

**The Hollow Men of  
*The Great Gatsby*  
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The twenties of this century witnessed a tremendous shift in emphasis from the sense of security and belonging to one of isolation and uncertainty. This shift came of course as a logical result of the traumatic experiences of the new generation in Europe, the generation that had seen the horrors of the trenches in the Somme, Ypres and Verdun, and blamed their politicians and generals for sending them there, for causing the grand butchery of millions of young men through incompetence, indifference and insensitivity to human life, human values, and human suffering. The experience of the First World War affected the young profoundly and out of the more sensitive of these came some memorable writing of profound personal sentiment.

Those who personally participated and in some cases died in it, the war became an expression of their sense of doom, their true belonging to a lost generation, emphasizing on the suffering and pain, sometimes romantically in self-pity or self-glorification, but mostly realistically drawing the physical actuality of the horrors of war.<sup>1</sup>

For those who survived the war, or those who stayed behind for various reasons, the war presented the end of the old world, the world of promise, of hope, of tradition, the established world of the Victorians. The war, then, marked the breakdown of authority and anything that had been sacred and serious for the Victorians was held in profound contempt because it had proved to be hollow, meaningless and outdated and because it had failed to protect them against the

dehumanizing forces of the world, the gathering of the dark gods of hate, selfishness, greed, aggression and arrogance.

The survivors lost all interest in action, building a future, love, the will to live in fact. Human relationships lost their holiness and turned into mechanical business deals or superficial contracts to ward off ennui. Disillusion and despair ruled the day; intelligence and moral purpose seemed to have fled from life. Indeed, one word that really describes the mood of the decade following the end of the war is "apathy". The world was a sick place, but the young had lost that initiative, that confidence and that moral earnestness which characterized their predecessors, and lacked the drive which would push them to try to heal its wounds, to reestablish the faith, the beauty that had fled from the world.

The American experience of the war is in general rather peripheral and indirect. Few of them saw direct action having many of them volunteered for the sheer adventurism it seemed to invite. And yet the impact of the war was so great that a host of American works came to be written which stressed the collapse of old values, the idealism which had pushed them into it in the first place to try to end all wars henceforth. Instead, there was the sense of the futility of their search for the promised golden era. If prewar American life had been tedious and uninteresting, postwar America saw a rebellion against the very foundations of the society, namely morality, religion, the family, motherhood, marriage, the law, etc.

It wasn't really freedom that they were seeking, there wasn't anything significant that interested them. Sense and values had passed away from the world with the last bangs of the war. Now there was only the whimper. That and the desire to protect oneself against the rising tide of materialism, of isolationism and puritannical prohibition and ensuing bootlegging and crime. That protection took the form of utter surrender to a life of aimless revels, emotional bankruptcy or yet still exile to Europe, even though the latter had been shattered by the colossal devastations of the war. Several European forms

of pleasures, such as bullfighting, French bars, endless cocktail parties, easy sex seemed to promise them the excitement that would "Compensate" for dejection and despondency. And they feigned that they were really doing something, that life was thus really assuming a meaning for them, that they were putting their "talents" into productive use. Some really wrote about their experiences; others only pretended to "living their vague life of absorption" in their work, as Lawrence says. "They talked and wrestled in the throes of composition, and felt as if something were happening, really happening, really in the void."<sup>2</sup>

F. Scott Fitzgerald, one of the most talented and perhaps the best representative and perfect embodiment of the lost generation of the twenties, like many of his compatriots, had his fair, and increasingly excessive, share of drifting, sensual indulgences, alcohol and second hand war. Like many of his heroes, he chased a mirage to attain happiness, a dream, a symbol of the impossible to fill the void in him and life around him. That dream was Zelda Sayre, whom he met in Alabama while awaiting in an army camp to be sent to France to participate in the war. He didn't get to France but what he heard and read were enough to damn his generation to everlasting recklessness, confusion, prodigality and a futile search for the "paradise" which had so suddenly slipped away from their hands.

