

タイトル	The Great Capitalist Gatsby: Suspending and Maximizing Values in F. Scott Fitzgerald's : The Great Gatsby
著者	MATSUURA, Kazuhiro
引用	北海学園大学学園論集(173・174): 39-45
発行日	2017-12-25

The Great Capitalist Gatsby: Suspending and Maximizing Values in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*

Kazuhiro MATSUURA

Introduction

The Great Gatsby is a text full of ambiguity. Nick, the narrator, introduces his inclination to “reserve all judgements” on the very first page of the novel, thus indicating that this philosophy will play a critical role as the story unfolds. Readers do not yet know who or what Nick will need to suspend his judgement about, nor can we fully comprehend the significance of his claim. This paper argues that the theme of “suspending judgement” is related to the economic system of capitalism that dominated Fitzgerald’s own life as well as the world of the novel. Furthermore, it claims that *The Great Gatsby* demonstrates both the possibilities and the limitations of capitalism via suspending values.

Fitzgerald struggled with money problems throughout his life, even as a young boy. Malcom Cowley points out that like other young people, Fitzgerald was fascinated with earning money. After the war, he hoped to marry Zelda; however, he was too poor. Critics such as John Kuehl argue that Fitzgerald’s own poverty is directly reflected in the economic struggles of his characters. Kuehl also claims that the salary Fitzgerald gained from his publications was a significant motivation for his writing. He wrote many short stories for easy money. Kuehl casts some doubt as to the quality of his fiction: “Scott Fitzgerald wrote for money more mediocre fiction than any other American author of similar suture except, perhaps, Mark Twain” (142). As a young writer, Fitzgerald spent excessive amounts of money on his lavish “flapper” lifestyle. He explains this in *My Lost City*, a collection of personal essays documenting his life from the 1920s to the 1940s. Describing the excess of high society New York in the late 20s, he writes:

The tempo of the city had changed sharply. The uncertainties of 1920 were drowned in a steady golden roar and many of our friends had grown wealthy. But restlessness of New York in 1927 approached hysteria. The parties were bigger — those of Conde Nast for example rivalled in their way the fabled balls of the nineties; the pace was faster — the catering to

dissipation set an example to Paris; the shows were broader, the buildings were higher, the morals were looser and the liquor was cheaper but all these benefits did not really minister to much delight (112).

As he was writing *The Great Gatsby*, the American economy was blooming and becoming what is referred to as a kind of “bubble.” In economic theory, a bubble is created when too many buyers are overly eager to buy. During the economic bubble of the 20s, people in New York City felt overly optimistic as they tried to drown out the memory of the war years. Technically, in an economic bubble, the economy and stock price become dramatically higher, radically exceeding their real value. This was the first time in American history that consumers were able to make purchases on credit, so they were spending well beyond their means in a ‘buy now, pay later’ style that was new to them. People’s spending habits and optimism become unrealistically high in an economic bubble. In the titular essay “My Lost City,” Fitzgerald describes the American boom: “New York had all the iridescence of the beginning of the world. The returning troops marched up Fifth Avenue and girls were instinctively drawn east and north toward them — we were at last admittedly the most powerful nation and there was gala in the air” (109).

However, all bubbles eventually burst. Fitzgerald could see the booming economy’s destiny and knew that the endless hope and happiness couldn’t last forever. In other words, he could see the limitations of capitalism and knew that the apex of the happiest emotion would be followed by a decline.

Jay Gatsby walks the same road as Fitzgerald; both men struggle with poverty. When Gatsby first meets Daisy, he immediately falls in love with her. However, he does not stand a chance because Daisy comes from the opposite end of the class spectrum. She would never consider marrying a man who could not offer her financial security and social respectability. Eventually, she marries Tom Buchanan, who belongs to “old money” American society with his staggering wealth and impressive Georgian Colonial mansion in East Egg.

Determined to win her over, Jay proceeds to make big money via dangerous business; rumors circulate that he is involved in boot-legging, which was illegal under the Prohibition Act. Gatsby is a smart capitalist and becomes an overnight millionaire. Retaining Daisy would have further increased his capital; however, in the end, he fails to do that. Through this tragic novel, Fitzgerald indicates the final destination of capitalism via Jay Gatsby’s ultimate demise. His final scene indicates the method of making endless hope.

Maximizing Values

Jay Gatsby is portrayed as a poor boy in Minnesota. However, after he changes his name and

meets Dan Cody in Lake Superior, his life changes dramatically. Cody teaches Gatsby how to act as a gentleman. Gatsby learns to speak like a well-educated gentleman who was born into “the right family” and educated at expensive schools. Meeting Daisy Fay also changes Gatsby’s life. His most important mission becomes winning Daisy over. To do so, Gatsby does not go directly to Daisy because he cannot afford to marry her. Thus, he tries to become rich so that he can catch people’s eyes and win her heart. It takes him only five years to become rich, buy a gorgeous house in East Egg, and start throwing lavish parties.

