, având o structură care ajută la crearea și extinderea orizontului de cunoaștere a literaturii americane raportat la contextul mai larg al înțelegerii fenomenului cultural american.

- Cursul are un conținut structurat într-o manieră care să garanteze inițierea studentului în abordarea critică a operelor literare apreciate pentru felul în care au valoare în cadrul unei epoci, unui curent sau biografiei unui scriitor. Deprinderea limbajului și a tehnicilor criticii moderne și aplicarea lor în interpretarea operelor literare este o premiză importantă în procesul de aprofundare a cunoștințelor corelate cu literatura secolului XX din spațiul american.

Unitatea de învățare 1

F. Scott Fitzgerald – *The Great Gatsby*

Obiectivele temei:

- cunoașterea mediului social și cultural în timpul anilor 1920
- cunoașterea operei lui F. Scott Fitzgerald în general și a romanului *The Great Gatsby* în special
- familiarizarea cu The Roaring Twenties și The Jazz Age

Timpul alocat temei: 4 ore

Bibliografia:

Berman, Ronald. *The Great Gatsby and Modern Times*. Urbana, 1994.

Johnson, Claudia. *Class Conflict in F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby*. Detroit, 2008.

Lathbury, Roger. *The Great Gatsby*. Farmington Hills, MI, 2000.

Lehan, Richard. *The Great Gatsby: The Limits of Wonder*. Boston, 1990.

Short biographical note

F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896-1940) was born in St. Paul, Minnesota. He entered New Princeton University but he never graduated. He felt that his classmates were superior to him and he felt quite overwhelmed by the fact that they were rich and born Easterners. When the United States entered World War I, he enlisted in the Army, and while in a training camp in Alabama he met Zelda. She was a Southern belle and the woman who was to become his wife and an inspiration for the female characters of his works. He became a writer as a goal set to impress Zelda and eventually marry her when he had enough money in order to get married. Their marriage represented both his greatest happiness and his misery as his wife was troubled and in the final years of their marriage she had several break downs. His first novel, *This Side of Paradise*, was published in 1920, and revealed Fitzgerald's preoccupation with the life of young people, who had an excitement regarding life, but also a cynical view, presenting the parties and love affairs of the rich and the would-be rich. The author wanted to expose what the youth was going through and he envisioned the Jazz Age in a very accurate manner. The main character of the novel, Amory Blaine, has all types of adventures that can match those lived by Fitzgerald. The elements of the novel that the author presents in his novels include: the love of an unattainable girl, the power and glamour of the rich, and the clash of ideals and reality. Considering the fact that the Fitzgerald's were in debts even though he earned much

money for his published short stories the next step was for a collection of Fitzgerald's stories to be released later in 1920. In 1922 he published his second novel *The Beautiful and the Damned* and presented the marital problems of a couple, which brought less success than expected. The same year the collection of short stories *Tales of the Jazz Age* was published and this showed a more mature writing from the author's part.

Fitzgerald's best-known novel, *The Great Gatsby*, was published in 1925. By then the author was himself rich, though his earnings could never keep pace with the extravagances of his wife and he was forced to work hard in order to maintain their lifestyle. He attained great success and he was considered a serious writer. Beside his novels he published collections of short stories and many of them appeared first in magazines such as *Esquire* and *The Saturday Evening Post*. Fitzgerald was forced to go to Hollywood and to freelance work in order to make money as he wanted to go back to his writing after having earned enough to maintain the same extravagance as before.

In 1932 Fitzgerald started his work on *Tender Is the Night*, which presents the decline of a psychiatrist called Dick Diver having a maturity of style and themes that are not present in his previous novels. Unfortunately the novel was not a commercial or critical success. The writer did not manage to publish his last novel *The Last Tycoon*, which was released after his death

F. Scott Fitzgerald has to struggle to pay his daughter's college fees and his wife's medical bills and his increasing alcohol consumption did not help him survive through all the problems. He had a heart attack and died in 1940 at a quite young age.

Since the 1950s Fitzgerald's popularity has been increasing and the critical success has been greater than during his lifetime. Nowadays many things are considered to be *Gatsby*-like and so showing that his character lives on and so does his fame. *The Great Gatsby* has been rediscovered and is considered one of the major American novels of the 20th century. The American author was a biographical one as the settings of his novels follow his life from the Princeton days to those in Hollywood in the 1930s.

The Great Gatsby (1925)

F. Scott Fitzgerald's first two novels, *This Side of Paradise* (1920) and *The Beautiful and Damned* (1922), presented the atmosphere of the early 1920s, with the relaxed morality and the desire for partying, being both bestsellers. The way in which an outsider would view the life of the rich is a theme that is encountered in the author's work, but it is *The Great Gatsby* which manages to explore it to the fullest. Even though Fitzgerald believed that his novel would be a financial success it did not reach his expectations, even though the critics praised his achievement.

