

The Great Gatsby: Comedy of the Absurd Dressed Up as a Romance

Višnja Sepčić
Faculty of Philosophy, Zagreb

The article places *The Great Gatsby* in a multiple literary context. While recognizing the presence of both European and American tradition of realism and naturalism within its basic structural model of the novel of manners, the article draws attention to various other literary affiliations which *The Great Gatsby* demonstrates. It analyses the sophisticated references the novel makes to E.A. Poe's powerful study of disintegration, *The Fall of the House of Usher*, as well as its ambivalent relation to the tradition of the chivalric romance. The major parallel is drawn between Fitzgerald's masterpiece and the existentially-slanted post-war literature, most notably the theatre of the absurd. The article contends that Fitzgerald's novel powerfully anticipates not only the overwhelmingly bleak vision of the human condition projected by the theatre of the absurd but many of the stylistic features by means of which this vision is realized.

Literary perspectives from which one can look at Fitzgerald's masterpiece are manifold. The seemingly fragile romance dealing with the reckless twenties is deeply embedded in tradition. Lionel Trilling wrote a brilliant essay on *The Great Gatsby* as a novel of manners, stemming ultimately from the European traditional motive of the young man of the provinces coming to the big city (Balzac's Eugène Rastignac, Stendhal's Julien Sorel, Dickens' Pip), desperately searching for money, status and success, driven by ambition and the will to succeed. Trilling stresses that Fitzgerald's presentation of manners, like that of his great European predecessors, is fully controlled by a profound moral and historical imagination. Many more literary affiliations may be detected as overtly or covertly present in Fitzgerald's novel. The chief character on whom the novel centres, the great Gatsby, alias Jay Gatz, is at once a grotesque image of a *nouveau riche*, a "bourgeois gentilhomme", going as far back as Molière, and simultaneously a poignant image of a man in the grip of delusion, using up the total energies of his mind in the pursuit of shadows, mistaking the ephemeral for the eternal, the illusory for the real, the abstraction for the concrete, a Don Quixote with a difference. The native Ame-

rican tradition is, of course, present in multiple guises. Leaving aside for the moment the heritage of American realism and naturalism to which Fitzgerald is obviously indebted, one may detect in it an echo of E.A. Poe's powerful story of disintegration, *The Fall of the House of Usher*. The great Gatsby is a legitimate though remote descendent of the Poesque prototype that has such a rich progeny in modern fiction. Fitzgerald's powerfully presented landscape of the valley of the ashes, the ecologically ruined landscape where the real slides over into the phantasmagorical, reminds one, however remotely, of the sinister and melancholy landscape which introduces us to Poe's tale. Roderick Usher, whose decadent castle is but an extension of himself, is one of the ancestors of the great Gatsby. Both are brilliantly original versions of the myth of Narcissus, both live within the charmed circle of their traumas, neuroses and obsessions, irrevocably alienated from reality, self-isolated and ultimately self-destructive. Like Usher's, Gatsby's house, its feudal silhouette ludicrously out of place in the surroundings of New York, is but an extension of himself, an outward projection of an inward chaos. But if the similarities are there, there are also important differences. The inner demons which are rampant in Poe are entirely absent in *The Great Gatsby*. Gatsby's delusion is created by an arbitrary act of the mind. ("the truth was that Jay Gatsby of West Egg, Long Island, sprang from his Platonic conception of himself.") As the ghosts are absent from his spurious feudal castle, so are the demons. The irrational forces are entirely absent from Gatsby's curiously passionless dream of Daisy, his "fatal woman". While Usher's house with its labyrinthine ways and burried dark secrets fully mirrors the tormented soul of its owner, Gatsby's house, devoid of the ghosts and the demons, is a wild agglomeration of meaningless things, a chaos without a soul, a surrealistic jumble, a nightmare of matter. On one of the complex levels of meaning of the novel Gatsby's doom consists in the reification of his world. His existence is suffocated by thing. He is alienated from the World, Reality and Others by the worship of a false god, the Mammon of material success. On another level, he is the very image of a man dominated by abstraction. His self is abstracted from reality, drained of vital powers. Unlike Tannhäuser or Keats's pale knight, he is not enthralled by his own sensuousness but by an idea. Looked at from this perspective, he is yet another variant of the modern man, with whom the process of abstracting reality has proved to be irreversible, bringing him inner ruin. With Gatsby, the tyrannical mind turns concrete beings and relationships into abstractions and thus the reality beyond the self becomes unreachable. The abstraction becomes real, palpable, tangible while the reality fades into the background and becomes unreal, intangible, impalpable. Like many modern heroes, he inverts the categories of the real and the abstract, becoming incapable of the distinction between the two. The narrator, Nick Carraway, senses this when he comments on Gatsby in one place: "No amount of fire or freshness can challenge what a man can store up in his *ghostly* heart." The process of abstracting reality has gone so far with Gatsby that even the woman who triggered off the dream and then stepped out of it ultimately fades out of the dream.

