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**Gone with the Green Light:
The Journey of *The Great Gatsby's*
Commercial Fiasco**

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Abstract: *The Great Gatsby* is nowadays considered a cultural touchstone and one of the flagships of North American literature. Nevertheless, the novel was not widely popular upon its release in 1925 and it was considered a commercial failure. After the death of its author, Francis Scott Fitzgerald, in the nineteen forties, the book took a complete turnaround and experienced a revival towards the end of the Second World War. The novel was established as an American classic and a compulsory book in the syllabus of American classrooms.

This paper aims to explore the diverse factors that might have contributed to the initial critical and commercial failure of *The Great Gatsby*, as well as the elements that led to its revival during the mid-twentieth century, eventually establishing it as a fundamental literary composition for the study of American culture and values.

Resumen: *El Gran Gatsby* es hoy en día un referente de la cultura popular y una de las obras más conocidas de la tradición literaria norteamericana que retrata los locos años veinte. Sin embargo, la novela no gozó de tal popularidad cuando fue publicada en 1925 y fue considerada un total desastre comercial. Tras la muerte de su autor Francis Scott Fitzgerald en los años cuarenta, la obra cambió radicalmente de rumbo y a finales de la Segunda Guerra Mundial sufrió un resurgimiento que la estableció como una obra de culto en la educación estadounidense.

Por ende, este trabajo pretende explorar los diferentes factores que podrían haber influenciado el inicial fracaso comercial y crítico de *El Gran Gatsby*, así como los elementos que propiciaron su resurgimiento a mediados del siglo veinte hasta convertirse en una obra de culto para el estudio de la cultura y valores norteamericanos.

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“Under separate cover I'm sending you my third novel, *The Great Gatsby*. I think that at last I've done something really my own, but how good 'my own' is remains to be seen.”

Francis Scott Fitzgerald, 1924

INTRODUCTION

The main aim of this work is to explore the factors that could have contributed to *The Great Gatsby's* commercial fiasco and to the revival of this work twenty years later. With this purpose in mind, this essay will take into consideration four main sections: The historical and societal context in which the work was published, the critical reception, the marketing strategies, and the revival of the book.

The first section will discuss the historical context and the societal factors that might have influenced the popularity of the book. It will be explained how during the roaring twenties the book was uninteresting to the main reader base due to a difference in sensibilities led by the mass production of books. Another factor studied is the general unconcern with society's problems, as a result of the First World War, the economical affluence and the increasing consumer culture. Lastly, the section also suggests that Fitzgerald's novel might have not been entirely aligned with the mainstream reader's base superficial interests, but with the interests of more educated intellectuals.

The second section will study the initial criticism received from literary critics upon the publication of Fitzgerald's novel. The first pieces of criticism were not favorable due to the analysis of the work from a disinterested and limited perspective, which led to an incomplete understanding of the work's themes. It will explore how the analysis of the work focused on Fitzgerald's writing style and narrative technique, but failed to develop on the critical notions included in the novel. This section will focus on the first reviews available, including the initial suggestions made by the author's editor Maxwell Perkins, and one of the most influential pieces of criticism written by H. L. Mencken. These first impressions might have been decisive in the overall mixed reception of the novel. The review of Laurence Stallings is also going to be briefly explored, since it was the only proper critical opinion according to Fitzgerald.

The third section will address the realm of the publishing industry and the marketing strategies employed by the publisher Charles Scribner's Sons upon the initial

commercialization of the book. This section will be mainly oriented towards the analysis of the paratextual elements surrounding the book such as the dust jacket, the content of the blurb or even the title of the work. It will be discussed how these concise nuances directly linked to marketing decisions might have negatively affected the number of sales of the first edition. The idea of the American Dream from a marketing point of view will also be discussed with regard to the poor sales performance and the type of audience towards which the book was targeted. In addition, the factors mentioned by Fitzgerald to Scribner will also be discussed. Lastly, the negative outcomes of this commercial failure will be examined.

The last section explains the events that led to the revival of *The Great Gatsby*, such as the Books for Victory program or the advances in the publishing industry. This part of the essay also includes how historic events might have benefited the popularity of the work due to its demythologizing themes. This new mindset also led to new literary forms of analysis, which soon connected with *Gatsby's* symbolism after a close reading. The section concludes with the establishment of the novel as one of the most popularly cited works in the US academic sphere and, more importantly, as an American classic novel that brings a whole new set of interpretations to whomever reads and writes about it.