The novel *The Great Gatsby* reflects Fitzgerald's understanding of the fact that the pursuit of entertainment and excitement is part of a plan to cover the real pain they were experiencing. There is the exploration of the things money cannot buy and the way in which the wealthy people manage money in a very skilled way to get what they want and so crush the dreams of others around them. The story presented in the novel is that of Jay Gatsby, who as a poor young man had lost the rich girl he loved to a man of her own class, has subsequently become rich himself, and has come to live in a nearby mansion where he gives extravagant parties with the sole aim of impressing her, is a strangely poignant one. And although the mysterious and glamorous façade of his life is to collapse, and his dream is to be shattered, he is a romantic figure to the end. Not so the congenitally rich Tom Buchanan, the man whom the girl Daisy married: his unsought wealth has made him hard, self-centred and purposeless. The desire Gatsby has to re-live the past is doomed to fail miserably.

Fitzgerald uses Nick Carraway as the narrative consciousness for Jay Gatsby's story, and by doing this he gives the reader the contrasting perspectives that call both Gatsby's and Nick's motivations into question. Nick is Daisy's cousin and an acquaintance of her husband, Tom Buchanan. T. S. Eliot called *The Great Gatsby* "the first step that American fiction has taken since Henry James". The desire that Gatsby had considering his dream is the influence that affected his perspective towards reality. He is unable to see the reality as it is.

The theme the novel presents encompasses the related themes of mutability and loss. Fitzgerald's work is about American history combining the theme of aspiration with that of time. After Gatsby's dream world has been shattered, Nick can feel more connection to him as he understands more clearly what drove the protagonist's attitude and what his tragic end represented. Nick is the only one who offers us a version of Gatsby's inner world in the moments previous to his tragic death. There is no other version of the events than that of Nick and in a way he and Gatsby are dual versions of the same experience. Gatsby has no opportunity of seeing things as they really are and he is in need of corrective vision. Nick thinks that it is his mission to fulfill such a goal.

The destiny of the protagonist is presented as a dream within a dream. As the story is revealed Nick gets closer to Gatsby and learns more about his true identity as James Gatz. The wealth that Gatsby had was definitely not a legal one and his ability of buying a house that can offer him the possibility to watch over to her house and have lavishing parties showed that he was not ashamed of the source of his business. Jimmy Gatz transformed himself into Jay Gatsby, but in the process he did not change himself. He continued to keep his mind and soul trapped within that summer he spent with Daisy. He only changes his appearance as he became an elegant young man, extremely rich and handsome. He was never fully accepted in the high society of New York as he represented new money and not old money, meaning the aristocracy. The image of Daisy and her luxurious lifestyle made influenced Gatsby to try and achieve such a position for himself. His great mistake is that he believed

that dreams can offer the promise “that the rock of the world was founded securely on a fair’s wing” as Fitzgerald wrote in the novel.

The love story presented in the novel reveals the childish belief in true love and its power to conquer all obstacles. It also suggests a mythical past of human innocence, which no longer exists as people have been affected by selfishness and lack of care for the others.

Jay Gatsby is an isolated figure, who focused only on what he desired and did not understand that his chase for an impossible dream was not going to bring upon anything good. That moment of revelation when he kissed Daisy in 1917 made him different from other young men his age and brought upon him a fatal obsession with getting Daisy and marrying her when he became rich. His vision is totally egocentric as Daisy is the object of his worship, but she has no saying in what her life should be. In his mind the protagonist had created everything for her to be satisfied, but he never connected to her needs, wishes and desires. Gatsby is trapped in a world that he invented, where no one is allowed and unaware of might change in Daisy’s life, or in that of those around him. He is absent and feels no real connection to anyone. The impossibility of his dream is marked drastically by the discrepancy between the illusion of Daisy and reality as he only imagines what she should be, not what she really was. Death is the only solution to this contradiction; once Gatsby glimpses the truth, he still denies it but he cannot ignore it, and on the other hand he could not live with this new discovery. His idol had to remain perfect, mainly because he cannot accept that he was wrong.

Even if Gatsby is both dreamer and corrupt, Nick Carraway sees himself as “a guide, a pathfinder, an original settler”. Nick is a possible Jay Gatsby, he finds himself in the protagonist, but he is wiser and better prepared to face the society of their times having also a skeptical nature and not being so naïve at times.

F. Scott Fitzgerald brings an advertisement to the novel to watch over Gatsby’s destiny, namely the eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg, showing gigantic blue eyes with glasses looking over the valley of ashes, which separated East and West Egg from New York City. Two other colors that the author makes use of are yellow and white, which are the ones that make up a daisy, trying to show purity also through the dresses both Daisy and Jordan wear, as none of them has any purity left in her being. Daisy wears white when she meets Gatsby again. She did the same when she was 18, not assuming anything all her life. The loose morals of the time are also present in the novel and white ends up representing vacuity, superficiality and not noblesse and purity as it had been meant to do.

A contrasting character to that of Gatsby is Tom Buchanan, who also has money, but his representation of the old money shows how he can manipulate people in order to do what he desires. He has a mistress and he also acts as her husband’s friendly customer, he cheats on Daisy, but still manages to have her loyal to him even though there exists marital unhappiness. Tom is the kind of individual who makes it very clear for his wife that the old money that they have inherited and