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Decadence in disguise

A Marxist view of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*

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“Whenever you feel like criticizing anyone . . . just remember that all the people in this world haven’t had the advantages that you’ve had” (Fitzgerald 3)

I. Introduction

The Roaring Twenties, the so-called jazz-age, is a time often romanticised in fiction as a time of post-war relief and general happiness, an era described by Russel Duncan and Joseph Goddard more specifically as “an era of prosperity . . . a hedonistic age marked by the pursuit of pleasure” (20). Hedonism and the pursuit of pleasure are two prevalent features in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s novel from this time period, *The Great Gatsby*, the novel around which this thesis is centred, both as regards the characters and the milieu. Decadence, as defined by the Cambridge Dictionary, refers to a person, group or society of low moral standards (Cambridge Dictionary), and depicting the twenties as a time period very much lacking high morals is arguably what Fitzgerald has done.

With works such as *The Beautiful and Damned* (1922), *The Great Gatsby* (1925), and *Tender Is the Night* (1934), Fitzgerald’s novels are in some regard, at a first glance, stories of success, or rather about successful people. This is done by centring his plots around the carefree and highly materialistic upper-class American in pursuit of (or in some cases being perceived as close to achieving) the American dream, a concept which will be further explained and defined in this thesis. This is particularly true about *The Great Gatsby*, which in every regard is centred around a carefree upper-class but also features both direct- and underlying questions regarding both the American Dream and the cost of capitalist success, and serves as the main reason as to why this thesis will focus on that novel in particular. While the novel’s surface is covered with money, success and power, Fitzgerald seems to want to tell

the reader to look closer, to scratch at the surface of the shallow and ignorant capitalist ideals, which is why Fitzgerald's literary works make for excellent subjects for Marxist analysis.

The novel *The Great Gatsby* follows protagonist Nick Carraway as he ventures into the realm of upper-class America during the peak of the Roaring Twenties. On the surface, the novel tells a hopeless love story of Jay Gatsby, a self-made upper-class man and his pursuit of the love of his youth, Daisy Buchanan, who also happens to be Nick's second cousin. Gatsby, Daisy and her husband Tom reside in the luxurious locales of East- and West Egg, New York. While both of the Eggs are occupied by the American upper-class, the novel also takes us through the wasteland which lies between the Eggs and inner-city New York called the Valley of Ashes, where Tom's lover Myrtle resides with her husband, George. George works as a mechanic in a garage and auto shop while Myrtle dreams of something more, a climb up the social ladder, a way out from the valley.

The Eggs, the city and the Valley all represent different layers of the socioeconomic hierarchy, yet there is more than one thing, one character or one symbol that could be argued to represent or symbolise the myth of the American dream and the foreshadowing of the failure of capitalist society. Most of the characters contribute to exposing these flawed systems: from Nick's initial excitement in regard to Gatsby, Tom and Daisy and their lifestyle and how this excitement gradually turns into disgust, to how one could argue, much like Leland Person does, that the entire story arc of Gatsby and Daisy symbolises the "death of a romantic vision of America" and "the mutual alienation of men and women before materialistic values of modern society" (3).

Previous research on the novel which has been deemed relevant for this thesis has all been selected based on their focus: analysing the novel from the perspectives of class, while

also considering the concepts of the American Dream or capitalism in general. These sources provide a good background as well as perspective, as this thesis aims to analyse all of the above-mentioned themes and concepts, but from a Marxist perspective.

Previous research includes the works by William E. Cain, who wrote the article “American Dreaming: Really Reading The Great Gatsby” on the economic inequalities depicted in the novel. Cain aimed to analyse the novel’s characters in relation to the American Dream and concludes that Fitzgerald, through the use of symbolism in his characters, succeeded in both examining and exposing the “limitations of the American Dream” (18).

Alberto Lena’s article “Deceitful Traces of Power: An Analysis of the Decadence of Tom Buchanan in The Great Gatsby” focus on, as the title suggests, more character analysis, this time through the concept of decadence. Lena discusses the personal traits of Tom and his obsessive relationship with money, power and material possessions. The article argues that while the characters in the novel are meant to symbolise the downfall of American high-society in the twenties, Fitzgerald fails to actually make that point: rather the novel solidifies the capitalist dream as something which will withstand the ordeals of time. It does, however, make the point that the characters, on an individual level, will fall under the pressure and corrupting forces of wealth and desire for power (37).