Marriage to Zelda Sayre, the rich, spoiled daughter of an Alabama tycoon, in 1920, seemed to provide him with that paradise or happiness that he, like so many of his generation, ardently wished to attain. Zelda was beautiful, young, vivacious, and for a short while all seemed well. But soon the fog cleared and the true character of Zelda became apparent. In a letter to his daughter, Frances Scott Fitzgerald, he spoke of what Zelda had meant to him and what marriage to her had cost him:

When I was your age I lived with a great dream. ... Then ... .....the dream divided one day when I decided to marry

your mother after all, even though I knew she was spoiled and meant no good to me .... You came along and for a long time we made quite a lot of happiness out of our lives. But I was a man divided—she wanted me to work too much for her and not enough for my dream.<sup>3</sup>

Zelda was vain, temperamental, superficial, selfish and excessively used to squandering money without the least bit of realization or care as to how her husband was making it. He was always in debt and most of the time was forced to put out story after story of inferior, even trashy, quality to satisfy her needs and to meet the cost, or at least partly, of their extravagant way of living.<sup>4</sup> In a humorous essay written in 1924, Fitzgerald discussed his financial problems, even after his literary successes:

There was a fruitless week of patching and revising, and then we gave up and came home. To my profound astonishment the year, the great year was almost over. I was \$5000 in debt, and my one idea was to get in touch with a reliable poorhouse where we could hire a room and bath for nothing a week. But one satisfaction nobody could take from us. We had spent \$36,000, and purchased for one year the right to be members of the newly rich class. What more can money buy?<sup>5</sup>

Another cause of friction between Fitzgerald and his wife was the fact that she was a flapper. They quarreled frequently over her flirtations. These assumed serious proportions in 1924 when Zelda had a short affair with a French

airman (René Silvé) without in the least bit forming a sense of guilt. Moreover, her frequent schizophrenic breakdowns and the ensuing mental and emotional deterioration "cracked" him up too. Gradually he came to believe that all life was a process of breaking down. The 1929 economic crash, thus, was seen by him as an inevitable end to a decade that was sick through and through, had refused to face the reality, preferring, instead, to ignore its ills, the general social, moral, materialistic malaise that gnawed at it and had deemed alcohol, jazz and sex as sufficient to shut out the ugliness without and the emptiness within. Ultimately, like many of his generation, he too came to see "the irrevocable connection between personal tragedy and cultural decline which formed the basis of his dialectic."<sup>6</sup>

One thing that dominated the twenties and thus was reflected in the literature of the period was money. Even when their attitude was critical and negative or yet still ambivalent, they seemed to be obsessed by that miracle word which has given America such a false economic boom, and its politicians such a façade of "normalcy". It was all sham, and evidently could not outlive the decade.

Fitzgerald's early novels and particularly *The Great Gatsby* are mirror reflections of the prevailing mood of the twenties. They study various types of people who are set against a background of emotional exhaustion, intellectual sterility, social recession and moral hollowness. Their vain efforts are directed to achieving a lasting success or happiness, the building of a paradise, which, however, never takes a real shape, and never fulfills the dreams of the protagonists. Because they are dreams based on and supported by illusion, fantasy, and, above all, material wealth. The aforesaid actually constitute the elements of the so-called American dream.

The leisure class of Fitzgerald's novels seems to possess youth and beauty and happiness and deludes itself that these magical qualities are eternal and could be had for money. that love is a commercial transaction and could be easily sold or

bought. In Fitzgerald's view this romantic outlook is morally corrupted and depraved by the rising tide of industrialism and materialism and is therefore condemned by him.

In *The Great Gatsby* we come to closely examine the background of the American dream, its privileges and responsibilities, we see Gatsby's illusion, his self-deception, we see Gatsby being identified with the American dream itself, and finally the failure of that dream:

... he [Gatsby] must have felt that he had lost the old warm world, paid a high price for living too long with a single dream. He must have looked up at an unfamiliar sky through frightening leaves and shivered as he found what a grotesque thing a rose is and how raw the sunlight was upon the scarcely created grass. A new world, material without being real, where poor ghosts, breathing dreams like air, drifted fortuitously about....<sup>7</sup>

Commenting on this splendid criticism of the American scene, Edwin Fussell says:

Such was Fitzgerald's maturest vision of the United States of America, perhaps the most magnificent statement in all our literature of the cruel modernity of the 'new world', its coldness, unreality, and absurdity nourished (if one may use so inappropriate a word) by that great mass neurosis known as 'The American Dream.'<sup>8</sup>

*The Great Gatsby* is in fact a penetration into the American Dream during the corrupt years of the twenties, the discovery that it is no longer a simple, honest, moral, even religious "pursuit of happiness", but rather a shrivelled, hollow glamour of wealth; a substance without form, a spirit without the soul. Gatsby himself turns out at the end to be nothing but an immature romantic lacking in intelligence, self awareness and judgment. He dies not only physically but spiritually and morally as well. His fall indicates the crumbling of the American Dream.