Gatsby lives his life among the figments of his mind. Daisy, the woman he thinks he loves, has been turned into the Platonic idea of a woman, and becomes linked, in a bewildering jumble of concepts, with the idea of material wealth and

social success. His mental fixation becomes an armour against reality, causing impotence to create living relationships. There is a curious absent-minded quality in *Gatsby* throughout. In many crucial scenes he gives the impression of a man not all there, as if a vital part of him were withdrawn. More and more of his authentic primary existence is being eroded and succumbs to the vacuity of a chimera, a terror reign of the mental image. Hence the vacuity, the absent-mindedness. The chilling solitude is exuded by the monstrous house he built on the West Egg and it enwraps *Gatsby*. Swayed by an *idée fixe*, he stands at the centre of the charmed circle of the gigantic delusion spun by his mind, sustained by the sheer force of his will, a Don Quixote with a difference. Like his great Spanish predecessor, he is the knight of the intangible lady, wed indissolubly to the abstract ideal. He shares with Don Quixote a total blindness to reality, but ultimately lacks the nobility of Cervantes's hero owing to his complete moral obtuseness. The dislocation of fact and image effects a fatal jumble in his mind, the real loses substance and becomes a shadow while the shadow of the mind gains more and more substance. The visible embodiments of this aspect of *Gatsby* are his gestures of greeting, his gestures of farewell — the hieratic gestures of a figure in a legend, in a myth — well-fitting to this Don Quixote of an empty dream.

"The silhouette of a moving cat wavered across the moonlight, and, turning my head to watch it, I saw that I was not alone — fifty feet away a figure had emerged from the shadow of my neighbour's mansion and was standing with his hands in his pockets regarding the silver pepper of the stars. Something in his leisurely movements and the secure position of his feet upon the lawn suggested that it was Mr. *Gatsby* himself, come out to determine what share was his of our local heavens.

I decided to call to him. Miss Baker had mentioned him at dinner and that would do for an introduction. But I didn't call to him for he gave a sudden intimation that he was content to be alone — he stretched out his arms towards the dark water in a curious way, and, far out as I was from him, I could have sworn he was trembling. Involuntarily I glanced seaward — and distinguished nothing except a single green light, minute and far away, that might have been the end of a dock. When I looked once more for *Gatsby* he had vanished, and I was alone again in the unquiet darkness."(27—28)¹

Yet, maybe the most intriguing parallel that could be drawn within the multiple literary context in which *The Great Gatsby* may be legitimately placed, is a parallel with a literary phenomenon that would emerge in the future, some thirty years after Fitzgerald's novel was written, namely the theatre of the absurd. Fitzgerald's brilliant novel of the twenties fits well into the complex pattern of the drama of the absurd as it made its powerful breakthrough in the fifties, with Beckett, Adamov, Genet, and, above all, Eugène Ionesco, to whose dark comedies of the absurd *The Great Gatsby* shows striking affinities.

The themes of the theatre of the absurd, as enumerated by one of its best connoisseurs, Martin Esslin,² are all there — the absurdity of being, the fluidity of the

1. Page references are to F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1975.

2. Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, Anchor Books, Doubleday and Company, Inc., Garden City, New York, 1961.