Leland Person’s “‘Herstory’ and Daisy Buchanan” is another work of character analysis, focusing on Daisy’s characteristics in relation to the men of wealth and power who surround her. Person argues that Gatsby, by representing a “different” social class than the one Daisy belongs to, acts as a device for possible “liberation” from Daisy’s *own* world and from the destruction her husband brings upon them. Person concludes that in the end, Daisy feels

repulsed by the “vulgarity of Gatsby’s world” (8), as she can neither live nor exist outside of her natural habitat at the absolute summit of the socioeconomic ladder.

Furthermore, Marius Bewley’s “Scott Fitzgerald’s Criticism of America” discusses the society in *The Great Gatsby* from the perspective of social class and argues that Fitzgerald, apparently “essentially a Marxian” by the 1930s, was well aware of the “social disease” invoked by capitalist ideals and as such wrote the novel as a symbol of the decadence of the decade, and as a moral reminder that not everything that looks extravagant is worth the pursuit (21).

These articles all aim to analyse the novel in different aspects and their relevance in relation to this thesis comes from the fact that they all share common ground in their attempts to analyse the upper-class and capitalist structures in the novel, whether it be through a direct analysis of said themes or through e.g the analysis of decadence as a result of capitalist ideals such as the strive for wealth, power and materialistic success.

While previous research has mainly focused on either the characters of the novel or the society in which they live, this thesis will aim to analyse how both society and the characters in it are affected by the capitalist superstructure and the American Dream and what the societal implications on its characters are from a Marxist perspective. The analysis will be done mainly by applying Marx’s theory of the *superstructure*. This theory has been chosen for the thesis since the theory is well suited for analysis of both character and society as well as for discussing what implications one (the society) has on the other (the character). Terry Eagleton describes the function, or self-perceived necessity even, of the superstructure in the following manner: “the function of a superstructure, by and large, is to help manage [the working class] in the interests of a ruling class” (239). Going by this statement, this thesis

draws the conclusion that ideas such as those of the American Dream are constructed by the ruling class to keep the working class working, and can therefore be argued as a part of the capitalist superstructure.

This leads to the concept of the American Dream, which is up for analysis in this thesis and therefore needs to be clarified. The modern definition of The American Dream can easily be described as the idea that anyone in America has equal opportunities and possibilities to achieve success, wealth and happiness as the result of hard work (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). Harold Bloom, on the other hand, argues that the concept is in fact not static with a clear definition of what it actually encompasses (16). He proclaims that “like with so many myths, the American Dream is devoid of clear meanings” and that many of our modernist writers, Fitzgerald included, were very much aware of its “haziness” (16). However, Bloom states, that all the modernist authors describe the American Dream in the same manner: the dream of a nation where everybody has the freedom and possibilities to prosper, achieve happiness and wealth. Bloom further states that this ambivalent definition of the American Dream lives on in today’s society and can be seen in speeches by, for example, former President Obama (16). As this definition can be traced back to Fitzgerald’s novels while also seemingly still existent today, this definition will be the one used in this thesis whenever the American Dream is referenced.

By analysing the characters, society, the divide between classes and overarching concepts like the American dream, this thesis shows that the upper class, which hides behind extravagant parties and money, is the representation of decadence in Fitzgerald’s version of the 1920s American society. The elements of the novel which will be analysed are mainly the characters and their society, but overarching concepts such as materialism, class and the

American Dream all play a big part in how Fitzgerald approaches the decade, therefore this thesis will also discuss what implications these concepts have on both the characters and society, from a Marxist perspective. The characters up for analysis have all been chosen for their assumed class affiliation and their importance to either the story or to the other characters and their respective development through the novel.

I.I Through a Marxist lens

To properly analyse *The Great Gatsby* from a Marxist perspective, some theories and terminology need to be introduced and explained. To introduce what Marxist theory is and how it can be applied when analysing literature, Peter Barry has a passage where he quotes a letter from Friedrich Engels to the novelist Margaret Harkness, where the former cannot fault the latter for not writing an explicitly socialist novel, for “the more the opinions of the author remains hidden the better the work of art” (61). The implications of this quote are applicable to all forms of literary critique, yet it opens up the world of literary works to Marxist interpretation: Engels suggests that regardless of the author’s *own* ideas, ideologies or beliefs, every work of literature is open to interpretation and analysis and can be discussed through critical theories which the author did not necessarily *intend* the work to be viewed through, and by applying theoretical concepts which might even directly oppose what the author had intended.