The novel shows the ultimate inability of Jay Gatsby, the man from North Dakota, to adjust himself to the values of the East (the east coast of the U.S.), to the fake, classy, easy-going mannerisms, to the hollowness of men and women who pretend to be intellectual and sophisticated but are in fact rotten and selfish, heartless and insensitive, ruthless and vain. All his life we see or hear that Gatsby had been trying to reach such a creature, to win her over, to marry her and realize his dream, his happiness. To do that Gatsby is seen or rumoured to be "an Oxford man" or to have "killed a man", to have run shady drug-stores selling alcohol, to have drifted "coolly out of nowhere and [bought] a palace on Long Island Sound." (pp. 55-6) He gives "large parties", which of course are the trademark of rich living because they are "intimate", "sensational" and "urbane".

"I keep it [his house] always full of interesting people, night and day. People who do interesting things. Celebrated people." (p. 97)

Gatsby's intention is to make an impression upon Daisy. Daisy is the perfect representative of this class: insolent but cool and even though she is married now to an empty, silly but filthy rich man of her breed called Tom Buchanan, yet Gatsby still cherishes the vain hope of persuading her to return to him. It is a vain hope because she could never really accept him as one of them. He was an outsider, of a lower caste. Tom with the "wholesome bulkiness about his person and his position" could "flatter" her.

For Daisy was young and her artificial world was redolent of orchids and pleasant, cheerful snobbery and orchestras which set the rhythm of the year, summing up the sadness and suggestiveness of life in new tunes ... Through this twilight universe Daisy began to move ... drowsing asleep at dawn with the beads and chiffon of an evening dress tangled among dying orchids on the floor beside her bed. (p. 157)

Tom belonged to this world; Gasby did not with all his extravaganza and parties to which everybody went without being invited and nobody could care who the host was:

... my eyes fell on Gatsby, standing alone on the marble steps and looking from one group to another with approving eyes ... I could see nothing sinister about him. I wondered if the fact that he was not drinking helped to set him off from his guests, for it seemed to me that he grew more correct as the fraternal hilarity increased ... girls were putting their heads on men's shoulders in a puppyish, convivial way, girls were swooning backward playfully into men's arms, even into groups, knowing that someone would arrest their falls—but no one swooned backward on Gatsby, and no French bob touched Gatsby's shoulder and no singing quartets were formed by Gatsby's head for one link. (pp. 56-7)



To the end Gatsby remains "Mr. Nobody from Nowhere" (p. 136) with all his money and disreputable and mysterious past. He is never let into that class, he never fully adopts their manners, never fully learns to speak their language, never develops the "indiscreet voice ... the voice full of money ... the inexhaustible charm that rose and fell in it, the jingle of it, the cymbals' song of it ..." (p. 126)

And when Daisy finally admits that she never really cared for him, though she may have been interested in him at one time or another in her own selfish way, he realizes, in Tom's words, that "his presumptuous little flirtation is over." (p. 141) And the shock is too much for him to bear. The Buchanans may retreat "back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made ..." (p. 186) But Gatsby cannot be so devoid of humanity and feeling. It breaks him up. Even though he persists in saying that she loved him and not Tom or the "half dozen dates a day" (p. 157) she had, even though he persists in finding excuses for her behaviour and rejection of him and even though he supposes that she would call him, but deep down inside he knows it is not true: the anxious look he gives the narrator Nick Carraway "as if he hoped I'd corroborate this" (p. 160) is enough to tell us that he does not believe it. His dream is shattered, "the old warm world" was lost and he felt that he had "paid a high price for living too long with a single dream". (p. 168) The new world was "material without being real, where poor ghosts, breathing dreams like air, drifted fortuitously about ..." (p. 168) The actual physical death he meets is rather irrelevant as he was finished spiritually. Death was, in fact, a relief, a release.