HISTORICAL AND SOCIETAL CONTEXT

The Great Gatsby was released during an economically prosperous time known as the Roaring Twenties — a term coined by F. S. Fitzgerald himself and later used to describe this decade. During this *époque* right in between the end of the First World War and the Stock Market crash, the United States underwent many social changes, specially related to women civil rights and a profound change in manners and morals. Women were among the most benefited, partly due to their successful suffrage in 1920, but the overall society enjoyed a social liberation from traditional puritan values. Matters such as sex, tobacco and alcohol consumption —even though it was prohibited as the decade began— were more and more accepted among this blooming generation. This new period of Jazz, Flappers, Charleston and bathtub gin, was first registered by Fitzgerald himself in *This Side of Paradise* (1920) after barely graduating from Princeton. This new depiction of society provoked

confrontations between traditional values and modernism. Moreover, although the jazz-era was an affluent period, it was also characterized by an unbridled capitalism, poor moral values and an increasing intolerance towards different sectors of society such as immigrants or low-income classes. It might be argued that this time period was characterized by a tendency to ignore the profound social problems that the new—but also foundational—values were instigating through the decade. This escapist attitude could be attributed as an effect of the First World War, which might have spread a common *carpe diem* sentiment among US society. This was materialized through the fact that leisure activities were part of the society's daily agenda. Much of this leisure time was focused on the consumption of mass media through rooftop radios, cinematography or literature. Books were slowly becoming a massive form of entertainment, and it was no longer a medium uniquely targeted towards educated people or intellectuals, but also for the average Joe. This was widely known as the early beginning of American consumer culture (Streissguth 276).

Literacy grew exponentially due to an increase in the quality of education and reading accessibility. According to a study conducted by William S. Gray and Ruth Munroe “By the end of the first quarter of the twentieth century, 50 percent of the American population read books” (As quoted in Kaestle and Moore 181). To a certain extent, it could be argued that reading was highly popular and more accessible than ever. This was not only driven by the formidable economic environment, but also thanks to the improvement of the means of production, which led to people having more free time to spend. Moreover, the publishing industry was growing to such an extent that this period is considered the beginning of the “Golden Age” of book publishing in the United States. To match book production with literary production, the publishing industry enabled young writers to publish their more *avant-garde* and inventive styles. Editors seeking notoriety and sales brought into the scene a whole new wave of young U.S. authors such as F. S. Fitzgerald or Ring Lardner. In accordance, new literary genres materialized and rose in popularity during this decade. Nonetheless, this also led to an over publication of books, which flooded the public with often mediocre content (Asadoorian 31). This excess of content could have been negative both for readers and for good writers, since such an abundance of unremarkable novels could have sterilized the taste of many readers. The main problem of this mass-production was probably that “the few that are truly great literature and have potential to impact society are drowned by masses of mediocre or even bad books” (Asadoorian 31). Nevertheless, this could have been an argument used by intellectuals to address the middle

and lower classes that started to flood the literary world. It is probable that this concern was related with the overall superficial values of that time, as the readership did have a fairly materialistic approach towards books. During this Golden Age, as Asadoorian also states, books were advertised as a key to success, and they were a symbol of education and status, a sign that one had enough money and free time to spend on “cultivating activities” (25). It could be argued that the growing consumer culture had a substantial impact upon the consumption patterns of books. For the wide readership, books were becoming a mere commodity that inspired a false cultivating effect without any real substance. Books were considered just another good “colorful dabs of civilization to be lavished throughout the gracious modern American home” (Benton 20). Thus, the content of books was not as important to the readership as their materiality or cachet.

The American notion of success and lack of criteria in society might have been one of the reasons behind *The Great Gatsby* failure. The changes in the reader habits as a result of superficiality, plus the generalized societal unconcern with social problems, might have been a good indication of why the general readership might have not connected with the critical notions of Fitzgerald’s novel. This lack of critical understanding of Fitzgerald’s *oeuvre* —deeply related with disillusionment, materialism and the vacuity of the American dream— might have had no real value in such a fruitful and prolific time. This does not mean that the society had no sense or understanding of satire, but the novel’s critical themes did not evoke this interpretation, as the readership’s *ethos* was founded upon these motifs. It might seem that the only interests that could have aligned with the book’s disillusionment themes were the ones professed by intellectuals, which were characterized by their rejection of consumerism. However, the book is certainly not entirely based on these underlying ideas, since the satiric tone is also followed by a romantic storyline, which was still a really compelling theme by that time. It is possible that the reading audience only appreciated the romantic content, Gatsby’s mysterious past and the vivid descriptions of Long Island, which did not seem to generate enough momentum for the work to have a meaningful impact on the readership’s consciousness.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