To explain Marxist theory it is helpful to first understand the Marxist view of society and the mechanisms it is built upon. Raymond Williams (55) defines the concept of society by dividing it into three main areas. The areas will be listed as per Williams's definition and followed by clarifying examples of how each area relates to the novel: The first is a system of

beliefs characteristic of a particular group or social class (i.e capitalism). The second is a system of *illusory* beliefs, *false* ideas or false consciousness, all of which can be countered by true or scientific knowledge (i.e the American dream). The third is comprised of the general process of how meanings and ideas are produced through, for example, social constructs and influence. Williams's categories cover the main parts of what makes a society function, to a degree, as ideologies, beliefs and social constructs are the foundation to the world around us and to the fictional, as well as historical, societies in novels. These three categories, therefore, provide a good foundation when analysing society in a novel and directly tie into the Marxist concept of the superstructure.

The theory used in this thesis to analyse both the novel's characters and society is, as previously mentioned, the Marxist theory of the superstructure. According to Barry (160-161) and Williams (77), the concept of the superstructure divides society into the *base*, which represents the material production, distribution and exchange as well as the individuals who perform the labour, while the *superstructure* consists of everything above and over the base in the form of institutions, forms of consciousness as well as political and cultural concepts (politics, culture, ideologies, religion, the concept of the American Dream etc). Additionally, Gregory Castle (27, 105) notes that the Marxist theory of the superstructure is closely related to the ideas of Marxist materialism and underlines, just as Eagleton (239) does, that superstructures form under the dominant classes, i.e the class with the most power sets the norms and ideals for others to chase. Therefore, the theory of the superstructure is a relevant device when analysing literature as it allows for the literary critic to discuss society and the characters of a novel with the consideration of overarching structural phenomena such as, for

example, the American Dream and capitalism in general, as well as what implications these phenomena have on both said society and characters.

II. Beautiful or damned? An analysis of the characters in *The Great Gatsby*

The novel follows protagonist Nick Carraway as he ventures into the realm of the excessively rich American twenties, the fictional locales of the East- and West Egg, Long Island, New York. Fitzgerald casts characters from a variety of social classes, and this section of the analysis will aim to analyse how the characters are influenced by the capitalist superstructure and the American Dream.

II.I The Buchanans

The character of Tom Buchanan, like his wife Daisy, represents the upper class and old money. They would both fit into a category which according to Alberto Lena was coined by American economist Thorstein Veblen, called the “leisure class” (qtd. in Lena 23). Lena describes this sub-class within the upper class as those who “live on the fruits of the industrial community rather than within it” (23), meaning that these people have not made their money through any sort of labour, yet reap the fruits of the labour of others. The “leisure” here refers to the fact that the wealth these people have allows them to do seemingly whatever they want *whenever* they want, and as Nick notes, Tom “drifted here and there unrestfully wherever people played polo and were rich together” (Fitzgerald 10). This suggests a lifestyle much in line with the description of the leisure-class provided by Lena in both the “drifting” and the sports, in addition to the upper-class being around others from the same social class simply because of the fact that the only thing they share is being rich.

The two Buchannans arguably lack the ability to care about others on a deeper level than just superficially, which is a product of their leisure mindset in addition to never having to work for their livelihood. Nick points out the carelessness of the two and how their wealth is all they have and care about, stating “they were careless people, Tom and Daisy—they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated 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” (Fitzgerald 179). Money and power are what glue their relationship together, a relationship built on superficial success. They both view themselves in much higher regard than the people around them and separate themselves from general social life by hiding in their wealth and power which ultimately becomes part of their identity and subsequently an excuse for their actions and their inability to understand or care about the people beneath them.

The cause of the Buchanans' lack of morals and their carelessness can be traced back to the corrupting forces of the capitalist superstructure. As Lena points out, inherited money, wealth earned not from hard work but from the hard work of others, is “an invitation to corruption” (22). Wealth, and the power it brings with it, is a product of the superstructure in how both power and excessive wealth become part of ideals and identity, and the corruptive nature of these ideals are what lead to the Buchanans' decadence, their moral decay. However, it is arguably Tom's indecency, lack of moral and violent nature that is the most impactful in the novel. Daisy implies that she should have known better than marrying a “brute of a man” (Fitzgerald 14). This implies that Tom's decline in character was not set in motion *during* the novel, but rather part of his personality even before he married Daisy. This could also suggest

that the more time Tom spends with his money and power, the more corrupt, careless and morally blind he becomes.