Unlike most pre-war novelists on both sides of the Atlantic, whose theme was mainly the efforts of a sensitive young man out to struggle against various odds and succeed, Fitzgerald dared "to make failure the consistent theme of his work from first to last."<sup>9</sup>

Gatsby, like all the major characters of Fitzgerald, is doomed, or fails because he demands the impossible. The irony comes as a result of the contract between what the American Dream represents and what reality condones, between the ideal and the fact, the wonder and what it has been turned into.

The novel also portrays the conflict between the conservative, rather puritan values of the narrator Nick Carraway from the Mid-West and the corrupt and rather cynical attitude that people like the Buchanans of the East have towards life and values. The conflict of innocence versus experience and the passage of Carraway from innocence, naivety to maturity and revaluation.

Witnessing the traumatic experiences of Gatsby and learning more of his background, Nick changes in his outlook, his expectations and undergoes a revaluation of his intentions in life. Nick is a younger image of Gatsby, or rather would have turned into another Gatsby were he not to witness and not to learn from the gradual degradation and doom of Gatsby. Sure enough there are great differences between them when we put them together and compare their characters, their behaviour and their status. Gatsby is rich, but Nick is not; Gatsby is cold, aloof, withdrawn, mysterious, whereas Nick is very sociable. So must have been the young Gatsby. Nick quickly becomes attracted to a girl not very different from Daisy called Jordan Baker. The greatest difference between them, perhaps, is the fact that whereas Gatsby persists until the end of his life to live by his dreams and fantasies, which are false, Nick learns from his experiences, knows what Jordan stands for—a dumb fake and a habitual liar.

She was incurably dishonest. She wasn't able to endure being at a disadvantage and, given this unwillingness, I suppose she had begun dealing in subterfuges when she was very young in order to keep that cool, insolent smile turned to the world and yet satisfy

the demands of her hard jaunty body. (pp. 64-5)

Nick learns; Gatsby does not. The judgement he gives himself, a little arrogantly perhaps, "I am one of the few honest people that I have ever known" (p. 66) portrays the basic moral criterion upon which Nick is to base his future. This is why at the end of the novel he leaves the East and goes back home where like T. S. Eliot's Fisher King he will "at least set [his] lands in order."<sup>10</sup> He is a wiser man, whose rejection of the East puts some hope in the future, some positive sign in life.

Even after his death Gatsby stays in the East. When Nick suggests that perhaps Mr. Gatz (Gatsby's father) would want to take the body West, his fatuous father shakes his head naively.

Jimmy always liked it better down East. He rose up to his position in the East ... If he'd of lived, he'd of been a great man ... He'd of helped build up the country. (p. 175)

None of his hundreds of "friends" come to his funeral, except a "man with owl-eyed glasses" whose last comment serves perhaps as Gatsby's epitaph:

"The poor son-of-a-bitch." (p. 182)

His great house remains empty, desolate. Nick calls it the "huge incoherent failure of a house" (p. 187) where so many nameless and faceless "sophisticated men and women sparkling cold with jewels had sat in utter boredom, had become drunk, had talked for hours on nothing, had flirted or made casual indifferent love and gone away to their moneyed and corrupt life without leaving a trace, a name or address and without care, like predators.

But Nick is saved, and although we feel that with Gatsby something vital died too—the dream, the wonder, the magic of what America stood for all who came to it or wanted

to, but Nick's return to his old values, his successful moral upbringing save the day perhaps and become a glimmer of hope for man, every man. Something at least is redeemed.

As T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land", *The Great Gatsby* captures the spirit of disillusionment prevailing after the First World War. The book abounds with the wasteland theme emphasizing the barrenness of modern culture and the loss of a real, true ability to believe in life and moral, religious values. The opening panoramic description of Chapter II sets the scene very clearly:

About half-way between West Egg and New York the motor road hastily joints the railroad and runs beside it for a quarter of a mile, so as to shrink away from a certain desolate area of land. This is a valley of ashes—a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and grotesque gardens, where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and, finally, with a transcendent effort, of ash-grey men, who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air. Occasionally a line of grey crawls along an invisible track, gives out a ghastly creak, and comes to rest, immediately the ash-grey men swarm up with leaden spades and stir up an impenetrable cloud, which screens their obscure operation from your sight.  
(p. 29)

The scene is one of utter sterility; the emphasis is on ash, on the colour grey and lead, on the absence of life, of vegetation, even of hope. It is a grey land, a land of clouds of dust, a solemn dumping ground which Fitzgerald himself calls "the waste land." (p. 30) In a place like this even God seems to be dead. It is through this place that the people of West Egg

must go on their way to and from New York. It is near this place that one of Tom Buchanan's mistresses lives in an ash-covered garage and it is in this place that "love" is thought to grow. That sterile love is phenomenal of all love in the book, covered with ash and dead. So are Gatsby's dreams. All ashen and foul.