It is difficult to assess to what degree criticism stimulated the failure of *The Great Gatsby*, but it would be naive to assume that it had no effect at all. Literary reviews were also a tool by which the readership informed itself about what might be between the covers, and many books incorporated the opinion of one or more literary critics. Fitzgerald had already gathered certain recognition among literary critics with his first two novels, *This Side of the Paradise* and *The Beautiful and Damned* (1922). These two works were highly popular and had good reviews, especially his first novel, which greatly influenced the early beginnings of his professional career and his status as a young prodigy of contemporary American literature. Despite this, the criticisms that his third novel received were not as positive and favorable as the author expected. The reason behind this tempered—but certainly not unfavorable—reception encompasses various aspects of the work. One important aspect could be the enigmatic way in which Jay Gatsby is portrayed, which turned out to be too vague for some well-known literary critics such as H. L. Mencken. The other critical element related to the mixed reception of the work might be the overall neglecting attitude towards the themes criticized by the work, as the symbolic interpretations and ideological nuances were relatively disregarded in most 1925 criticism. There are only a few subtle references to the satiric resonances of Fitzgerald's writing, and even if mentioned as a positive trait of the work, they failed to be sufficiently thought-provoking to generate a critically introspective point of view towards the monolithic *dogmas* of their contemporary society. To some extent, this lack of awareness could be related to the societal context, although David J. Alworth argues that some intellectuals—in opposition to the mainstream reader base—were already considering and putting into question the critical themes

registered in the novel, especially the ideas of self-transformation and the American idea of the self-made man (Alworth 26). Nevertheless, these ideas did not seem to firmly materialize in most reviews of that decade and the omission of these potentially contributed to an incomplete understanding of the work and its complexity, thus delivering less favorable and extraordinary feedback of the work.

The first review of *The Great Gatsby* was predominantly positive. Maxwell Perkins, editor at Charles Scribner's Sons, first inspected the draft of the book on the twentieth of November, 1924. The editor's first opinion on Fitzgerald's oeuvre was remarkably positive, "I think you have every kind of right to be proud of this book. It is an extraordinary book, suggestive of all sorts of thoughts and moods" (in Alworth 15). However, the editor was uneasy about the overall vague descriptions of Gatsby's misty background, and was worried about inconsistencies in chapters VI and VII where feminine characters were too poorly represented —this idea was later supported by other editors at Scribner and by Mr Charles Scribner himself (Turnbull 191). Fitzgerald gladly accepted the criticisms and undertook a new approach, hence the novel underwent a substantial rework, to such a degree that it completely changed the role of Nick in the novel. The author transformed this character into Gatsby's mouthpiece and, more importantly, added a very important and innovative structural element to the narrative by employing Carraway as a passive spectator. After this considerable change inspired by the publishing house, *The Great Gatsby* was ready to be proofread for the last time and sent to be printed: "Those changes you have made do wonders for Gatsby. I'll have the proofs read twice, [...] and shall allow no change unless it is certain the printer has blundered" (M. Perkins *circa* December, 1924). Thus, although the first impression was positive, concerns were raised with regard to the characterization of Gatsby and Daisy. Notwithstanding the effort made by the author, the representation of the

main character was still criticized by book reviewers, and later Fitzgerald regretted not giving more importance to the female characters.

When published, *The Great Gatsby* had mixed reviews. Fitzgerald wrote a letter to Perkins arguing that “Most of the reviewers floundered around in a piece of work that obviously they completely failed to understand” (Fitzgerald, May 1, 1925). In these initial reviews, the writing style and vivid descriptions were acclaimed, but at the same time, the novel was criticized for the triviality and simplicity of its plot. According to the author, these criticisms were mixed because literary critics did not want to position themselves in favor or against the novel until “someone of culture had spoken”. This person was Henry Louis Mencken, a famous American cultural critic and essayist. His review of *Gatsby* published in *The Baltimore Evening Sun* might have been the most relevant review of the work during the period, and one of the most concerning for the author. This critic was closely related to Fitzgerald, especially from a literary point of view, since his critiques were frequently used as blurbs in his short stories and early novels. Nonetheless, the prestigious literary reviewer was no longer interested in Fitzgerald’s writing by 1925 and described his story as “no more than a glorified anecdote” and proceeded to call Jay Gatsby a “clown”. The critic recognized an evolution in Fitzgerald writing, but expressed no positive opinions on the work itself. Mencken relegated the book to an inferior position when compared to Francis Scott’s first novel *This Side of the Paradise*, claiming that it should not be put in the same shelf with this work. In his analysis, the American scholar stated that “The story, for all its basic triviality, has a fine texture, a careful and brilliant finish.” (in Alworth 360). His critique offered a limited and superficial examination of the story’s plot with regard to the novel’s cultural themes, and focused his analysis on the writing style. It might be possible that Mencken did not pay attention to the story due to the romantic elements presented,