Tom is described by Nick as having an aggressive posture and that he possesses a “cruel body” (Fitzgerald 9), his entire existence seems intimidating to Nick, and Tom bluntly claims that he is “stronger and more of a man than you are” (Fitzgerald 9), directed at Nick. Tom needs to manifest his power over Nick physically, it is not enough for him to have more material possessions, money or power. This physical manifestation of power is displayed in Tom’s relationship with Myrtle as well, as Fitzgerald describes how Tom “[made] a short deft movement, [and] broke her nose with his open hand” (Fitzgerald, 37). His violent nature, in addition to him taking his power for granted, results in a complete lack of respect for others to the point where he views Myrtle as nothing more than yet another possession. Tom’s disregarding of Myrtle’s marriage and autonomy tells us how little Tom cares about consequences, he is the manifestation of the power held by the upper classes, and his carelessness a representation of his entitlement.

II.II Jay Gatsby and James Gatz

The novel’s namesake, Jay Gatsby, might be one of the most elusive characters in modern fiction. Regardless of his frequent interactions with the other characters as well as his attendance at the extravagant parties he himself hosts, not one person in the novel *actually* knows Gatsby, most do not know his looks and very few are aware of his motives. On a deeper level, however, one could argue that Gatsby and his elusiveness is the representation of the pursuit of the American Dream, and how this pursuit leads to decadence and corruption.

Gatsby and his actions are symptoms of the influence the capitalist superstructure has over the characters in the novel. As previously concluded, the superstructure and the concept of the American Dream are here intertwined, they are two sides of the same dollar bill. One could argue that Gatsby seems to have internalised the logic of the superstructure to strive for wealth and power and as such convinces himself that these are key to obtaining Daisy's interest. In his pursuit of these key elements of wealth and power, he gives up his old identity (Fitzgerald 97), he attains his riches by questionable means and illegal affairs, and he isolates himself in his mansion. His interaction with the outside world is almost limited to the parties he hosts at his mansion, but even on those occasions is he isolated: the guests are there simply as a backdrop, a way to impress Daisy, a way for Gatsby to show how important he is simply by the sheer amount of people who attend his parties. He does not care about the people surrounding him as they are all simply pieces on his chessboard, they are, in his world, necessities and solidifies the idea that the lacking morals and decadence surrounding Jay Gatsby stem from the alluring pursuit of what he does not have.

Even after achieving what most Americans never even come close to, in regards to his wealth and power, Gatsby is not satisfied. His actions prove that the American Dream is nothing but a myth, a chase that never ends, as he has achieved many of the criteria from Bloom's definition of the American Dream, yet still chases for more. The green light at Daisy's dock (Fitzgerald 93) could be argued to symbolise the same thing: its colour represents money, one of Gatsby's obsessions, its location represents Daisy, and its distance represents how something can be close enough to see, yet too far away to grab, much like the myth of the American Dream. Yet, the narrative of Jay Gatsby goes beyond simply his pursuit

of Daisy as a person and requires one to pick his character apart to be analysed in smaller pieces: his past, his two personas, his motifs and the forces which drive him.

The entire persona of Jay Gatsby is made up of ambitions that stem from his desire to create something that distances him from his past. He creates an identity so different from the one he was born as, James Gatz, that Nick remarks that he is now a son of God (Fitzgerald 98). Gatsby's life goal is attaining Daisy's love, and as such, everything he has done to get to where he is now is defensible because of that romantic conclusion he envisions. Stephen Brauer argues that the psychology behind Gatsby's "self-making" is part of a "Machiavellian rhetoric that suggests that the means to success do not matter so much as the results" (52), an argument that the end justifies the means and in the case of Gatsby, his end is the only one that matters. Cain notes that "[Gatsby's] dream is to make it the way it was not: he hates his past, and his money is his guarantee that he can dispense with the person he was and invite—that is, order—Daisy to do the same" (462), which further suggests that the ideals of the American Dream drive Gatsby to a complete loss of character and moral so significant that he is willing to disregard even Daisy's own will.

