

## **The Divergent Readings of *The Great Gatsby***

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F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* centers on the clash of two opposing parties of the upper wealth bracket. Tom Buchanon and his wife, Daisy, live on the exclusive, aristocratic East Egg of Long Island, while Daisy's former lover, Jay Gatsby, resides opposite them on the equally wealthy but socially inferior West Egg. Through this geographical juxtaposition, Fitzgerald demonstrates the underlying conflict between "old money" (Tom/Daisy, East Egg) and "new money" (Gatsby, West Egg). The "old money" members gained their money primarily through inheritance and family bloodlines and thus they hold immense economic, social, and cultural capital. The "new money" members gained their money through hard work or illegal means and thus have equal economic capital, but inferior social and cultural capital compared to the "old money" members. Thus, Fitzgerald introduces the concept of socioeconomic class, the interrelation of both social status and economic wealth.

In a 2012 exit survey for graduating seniors at Phillips Academy, *The Great Gatsby* was listed as a favorite text for full-pay students but was not listed at all for financial-aid students. Fitzgerald, in focusing on the conflicts of members of the upper wealth bracket alienates readers not in that same wealth bracket. By subsequently blurring moral and economic language in order to criticize Gatsby, Fitzgerald alienates financial-aid students. While full-pay students, due to their closer background connections to the characters of the novel, were likely able to appreciate Fitzgerald's critiques, financial-aid students may have viewed Fitzgerald and *The Great Gatsby* as both perpetuating the idea that members of higher classes determine acceptable moral practices and ignoring the complex issues surrounding socioeconomic class.

Fitzgerald represents his critique of Gatsby (a representative of “new money”) through the blurring of moral and economic language. As Nick is leaving what would turn out to be his last meeting with Gatsby, he shouts, “They’re a rotten crowd...You’re worth the whole damn bunch put together” (Fitzgerald 154). Nick is referring not only to Tom, Daisy, and East Egg, but the entire social class that encompasses them. When he tells Gatsby that he is “worth” more than all of them, Nick might actually mean that Gatsby is worth more as a person, but Gatsby likely interprets that Nick is saying he is economically worth more than Tom and Daisy (Fitzgerald 154). Fitzgerald blurs the true intention of Nick’s words and the subsequent interpretation by Gatsby, in effect causing readers to question why Fitzgerald obscured the words describing Nick’s admiration of Gatsby’s personal self-worth and conflated it with Gatsby’s economic self-worth. Fitzgerald furthers this “blurring” during Gatsby’s funeral, when another of Gatsby’s “genuine supporters,” (along with Nick) Owl Eyes, comments on Gatsby, “the poor son-of-a-bitch” (Fitzgerald 175). Fitzgerald blurs the true intention of “poor,” avoiding word choice that would have directly revealed Owl Eyes’ admiration and pity for Gatsby and instead choosing to further confuse the audience by obscuring the exact meaning of “poor” (Fitzgerald 175). It seems as though, in these two moments, Fitzgerald presents a harsh critique of Gatsby’s moral self-worth and mocks Gatsby’s inability to be viewed as a true person instead of his meaningless wealth. Fitzgerald portrays Nick and Owl Eyes as two of Gatsby’s true supporters and friends, and yet chooses those two to make these extremely damaging statements, albeit unintentional on their parts, that mock Gatsby’s personal and moral worth. As a result, Fitzgerald attacks Gatsby, questioning his personal and moral self-worth and valuing Gatsby purely for his economic worth, ironically similar to what Tom and Daisy did in the novel itself. Not only would students have been alienated

by the novel's focus on the morality of extremely wealthy members of the upper class, but they would have also been affronted by Fitzgerald's underlying critiques of Gatsby and Gatsby's moral background.

In addition to Fitzgerald and *The Great Gatsby* itself, Angela Leocata and Jennifer Sluka, alumnae of Phillips Academy, each made arguments concerning socioeconomic class in education and at Phillips Academy that are vital in understanding the results of the 2012 exit survey. In "The American Reality: The Effect of Socioeconomic Class on the Educational Process," Leocata points out that, "Social class is not solely determined by income, but also by the extent in which work builds dignity and respect...members of higher classes and institutions determine acceptable behaviors in the class system" (Leocata 7). Leocata argues that people of higher classes (i.e. Fitzgerald), are the same ones who propose and determine the moral standards of a society. This theme of socioeconomic class is placed into the context of Phillips Academy in Jennifer Sluka's piece, "The Mythology of Hard Work and Exceptionalism: Reading Andover Through Barthes." Sluka argues that students at Phillips Academy are affected tremendously by socioeconomic class, and perpetuate their own destructive myth of "hard work and exceptionalism." Sluka argues that, "Andover's current mythology causes many students to leave with a feeling of entitlement and superiority to their peers, perpetuating the tyrannical stratification of society that accompanies elitism" (Sluka 14). Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* does nothing to combat this myth or the "entitlement" or "superiority" at Phillips Academy, where students of lower socioeconomic class are mixed into an education of higher-class, superiority, and exceptionalism.

In his underlying critique of Gatsby, Fitzgerald not only blurs moral and economic language, but he also directly exposes Gatsby's shady business partners and likely illegal business ventures. In doing so, he confirms Tom's suspicions that Gatsby is some "bootlegger," and reveals his intentions of representing Gatsby as a crooked and foolish man, criticizing his moral character and background. These moral critiques and attacks specifically on Gatsby must have alienated financial-aid students, causing them to view Fitzgerald as another "high-up," haughty, and unrelatable moral commentator. Financial-aid students must have realized the irony in attempting to analyze the moral critiques of a man with economic, social, and cultural capital who focused purely on upper-class conflicts and ignored the complex socioeconomic issues at Phillips Academy raised by Leocata and Sluka such as "entitlement," "exceptionalism," and "elitism." On the other hand, full-pay students, not as focused on the issues of socioeconomic class as financial-aid students, could appreciate Fitzgerald's critiques. As a result, many full-pay students listed *The Great Gatsby* as their favorite novel while most financial-aid students did not.

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## Works Cited

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