which by that time were considered stereotypical and oriented towards a feminine audience. Moreover, the depiction of wealth, adultery and alcohol might have also propitiated this analysis, as Mencken —among other intellectuals— was characterized for his elitist opinions, which despised this kind of activity. It could be argued that Fitzgerald's resourceful style was noteworthy to such a degree that might have garnered most critical attention, and ultimately became one of the most salient features of the work for most critics "What gives the story distinction [...] is the charm and beauty of the writing" (360). Thus, the apparent romantic and tragic themes, plus the singular writing style, overshadowed a conceivable critical comprehension of the work as a critique of American values. This idea was widely spread among scholars such as T. S. Licari, who acknowledged that Fitzgerald encapsulated within the novel's singular style a suppressed meaning, "one that has been overlooked in critical discourse since the book's publication in 1925" (1). This does not mean that other critics —such as Mencken or Gilbert Seldes— failed to perceive a satiric approach towards the American upper classes and their eccentric way of life, and lauded the depiction of these characters. However, these personages were analyzed as hyperbolic caricatures, not as the result of a materialistic and immoral society. Moreover, these critics never elaborated on the issue of American values or symbolism, but stuck to the author's skillful writing. This idea is backed up by William Goldhurst in his work *F. Scott Fitzgerald and his Contemporaries* (1963), where he claimed that "While approving the style of *The Great Gatsby* (that is, "aesthetic" excellence), did not think the novel important as a criticism of American life (that is, its "ethical" value)" (Goldhurst III).

Nonetheless, Fitzgerald cherished one positive review for its critical approach. In a letter to M. Perkins, the author stated that Laurence Stallings's review was the only intelligent critique written so far (Fitzgerald, May 1, 1925). This review also signaled

Fitzgerald's writing style. However, Stalling suggested that the author had undergone a process of maturation from his first hit, *This Side of Paradise*. In contrast to Mencken, the essayist did notice an improvement in the novel's themes and representations. According to Stalling, this book has adopted a more civilized point of view compared to the first novel, which was considered too explicit and "barbaric" for the *époque*. For him, *The Great Gatsby* was not a "spontaneous burst of erratic divertissement" (Alworth 363), but a novel that skillfully described the most affluent and sensational social scheme in the United States. That is, Stalling did not merely interpret the work as a romantic novel or an exaggerated view of highbrow society, but perceived that Fitzgerald had deposited all of his efforts into creating a well-rounded character such as Gatsby. Nonetheless, despite being respected by the author, Stalling's review did not counterbalance Mencken's transcendent analysis.

MARKETING STRATEGIES

Irrespective of the positive bits of criticism, the novel was a commercial fiasco. Fitzgerald wished to sell 75,000 copies and suggested a rather optimistic contract to his editor Maxwell Perkins and to Whitney Darrow —sales manager at Scribner—. His suggestion included a 15% of revenue up to 50,000 copies and a hefty 20% after 50,000. Nonetheless, on April 10, only ten days after the publication of the book, Perkins telegraphed Fitzgerald "SALES SITUATION DOUBTFUL" (Brucoli 56). The first 20,000 copies sold lazily in the initial run at the moderate price of 2\$ —hardcover novels ranged between 1\$ and 3\$ at the time—. The novel was published in the form of a full-size book and included a pleasantly aesthetic and eye-catching dust-jacket which was also written into the book. Moreover, the book included a uniformed binding with the Scribner's stamp on it at the request of Fitzgerald. Therefore, it could be argued that the book itself was properly positioned with regard to its

price range and aesthetic design, “Charles Scribner’s Sons made a strong effort to promote the book. It was packaged in a striking dust jacket” (Brucoli 3). Moreover, the novel was advertised seven times in *The Saturday Review of Literature* (3). Therefore, from a material standpoint, it could be affirmed that the book was properly marketed.