As mentioned previously, Gatsby's parties contribute to the argument that the influence of the superstructure has skewed his moral compass. As he sees himself as above the rest, he has the power to use the people around him as he sees fit. A delusional idea of grandeur which resonates well with Nick's observation of Gatsby's God-like status. The guests at his parties are from every part of the socioeconomic hierarchy and he assures Daisy that his house is "always full of interesting people, night and day. People who do interesting things. Celebrated people" (Fitzgerald 90). Gatsby seemingly makes no distinction between

class, and they are all there as pieces to the puzzle that is his life, his desire to attain Daisy's love.

Regarding the parties and Gatsby's guests, Bewley argues that the guests can be perceived as almost "ephemeral" and as "illusions", as they serve no purpose other than filling up space for Gatsby, and in this illusory existence they represent a "shattered American dream" (5). He further explains that they come to Gatsby's parties not only to enjoy the free drinks and extravaganza, they come as "illusions in pursuit of a reality from which they have become historically separated, but by which they might alone be completed or fulfilled" (6), as an only way for the working- and middle-class to experience the life of the rich, if only for a night.

II.III Nick Carraway

Nick comes from the upper middle class and acts as our guide in the novel, a "guide, a pathfinder, an original settler", as he describes himself (Fitzgerald 6). Nick works in the bond business, which suggests that he strives to make a lot of money quickly, whilst also moving to the richer part of New York, presumably to be closer to the upper echelon of the social hierarchy. An argument could be made that Nick's interest in money and the wealthy American, his profound need to be close to the world of riches, are the traits that make Nick one of the more interesting characters in the novel as this raises the questions of what drives him, what motivates him and what is important to him.

One of Nick's driving forces is that of upward social mobility, but Nick is also driven by the urge to *observe* the people and events which are to him strange and unrelatable. This has further implications for his character. Nick is fascinated by the world of the rich and

powerful and observes this world like a tourist, an observer in “consoling proximity of millionaires — all for eighty dollars a month” (Fitzgerald 7). The comment on how much he is paying for rent is one of the few honest thoughts of Nick: the presence of all that money and extravaganza for no more than eighty dollars a month is to him a bargain. This suggests that he values the upper-class world which he so desperately wants to be part of, in one way or another, very highly. Nick’s fascination with both Gatsby and Daisy and their lifestyles makes him give up pieces of his essence as the novel goes on and trades away personality traits for the sheer closeness to glamour: Nick makes small remarks on the actions of the people around him, suggesting that he has a working moral compass, yet he succumbs more and more to the corrupting nature of those around him, he observes questionable affairs and events yet he stays silent until the very end. Guilty by association. Instead of leaving the Eggs and the people that he finds as interesting as repulsive, he stays and slowly cares a little bit less about what is morally acceptable for every event and action he observes.

Nick’s relation to this world is not uncomplicated. He explains that he feels this world is strange to him, yet also intriguing: “I was within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of my life” (Fitzgerald 36-37), suggesting that he is well aware of his “tourist” persona, but his fascination with the rich and his yearning for upward social mobility keeps him in a world that he simultaneously seems to resent in many ways. This resentment is visible through small comments from Nick on various occasions in the novel, like breadcrumbs leading the reader towards his honest opinions. Nick tells Gatsby that “they’re a rotten crowd [and] you’re worth the whole damn bunch put together” (Fitzgerald 153), again suggesting that even though he is disgusted by the wealthy people of

the Eggs, Nick simultaneously thinks very highly of Gatsby, regardless of his acts, motives and questionable character.

Nick's fascination with Gatsby and the East- and West Egg tells us that while he does not completely disregard the luxurious lifestyle of the upper class, even though he clearly distances himself from it, he has given in to the chase of the capitalist ideals, and in the end, Nick leaves without anything but a disrupted mind. This leads to the argument that Nick, as with Gatsby, represents the unattainability of the American Dream. However, unlike with Gatsby himself, a Marxist critic could argue that Nick's failure of achieving economic success stems from an underlying feeling of guilt, or awareness, related to his own acts and observations throughout the novel. As Nick eventually, or perhaps inevitably, leaves Long Island with no intention of returning to the world of the rich, he ultimately represents the realisation that the American Dream is a myth and perhaps Fitzgerald here suggests that the upper-class and their wealth are not necessarily the end goal, a sort of hope for the class-based struggle and a foreboding of the end of the 'Roaring Twenties'.