Gatsby is a genius when it comes to making money. Fitzgerald does not explicitly explain *how* Gatsby makes his fortune, but whatever we cannot know in terms of his method, we can see that Gatsby is a true rags-to-riches successful businessman. His friend Meyer Wolfsheim is a gambler; however, Gatsby may not be (73). He is a proper investor or capitalist.

Gatsby knows how to maximize value. Maximizing capital is the goal of capitalism, an economic system that requires workers to increase money and assets endlessly. Piling up money, investing, and holding stocks are helpful; however, they are not the most important things. The most important marker of success in capitalism is fluidity or liquidity. People living in capitalist societies must keep money moving and increasing, not fixed. When fluidity hits the maximum point or is fixed, the money supply must be stopped and the system fails. As a result, the economy slows down, and if the economy is booming, a crash can come suddenly and burst the bubble. History shows this clearly.

Gatsby knows how to keep money and capital fluid. For Gatsby, “infinite hope” means infinite money, and only money can release him from poverty (2). After he is educated by Dan Cody, Gatsby meets Meyer Wolfsheim and becomes rich. His education from both men is important for Gatsby. His newly acquired ability to pass as upper class provides the foundation for making himself rich. Nick refers to Gatsby as having “an extraordinary gift...again” (2). Nick’s statement indicates that Gatsby also knows how to “reserve judgements” and that makes “infinite hope” for him: his gift is knowing the method of maximizing money via reserving judgements, and he adopts the way to making endless hope and happiness.

Gatsby has “infinite hope” that his sudden wealth will make him worthy of Daisy. Here we can suspect that Gatsby uses the same method to produce hope as he does to produce money. In other words, Gatsby embodies the system of capitalism. The most important idea for capitalism is to keep capital moving and increasing; it follows that decreasing or fixing capital is the worst scenario. If money and capital stay somewhere, they do not “work” because, staying somewhere, they cannot be increased. They need someone to release them from a deadlock situation to keep flowing. In the following section, I explain how this works.

Keep Flowing and Suspending Symbols

Gatsby is only interested in codes or symbols like money or bonds. He chases Daisy; however, he sticks not to Daisy as a physical substance but rather because she is a symbol or code of the past and money. If he can try to get Daisy, he can bring her somewhere without notification from Tom. Although he has the chance so many times to get Daisy after he makes fortune, he is fascinated with the past. He remains steadfast until the very end, when Daisy says she never loved him. This proves Gatsby's interest is only code or meaning rather than physical substance because if he wanted the substance of Daisy, he could have run off with her.

However, he does not do that. This suggests that he needs Daisy as a symbolic existence. Why? The answer is, as I described above, that he wants to maximize codes. Nick's dramatic statement toward the end of the novel provides a clue to understanding Gatsby's method:

Through all he said, even through his appalling sentimentality, I was reminded of something— an elusive rhythm, a fragment of lost words, that I had heard somewhere a long time ago. For a moment a phrase tried to take shape in my mouth and my lips parted like a dumb man's, as though there was more struggling upon them than a wisp of startled air. But they made no sound, and what I had almost remembered was uncommunicable forever. (111)

Immediately prior, Gatsby has revealed that his true purpose all along was to regain Daisy.

"I wouldn't ask too much of her," I ventured.

"You can't repeat the past."

"Can't repeat the past?" he cried incredulously.

"Why of course you can!" (110)

His note shows us that to maximize money or value, the most important thing is to use codes to cloak the meaning or significance of things in ambiguity. In other words, keeping these codes or symbols suspended is the method of maximizing money and hope. This indicates his strategy is to use the way of capitalism which maximizes money for making infinite hope. He diverts his business skills for the infinite hope. Of course, values and meanings are flexible: they resist being fixed. However, to maximize them, methodology is important to understand Gatsby. After that, we can grasp the meaning of the final part of the novel:

Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter — tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther...And one fine morning. So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past (180).

To prevent from sinking, motion is essential. The image of the boats beating on and fighting the

current is important because this evokes suspension, rootlessness, and mobility.