self, the loneliness of man, the absence of communication, the futility of human endeavour which is seen as a futile pursuit of shadows, and the omnipresence of death, the final metaphysical joke. The basic theme of the theatre of the absurd — that nothing is more real than nothing — is suggested by Fitzgerald's novel just as powerfully as by the theatre of the absurd, although much more obliquely. The grotesque distortions, the violent exaggerations, the fantastic slanting of the real into the unreal and the surreal, the death in the soul being mirrored by the entropy of the landscape, the disintegration of the language mirroring the disintegration of reality — are all there in *The Great Gatsby*, pointing in the direction of the theatre of the absurd, most notably Ionesco. Through the surrealist linguistic exaggerations in the conversations of his characters and the hilariously comical non-sequiturs mirroring the collapse of meaning Fitzgerald anticipates Ionesco's statement that "the surreal is here, within grasp of our hands, in our everyday conversation."³

The Gatsby world is a world of existential nonentities whose very selves are lost. It stages a multiple story of lost selfhood. Tom and Daisy Buchanan lose their selves in the futility of their pointless existence. Their selfhood disintegrates into a series of inconsequential moments, moods, whims and gratuitous acts, with moments of lust or violence punctuating boredom. Wilson fades out of existence and his wife Myrtle's exuberant vitality runs to seed in the sterile valley of the ashes.

Gatsby himself is a crown of lost selfhood, the victim of a gigantic chimera. With him a figment of the imagination wedged itself between the self and the self — realization. In the wasteland of his dream turned abstraction Gatsby passes his life. Gatsby shows more than superficial kinship to Beckett's heroes, imprisoned in the cocoon of the self, impervious to reality, uncertain of everything, the world, the others, the self. In such a world relationships are impossible, and Gatsby amply proves the thesis of the loneliness of man, the absence of communication, staged so insistently by the theatre of the absurd. Like the Beckett heroes he lives in frozen time, unable to establish a clear division line between what is real and what is illusory. Like the two tramps in *Waiting for Godot* standing in the midst of an open road, he spins a myth of Nothingness in the social and psychological Nowhere of his private life, finally coming to the conclusion that the substance is no more real than the shadow. In the claustrophobic ambiance of Beckett's *Endgame* the world and the self disintegrate slowly and implacably. In Gatsby's final vision shortly before his death the world and the self crumble to ultimate nothingness. Similar to the hero in *Krapp's Last Tape*, at the end of his life Gatsby cannot remember what he has dreamed about. The substance of his entire life eludes him, everything turns unreal, ghostly, no meaning and no consequence attaches to his life which in retrospect turns into an incoherent jumble.

"At two o'clock Gatsby put on his bathing suit and left word with the butler that if anyone phoned word was to be brought to him at the pool. He stopped at the garage for a pneumatic mattress that had amused his guests during the summer, and the chauff-

3. *Op. cit.*, p. 93.

feur helped him pump it up. Then he gave instructions that the open car wasn't to be taken out under any circumstances — and this was strange, because the front right fender needed repair.

Gatsby shouldered the mattress and started for the pool. Once he stopped and shifted it a little, and the chauffeur asked him if he needed help, but he shook his head and in a moment disappeared among the yellowing trees.

No telephone message arrived, but the butler went without his sleep and waited for it until four o'clock — until long after there was anyone to give it to if it came. I have an idea that Gatsby himself didn't believe it would come, and perhaps he no longer cared. If that was true he 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 ... like that ashen fantastic figure gliding toward him through the amorphous trees.*" (167—168)

This description suggests that for Gatsby in the last moments of his life everything becomes disembodied, disconnected, meaningless. Gatsby of the dream and Gatsby grown out of the dream seem to be equally unreal, insubstantial, vaporous, immaterial. The world turns into an immateriality. Not even the grass or the sky appear to be real and substantial in those last moments before he is shot. Everything seems to be a mirage, evasive and elusive, in constant meaningless flux. Thus the identity crisis, the identity question which has been central to Fitzgerald's novel throughout, is given a special sharpness, special poignancy with Gatsby's final insight. What seemed to be the most real thing about Gatsby — his dream — proved ultimately to be nothing better than a handful of dust. The immaterial chimera on which his mental life pivoted for so long, cheated him out of existence. Daisy dissolves as if made of insubstantial texture, his parties, his guests, his gigantic ambition dissolve into Nothingness. Thus human life, the human relations portrayed in this novel seem to be finally assimilated into the bleak landscape described so powerfully, so unforgettably at the beginning of the novel, a most fitting mis-en-scène for the total action of *The Great Gatsby*.