II.IV Myrtle

Myrtle and George Wilson are the working-class representatives of the novel, residing in the borderland between the Eggs and New York City. Of the pair, Myrtle plays the bigger role in the plot and not much is told about her husband George. Myrtle's story arc revolves around her desire to move up in the world, away from her husband and into the arms of a rich and powerful other, as Tom Buchanan, leading up to her ultimate demise: death by expensive automobile.

Myrtle as a character seems to be wanting a life other than the one she lives with her husband. One could argue that her relationship with Tom exists because of Tom needing to escape his marriage or to simply fulfil his sexual needs elsewhere. Yet, one could make the argument that their relationship is not quite that simple: Myrtle's desire to move up on the social ladder is an equally strong motivator for their relationship to be. By accepting Tom's feral, violent and animalistic sides, by pleasing his sexual desires, she, in turn, gets an apartment in the city and various material possessions (Fitzgerald 28). Myrtle's goal is to leave her husband, and with him her life, behind in the Valley for the pursuit of higher social status. This suggests that Myrtle, clearly sold on the capitalist ideals of the American Dream, is willing to sacrifice everything she has only to be viewed as higher up on the class-scale, a victim in herself to the capitalist superstructure.

Tom comments on her current situation, claiming that the valley in which she lives is a "terrible place" and that "it does her good to get away" (Fitzgerald 27), implying that Myrtle's life and, presumably, her economic situation is something that Tom looks down on and that part of him using her comes down to some form of pity, showing clear signs of classism in Tom's self-declared superiority. One could wonder if these comments would have changed Myrtle's view of Tom had she heard them, suggesting that Fitzgerald uses Myrtle's absence in the conversation as a symbol for the reason and moral that is absent in both the other characters and in the novel in general.

Nevertheless, the fact is that Myrtle is driven by her needs and desires of achieving upward social movement. When viewed from a Marxist perspective, Myrtle is in all aspects a victim of the capitalist superstructure. She is chasing a different life based on the ideals of riches and economic superiority, ideals which ultimately lead to her death. Furthermore, the

character who pays with his life for the death of Myrtle is, in fact, innocent of that specific crime. Again, showing the corruption and decadence caused by the capitalist superstructure and the alluring ideals of the American Dream.

III. Eggs and Valleys - Analysis of society in *The Great Gatsby*

This is the valley of ashes—a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens; where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and, finally, with a transcendent effort, of men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air. (Fitzgerald 24)

As with the characters of the novel, the locales and the society in *The Great Gatsby* play equally significant roles in the examination of class, materialism and the American Dream. Marx's theory of the superstructure will be applied here, as the capitalist ideals and the American Dream are the main ideologies that drive the narrative and the characters' actions. Williams (77) notes that for one to understand the implications of the superstructure, one must first understand its relation to the base, the individuals behind labour and production who in this thesis were translated into the novel's characters. The superstructure can be best understood by analysing the implications it has on society and the people in it. For example, the characters in the novel are driven by ideals (the superstructure), and so the ideals directly impact the characters and their actions. On the other hand, it is important to keep in mind that the base also determines the superstructure: ideals and ideologies do not create themselves,

and as such, the superstructure is not a divine presence but rather a construct of social and economic motivators. While the superstructure is defined by the ruling class, its definition must also be made with the consideration of what the working class is willing to strive for.

Fitzgerald writes the locales of the East- and West Egg, the Valley of Ashes and the city as representations of the different socioeconomic classes in the novel, while also having them act as symbolic manifestations of class-related ideals. The Eggs, for example, are in many ways to be considered a concept or idea rather than just a physical place, and as such, applying the theory of the superstructure here helps one to see the correlation between the characters' actions and the society in which they act.

Williams presents an argument, claiming that while the rich are getting richer and the carefree more carefree, the rest are left beneath, arguing from a Marxist point of view that "civilization had produced not only wealth, order and refinement, but as part of the same process poverty, disorder and degradation" (18). This is a point that well coincides with Marx's own, which Reeve Vanneman and Lynn Weber Cannon refer to in their study *The American Perception of Class*: "The development of Modern Industry, therefore, cuts from under its feet the very foundation on which the bourgeoisie produces and appropriates products. What the bourgeoisie, therefore, produces, above all, is its own grave-diggers" (33). A remark suggesting that while the upper-class society becomes more wealthy and powerful, it does so by denying the same rewards to others, and the cost will be paid by its own inevitable demise. Now, this demise arguably has yet to come in any *literal* sense, but as noticed in the novel the downfall comes in the form of an individual one, with one character after another showing signs of decadence, indulging in questionable affairs and falling into

hopelessness, all caused by the mechanisms upheld by the capitalist superstructure with the appeal of the American Dream.