The scene ultimately is a wasteland without any moral values or principles or considerations that may impel to moral action. Spiritual values are debased, faith or God is absent, save perhaps in the cold dead eyeglasses of Dr. T. J. Ecklegurg, the gigantic advertisement overlooking the valley of ashes. As Eliot in "The Waste Land" is not satisfied with the mere description of the wasteland, the mere mention of impotent, sterile and bored figures, but hints also, starting from Part III "The Fire Sermon", through "Death by Water" and "What the Thunder Said", that something has to be done, a way must be discovered out of this arid life, particularly by self-discipline and restraint and by cleansing and purifying oneself, thus bringing the hope of salvation, so Fitzgerald by the murder of Gatsby (by drowning—thus becoming identified with Eliot's "drowned Phoenician Sailor" and signifying the efforts towards deliverance) washes out "the foul dust" which "floated in the wake of his dreams". (p. 8) and sees the possibility of the deliverance and redemption of Nick. In the hour of doom we hear the promise of redemption and through death comes life, comes the spring. The death of Gatsby therefore may serve perhaps as a sacrifice to bring about the rebirth and redemption of Nick. Thus the conclusion of the book may indicate, as Eliot's "The Waste Land", that beyond this waste land the world can be fertilized by awareness and immolation and perhaps solve the paradox of life in death and death in life.

Nick has lost his innocence, lost his love for Jordan and attraction to Daisy, lost his plans for striking it rich in the East, but at the end West Egg is behind him and the rich, traditional values of his youth in the Mid-West are ahead as Eliot's Fisher

King "sitting upon the shore/Fishing, with the arid plain behind me."

The concluding sentence is one of hope:

So we beat on, boats against the  
current, borne back ceaselessly into the  
past. (p. 188)

*The Great Gatsby* is thus a very moral book and like Eliot's "The Waste Land", even a religious book. It is in values and morality that one can find happiness.

"When I came back from the East last summer", says Nick at the beginning of the book (but after the events of the story have taken place), "I wanted the world to be in uniform and act a sort of moral attention forever." (p. 8)

A deeply felt religious feeling this displays and provides the only means of salvation. Nick recognizes it and this is why he leaves the East. There is no salvation in the wasteland as it stands. Salvation is found away from it, in the wholesome bounds of home and morality.

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## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>See for example R. Brooke's "The Soldier"; W. Owen's "Exposure", "Greater Love", "Futility", "Anthem for Doomed Youth", "Strange Meeting", etc.; S. Sassoon's "Dreamers"; Alan Seeger's "I Have a Rendevous with Death"; Isaac Rosenberg's "Dead Man's Dump", "Returning, We Hear the Larks", "Break of Day in the Trenches"; and others.

<sup>2</sup>D. H. Lawrence, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, (London: Penguin Books, 1961), p. 19.

<sup>3</sup>Cited by Arthur Mizener, *The Far Side of Paradise* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1951), p. 122.

<sup>4</sup>Between Nov. 1922 and April 1923, for example, Fitzgerald published eleven stories for \$17,000; and several more in Oct. 1923.

<sup>5</sup>F. S. Fitzgerald, "How to Live on \$46,000 a Year", in *The Great Gatsby: A Study*, ed. by Frederick J. Hoffman (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962), p. 141.

<sup>6</sup>C. W. E. Bigsby, "The Two Identities of F. Scott Fitzgerald", in *The American Novel and the Nineteen Twenties* (London: Edward Arnold, 1971), p. 149.

<sup>7</sup>F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*. (Penguin Books, 1964), p. 168.

<sup>8</sup>Edwin Fussell, "Fitzgerald's Brave New World", in *The Great Gatsby: A Study*, p. 252.

<sup>9</sup>William Troy, "Scott Fitzgerald—The Authority of Failure," in *The Great Gatsby: A Study*, p. 224.

<sup>10</sup>T. S. Eliot, "The Waste Land", Part V "What the Thunder Said". (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1965).