"About half-way between West Egg and New York the motor road hastily joins 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 the 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 ash-grey men, who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air. Occasionally a line of grey cars crawls along the invisible track, gives out a ghastly creak, and comes to rest, and immediately the ash-grey men swarm up with leaden spades and stir up an impenetrable cloud, which screens their obscure operations from your sight.

But above the grey land and the spasms of bleak dust which drift endlessly over it, you perceive, after a moment, the eyes of Doctor T.J. Eckleburg. The eyes of Doctor T.J. Eckleburg are blue and gigantic — their retinas are one yard high. They look out of no face, but, instead, from a pair of enormous yellow spectacles which pass over a non-existent nose. Evidently some wild wag of an oculist set them there to fatten his practice in the borough of Queens, and then sank down himself into eternal blindness, or forgot them and moved away. But his eyes, dimmed a little by many paintless days, under sun and rain, brood on over the solemn dumping ground." (29)

The phantasmagorical landscape of the valley of the ashes lies at the heart of the novel, its clouds of dust whirling about, assuming shapes of a phenomenal world, grouping and regrouping, shaping and reshaping and finally dissolving when the wind dies down and the dust settles. At the end everything turns into a handful of dust and Nothingness reigns supreme as before, the single god presiding over the scene, with the surrealistic touch of the grotesque advertisement for spectacles, Dr. Eckleburg's gigantic eyes staring out of no face, the grotesque travesty of God's eyes. This landscape, described in powerful surrealistic terms, projects a bleakly reductive vision of the human condition. Nothingness seems to be the final substratum of reality, pointing towards Beckett's reechoing of Democritus the Abderite "Nothing is more real than nothing." Appearances are deceptive, but what is more frightening, there is no reality behind appearances, Maya's veil does not drape a hard core of things, a more real reality. Behind the ever-shifting deceptive appearances stretches a vast realm of universal Nothingness out of which blurred shapes emerge for a brief second with nothing stable or definite about them. The identities which they briefly assume are accidental, fortuitous, inconsequential. They form and re-form, tormenting the eye that would like to read a meaning into them, and then dissolve and merge back into the background out of which they have emerged, the true substance of the universe, Nothingness. A world of deceitful appearances is no more than a theatre of shadows in which man plays his tormented self-chosen roles and then vanishes without a trace. Both dream and reality prove to have no substance. Phenomenal reality appears to Gatsby in his final vision as amorphous matter, no better than the phantasmagorical valley of the ashes, and it is not accidental that the words "drift", "fortuitous", "ashen", "fantastic" and their like, appear in Fitzgerald's description of Gatsby's death. The opalescent texture of Gatsby's dream as well as the seemingly stable, firm texture of the external universe prove ultimately to be equally insubstantial. The supreme role he chose for himself and played with such fervour — that of Daisy's eternal lover — proves as insubstantial and ultimately as inconsequential as the supporting roles he did not attach much value to except as a means to an end. In his final intuition of the pointlessness of things his life merges with Nothingness, the final reality out of which the veil of illusory appearances both in the outer and in the inner world is spun to the bewilderment and the torment of man who falls a victim to his own freely chosen illusions.

In conclusion we may say that under the intriguing surface of Fitzgerald's brilliantly witty and superbly written story of a frustrated romance taking place in the madly revolving world of the twenties, the underlying pattern of meaning, consistently sustained all through the novel and brought to its culmination at the moment of Gatsby's death powerfully projects, although muffled by the pastoral nostalgia and the lyrical elegiac quality of the style, the essentially bleak vision of the human condition which it shares with the existentially-slanted post-war literature, most notably with the theatre of the absurd.

“VELIKI GATSBY”: KOMEDIJA APSURDA PRERUŠENA U ROMANCU

Članak smještava Fitzgeraldov roman *Veliki Gatsby* u višestruki književni kontekst. Prihvaćajući tezu o nazočnosti evropske i američke realističke tradicije u osnovnom strukturalnom obrascu tog romana, članak obraća pozornost na prisutnost različitih drugih književnih tradicija u tom romanu. U članku se analizira Fitzgeraldova suptilna mreža referencija na pripovijetku E.A. Poea *Propast kuće Ushera* kao i njegov ambivalentni odnos prema viteškoj romanci. Središnja paralela koju članak postavlja jest ona između Fitzgeraldova romana i teatra apsurdna, čije tematske i stilske značajke *Veliki Gatsby* iznenadujuće sugestivno anticipira.