Emil Øversveen, whose article mainly deals with the Marxist theory of alienation yet feature relevant observations in regard to the theory of the superstructure, makes the argument that the ideals of the superstructure can lead to the corruption of individuals, and notes that “those groups who are most exposed to the market forces and who are most deprived of the social power to influence their social circumstances are likely to be at particular risk at the subjective experiences of fatalism, hopelessness, loneliness and despair.” (15). Three of the four traits (*hopelessness*, *loneliness* and *despair*) are arguably present in Fitzgerald’s characters analysed within this thesis, and one could trace these traits back to their source: the capitalist superstructure and the ideals of the American Dream, which are the underlying motivators for the characters’ decisionmaking and the catalysts for their demise and fall into decadence.

III.I ‘The Eggs’ and their baskets

The two most prominent areas of the novel are the East- and West Egg. One represents the old money where generations of wealth have always flourished, while the other a new haven for the newly-rich and self-made millionaires, the “less fashionable of the two, though this is a most superficial tag to express the bizarre and not a little sinister contrast between [the Eggs]” as Nick remarks (Fitzgerald 7). In other words, the old-money East Egg resents those of self-made money, suggesting that while they are indeed wealthy, they stand *beneath* the generations of money represented in the East.

The Eggs can be viewed as physical representations, manifestations or models, of the superstructure. Like a storefront display of wealth, luxury and carelessness, the locations perfectly show off what the American Dream leads to, what lies at the end of the rainbow, the perfect sales pitch. Williams states that the superstructure defines “forms of social consciousness” (76), which means, when discussing the Eggs, that they are more than just their physical location gives away, they are the physical representation of capitalist success. They exist to carry the ideals and the social consciousness required to chase said ideals. Their location simultaneously represents the unattainability of the American Dream for the working class by being located far away from the city, as well as by being occupied by the wealthiest people of the American east: out of reach both physically and economically.

III.II The Valley of Ashes

Williams notes, on the Marxist theory of the superstructure, that the being of men is not determined by their consciousness, but rather that “their social being determines their consciousness”, suggesting that class affiliation is a construct of the superstructure and that the inevitable ‘awakening’ consciousness of the working class makes them realise that they are indeed chained to their circumstances, and can only break free from their predetermined existence by revolution (75). Vanneman and Weber Cannon point out that the notion of revolution is close to impossible for American workers to comprehend, as American capitalism was much stronger because of the resources they had at their disposal. One of these resources was the ability to, by the power of consumerism and materialism, sell the American Dream to the working class as a motivator to keep producing for the holders of capital (3). This is of course, as previously discussed, reflected in the novel’s characters, but the

environments in which they traverse and where the dialogues and events take place clearly echo this sentiment as well.

The geographical representation of the lower classes as a result (or consequence) of the success and wealth of those who reap the fruits of the labour of others. The Valley of Ashes sits firmly in between the luxurious East- and West Egg and the increasingly important and expanding New York City, caught in the middle, yet so clearly below in regards to societal value. The area gets its name from the residue produced from all the roadwork, construction and coal from the work done to enhance the locale, the price of building something of a higher standard. Could it be that Fitzgerald poses the valley as a naive reminder for the upper-class of what they built their fortunes on, having to ride through this place every time they need to go outside of their bubble? Or rather, as Nick states: “When the drawbridge is up to let barges through, the passengers on waiting trains can stare at the dismal scene for as long as half an hour” (Fitzgerald 24-25), suggesting instead a zoo-like experience, a place where the upper classes can stop to watch the, to them, almost exotic poverty and depression from the train’s windows, yet another piece to the self-fulfilling prophecy of the rich and successful.