The paratextual elements were, nonetheless, surprising. Fitzgerald's first copy of the novel included a long letter to Mr. Perkins in which, among other issues, he urged Charles Scribner’s Sons *not* to include blurbs on the jacket; “This time I don't want any signed blurb. I'm tired of being the author of *This Side of Paradise* and I want to start over” (Fitzgerald, October 27, 1924). That is, the author wanted to establish himself as an impactful and influential literary figure, aiming to transcend the status of a one hit wonder. As a result, the jacket of the first edition did not include any blurbs, and no reference was made to his debut novel on the cover: “Remember about having no quotations from critics on the jacket – not even about my other books!” (Fitzgerald, January 24, 1925). Instead, the dust jacket included a note written and signed by the publisher Charles Scribner’s Sons, and the only reference to *This Side of Paradise* appeared in the front flap of the jacket as part of the “Other Books” section. It is difficult to know to what extent this decision affected book sales, but considering the absence of a book critic review on the back cover, and the tenuous mention of the author’s blockbuster on it, it is reasonable to think that this had partially affected book sales. This idea is supported by the fact that during the decade, book covers were increasing in popularity, since they were considered to be a remarkably effective advertising method; “the general public...relied increasingly on book jackets to inform them about what might be between the covers” (Tebbel 311). Moreover, with regard to the back cover note, there is factual evidence pointing that Scribner’s impersonal review was not well received, given that one of the most unfavorable initial reviews of the work negatively

categorized Scribner's note as a mere sales-driven blurb: "I suppose the Scribner jacket-writer wants to sell as many books as he can" (in Alworth 5). Taking this into account, it is plausible that Scribner's note was too effusive, and perhaps, if the praises had come from well-known literary critics instead of the publishing house, the reaction might have been different. On top of that, it is important to note that according to John Tebbel, books remained the primary medium to display advertising over the prominence of individual writers (309). Thus, if the content of the book is backed up by the publishing house instead of an expert, it is fair to consider that this could have caused some distrust among readers. Furthermore, in the jazz-age "gimmick advertising was not unknown even to the most prestigious houses" (Asadoorian 26). Therefore, this could also have discouraged some readers.

The Great Gatsby's cover and title also lacked one of the most important marketing aspects for attracting a general audience: The American Dream. During the Golden Age of publishing, the promise of the American Dream was used as a marketing tool to attract the middle and upper-middle classes (Tebbel 16). This commercial strategy was widely spread throughout the American publishing industry, from the early twentieth century until the Second World War, and consisted of promoting books as a gateway to upward social mobility. It could be compared to the American notion of "from rags to riches" but was advertised as "a get smart quick technique" (Benton 16). Reading books went hand in hand with American convictions, and were considered a means of reaching success; for the middle classes, books served as a status symbol, a sign of education and wealth. While Scribner's first edition was indeed visually appealing, its commercial blurb itself did not incorporate these particular sensibilities as marketing strategies. It might be asserted that the American Dream is still appreciable as a background element in the included quote: "There

was something gorgeous about him, some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life... It was an extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness such as I have never found [...]”. However, despite being an underlying element, Scribner’s blurb does not make use of the —not so positively portrayed— American aspirations of the novel as a hook to allure the middle and upper-middle classes. Instead, the Scribner jacket-writer uses the romantic and mysterious tone of the work as a strategy to attract *clientele*, especially focusing on the relationship between Daisy and Gatsby and his enigmatic past. More importantly, the pessimistic facet towards the American ideals of the time is noticeably encompassed within the blurb: “A marvellous fusion into unity of the curious incongruities of the life of the period [...] a story that ranges from pure lyrical beauty to sheer brutal realism, and is infused with a sense of the strangeness of human circumstance in a heedless universe”. Given these considerations, it could be argued that the composition of the blurb may have not fully satisfied certain social classes, particularly the higher class, due to the negative portrayal of American ideals and “the dance with the devil” that goes on the top. It could be hypothesized that the inclusion of Nick Carraway in the blurb could have impacted positively in the reception of the work, as he belongs to an upper-middle-class and plays the role of narrator. Thus, it would have reinforced the sense of relatability with the audience.