We can see other images of flowing and floating earlier in this novel. As Nick arrives at Tom's house for the first time, Daisy and Jordan are described as flowing: "The only completely stationary object in the room was an enormous couch on which two young women were buoyed up as though upon an anchored balloon" (8). Our final image of Gatsby shows him flowing on a mattress in a pool. As the water flows toward the drain, Gatsby floats on the surface:

There was a faint, barely perceptible movement of the water as the fresh flow from one end urged its way toward the drain at the other. With little ripples that were hardly the shadows of waves, the laden mattress moved irregularly down the pool. A small gust of wind that scarcely corrugated the surface was enough to disturb its accidental course with its accidental burden. The touch of a cluster of leaves revolved it slowly, tracing, like the leg of transit, a thin red circle in the water (162).

Like floating values produce endless gains, Gatsby makes infinite hope and happiness.

"Young Parke's in trouble," he said rapidly. "They picked him up when he handed the bonds over the counter. They got a circular from New York giving'em thenumbers just five minutes before. What d'you know about that, hey? You never can tell in these hick towns-." (166)

This case indicates that until they are caught, they can endlessly increase their gains. Once their scheme comes to an abrupt halt, Gatsby's theory suddenly collapses. This demonstrates that fixing meaning and values is a useful scheme for Gatsby. So long as his capital remains in motion, capitalism works for Gatsby, but as soon as it becomes fixed, he sees the limitations of the system. Like a bubble economy, the scheme can work only so long as the flow continues; however, once that is fixed, the system fails.

Thus, in the final part, his dead body is still floating on the moving mattress in the pool. According to Nick, Gatsby notices that his own hope is destroyed. However, Nick's prediction of Gatsby's sad and hopeless end is clearly wrong. Gatsby's end is not tragic. Jay Gatsby holds his great ability for maximizing his hope and shows us the method of maximizing values and hope until the last minute of the last day. Gatsby's final depiction is an image of floating, and this shows his final destiny is not tragic. For Fitzgerald, suspending something makes eternal hope, and this makes even death a hopeful phenomenon. Floating means the possibility of producing endless hope. So, he is floating in the pool and has endless hope for Daisy in front of the green light. Although the final scene is sad and hopeless at first glance, for Gatsby, it is the best possible ending, filled with literally endlessness and infinite hope.

Conclusion

As a proper business man, Gatsby successfully maximizes his profits and gets many assets. He turns over the method and maximizes his hope. His hope expands and he succeeds in getting very close to Daisy. However, just as history demonstrates for an economic bubble, his “hope scheme” suddenly sees gigantic disruption. I would like to quote the famous American fund manager John Templeton about economic booming: “Bull markets are born on pessimism, grow on skepticism, mature on optimism and die on euphoria” (Fisher 106). As he points out, when people think they are happy or achieve their hope, the bubble hits the ceiling and the boom collapses. Interestingly, Fitzgerald describes same thing in “My Lost City”: “And lastly from that period I remember riding in a taxi one afternoon between very tall buildings under a mauve and rosy sky; I began to bawl because I had everything I wanted and I knew I would never be so happy again” (111). Once it reaches the highest peak, it can only fall. In *The Great Gatsby* this movement is described as both economy and hope.

Finally, they want to fly higher and higher like in his essay “Echoes of the Jazz Age”:

In the spring of '27, something bright and alien flashed across the sky. A young Minnesotan who seemed to have had nothing to do with his generation did a heroic thing, and for a moment people set down their glasses in country clubs and speakeasies and thought of their old best dreams. Maybe there was a very out by flying, maybe our restless blood could find frontiers in the illimitable air. But by that time we were all pretty well committed, and the Jazz Age continued; we would all have one more. (136)

Notes

1. The possibilities and limitations of capitalism are recurrent themes in Fitzgerald's works. According to Matthew J. Bruccoli, “At the beginning of his career Fitzgerald was exuberant about the money and exposure generated by his stories” (15). Ronald Berman indicates points the affair of money “Gatsby, who relies on money and tries to forget his origins, and Tom Buchanan, who mistakes each and every one of the class values from “tradition” to “courage” summarized by Mencken” (9). Furthermore, Kuehl also points out that money in *The Great Gatsby* reflects the different levels of class in American society:

Money serves thus as the medium of the magic. It is the secret of Daisy's voice. Gatsby says, stunningly, that “her voice is full of money” (p. 120) and this is not a mystical effusion. It has, if anything, a kind of sociological exactness. Her voice has the modulations of good breeding, of confidence, of schooling, of the assurance of being always loved and provided

for and free to enjoy what life offers. Money, in the imaginary world these characters seek, is all that is needed to buy happiness, beauty, time itself (47).

2. We can see his money problems in his others works, such as "Babylon Revisited." In this short story, Charlie Wells, the protagonist, loses his money and family. Finally, he recovers his economic situation; however, he cannot recover his family. Additionally, Fitzgerald's short stories series titled *Pat Hobby* features the protagonist Pat, who also struggles with money problems.

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