The Valley acts as the place where we are first introduced to the working class, to Myrtle and George, and it acts as a catalyst of sorts for the events to come. The second cataclysmic event is arguably the death of Myrtle, which sets the end of the novel in motion and also takes place in the Valley (Fitzgerald 136). This event, and where it takes place, has many implications for a class-based analysis: First, Myrtle runs out into the streets, believing that someone will finally save her from her chain of circumstances, but is met with her own death. She clings to a false hope and a last resort to get away from her working-class

affiliation, but is instead tied to the Valley even in her death. This leads to the case of George's revenge, the killing of Gatsby. This is symbolic in a way that suggests that the working class has the ability to fight back. On the other hand, George ends his own life, yet again indicating that the pursuit of something more only leads to corruption and decay, even if the chase is for a sort of justice in an otherwise, as in this case and from George's perspective, unjust world.

IV. Conclusion

We can apply numerous different theoretical frameworks and ideologies and combine different views when analysing the novel, and the conclusions would be, next to, endless.

The forefront of luxury and prosperity which make up the novel on a surface level falters rather quickly when one starts to look closer at the seams and fabric. While many of the novels' characters have, in some way or the other, accumulated wealth, Fitzgerald makes it clear that nothing is ever enough. The novel has a focus on its characters seemingly *not* achieving goals, tasks and desires: Gatsby's pursuit of Daisy as his long lost love, Tom's escapism, as well as Myrtle's and Nick's desire to move up in the social hierarchy. Climbing the ladder of social class does not necessarily lead to happiness and neither does the obtaining of power or money, whether it be from hard work or inheritance and this thesis makes it clear that the events, actions and even character developments can be traced back to the capitalist superstructure.

Tom is, from a Marxist perspective, the 'poster boy' for everything that was wrong with the old-money-nineteen-twenties-American, and Bewley (18) notes that Tom's characteristics would today fall under the category of the "upper-class Fascist". It could be argued that this reflects Fitzgerald's own thoughts regarding the social class at large, and his

way of distancing himself from it, using Tom's character and actions as a worst-case scenario and, again, a symbol for the moral decay and decadence of the decade. Tom's lack of morals seems to stem from the boredom and power his wealth brings, and as he seeks thrills outside of his comfort zone, he becomes the embodiment of decadence.

The decadence in the characters makes them unable to relate or care about the people around them, and in particular in relation to the people *beneath* them, socioeconomically. Could this be a sort of coping mechanism, a way for the characters to deal with the fact that they are in so many ways "stuck" where they stand?

No matter how much or little the characters have, they all strive for something more. The *superstructure*, the ideals of the times and society in which they live, demands of them, or rather *encourages* them to chase the fleeting ideals and goals of The American Dream and this is reflected in many instances and events throughout the novel: the green light at the dock, Gatsby dedicates his entire existence to becoming something he is not, to pursue Daisy, a pursuit that eventually fails, Tom's decadent lifestyle as a result of never settling with what one has, Nick's persistence to keep coming back to a lifestyle which he resents yet wants to be a part of. The capitalist ideals of wealth and power are clearly evident in the characters in the novel, and one can, much like Bewley does, argue that this mirrors Fitzgerald's own opinions and experiences regarding the upper-classes during the twenties as the themes of decline and failure are existent in his novels in general and that his novels "strengthen [one's] conviction that society in its present stage is ruled by a complex of forces destructive of basic human values and subversive of man's vision of the good life" (Bewley 27).

By applying the theory of the superstructure to the society in the novel, it stands clear that the capitalist ideals and the concept of the American Dream determines how the

characters act, who they are and what they become, and in the same way, it is certain that ‘what they become’ is corrupted by the capitalist ideals: by chasing the ideals of the capitalist superstructure, many of the characters lose themselves, morally, and their ability to feel anything towards other people, as they can only view them as obstacles, standing between themselves and a dream. This can be seen in Gatsby and Tom specifically, and so, the capitalist utopian dream in the novel’s background inherently transforms both its characters and the society itself to one of decadence and moral decay.

The novel ends with a quote from Nick, where Fitzgerald alludes to the fact that man will never learn from his mistakes, saying “so we beat on, like boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past” (Fitzgerald 180). This implies that although Fitzgerald successfully revealed the flaws of the American Dream and the American capitalist superstructure while also creating a classical work of fiction, he is seemingly aware that he has failed in making any type of change even in his own characters, as history is destined to keep repeating itself. Jay Gatsby might be dead, and with him *a version* of the pursuit of the American Dream, but Fitzgerald arguably knows that the Roaring Twenties, and the decades which are to follow, contains many more Gatsbys and Buchanans and countless more dreams which all justify their pursuers’ means to an end.

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