In a letter to M. Perkins, Fitzgerald stated that “If the book fails commercially, it will be for one of two reasons or both.” (Fitzgerald, April 24, 1925). The author does not attribute the commercial failure to the novel’s blurb, marketing strategies or to the rather tragic ending, “I don’t think the unhappy end matters particularly” (Fitzgerald, June 1, 1925). First, he attributes the poor initial sales to the title, which he considered to be “rather bad than good” (Fitzgerald, June 1, 1925). Scott and Perkins interchanged a fair amount of letters with regard to this issue, and several titles were considered: *Trimalchio*, *Trimalchio in*

West Egg, *Gatsby*, *Gold-hatted Gatsby* and *The Great Gatsby*. The author wanted the first option, as he stated, “my heart tells me I should have named it *Trimalchio*” (Fitzgerald, February 18, 1925). However, Charles Scribner Son’s recommended the last option, which Fitzgerald had no option but to accept, although he complained to Perkins that “*The Great Gatsby* is weak because there’s no emphasis even ironically on his greatness or lack of it. However let it pass” (Fitzgerald, February 18, 1925). To a certain extent, the title of the work could have had some influence upon its sales, as both titles have different connotations—a classic or an Americanized hint—. *Trimalchio* fitted and encapsulated to perfection Jay Gatsby, and would have endowed the work with a classical aura, that, as it has been previously mentioned, would have been optimal to attract some social classes that wanted to show themselves as educated and concerned with the world of letters. However, it could be argued that Scribner’s title *The Great Gatsby* encompasses the American spirit of greatness, and has a certain hint of irony, which could also be appealing for the reading audience. The second “*and most important*” reason according to Fitzgerald is that he did not manage to connect with the female audience as “the book contains no important woman character, and women control the fiction market at present” (Fitzgerald, April 24, 1925). Scott was already aware of this issue, which he already tried to solve by improving Daisy’s reaction during the meeting with Gatsby. Nonetheless, he was genuinely convinced that chapter VII would “hurt the book’s popularity that it’s *a man’s book*” (Fitzgerald, January 24, 1925) due to the characterization of Daisy.

The doubtful sales situation, in addition to contributing to Fitzgerald alcohol abuse and inspirational block (Edwards), also materialized in the form of slanders and gossip about the relations between Charles Scribner’s Sons and Fitzgerald. These rumors revolved around Fitzgerald switching to another publishing house, which indicates that the publishing

industry was aware of the fiasco. Fitzgerald heard one of these rumors and described it *via* correspondence to Perkins, “I hear Fitzgerald’s book isn’t selling. I think we can get it, as he’s probably blaming it on Scribner” (Fitzgerald, June 1, 1925). However, Fitzgerald and Scribner debunked this, and maintained their lengthy association. Nonetheless, by the final months of 1925 the novel was dead (Brucoli 4). Fitzgerald still had some faith, as he believed the English market could make a difference, since the novel was going to be published by Chatto and Windus in 1926. Sadly, the novel did not make any special impression in the old continent. Later that year, Fitzgerald and Scribner sold the rights for a movie to Owen Davis, but this did not influence the book’s sales. *The Great Gatsby* shyly survived in Scribner’s catalogs until the 1930s, when The Modern Library tried to bring it back to life, but was soon retired as it garnered no literary attention and had a small readership. As mentioned in H. Edwards, at the time of Fitzgerald’s death in 1940, “Scribner had moldering copies of the book in their warehouse” (Edwards). In brief, in the late 1930s Fitzgerald’s novel seemed doomed to oblivion.

THE REVIVAL OF *GATSBY*

During the Second World War, the production costs of books skyrocketed, and publishing houses had to choose carefully which works should continue in print or which new books were worth publishing. The United States was allocating a large part of its productive capacity into supplying the war on the European continent, and among these efforts, the American Red Cross launched a program known as the Books for Victory Campaign to send books to U.S. soldiers and sailors abroad (Andrew). *The Great Gatsby* was selected as one of the books that would serve as entertainment for soldiers in their recreational time or for those held in prison camps. This was a complete U-turn in the trajectory of Fitzgerald

literary recognition and the early beginning of the book's rise in popularity. Nevertheless, it is challenging to pinpoint the exact reasons behind this decision, but it is probable that two main factors played a significant role in its selection. The first is the already mentioned high cost of book printing, which likely prompted the Red Cross Book Service to look for books that were already printed and with a reasonable amount of stock. For this scenario to occur, the book must have been sufficiently printed during its era, yet not so popular or widely read. The only requirement was that the book had to be in good condition: "A valuable and conveniently packaged projectile of morale is a good book. [...] The first function of a book is that it be read. Only books in first class physical condition can be used" (Andrew). Fitzgerald's flagship work, which was widely available in warehouses (Edwards) and possibly in the stock of certain booksellers, was very appropriate for this campaign. The second reason—and perhaps most important—might be related to the themes of the novel and its historical context, which could have been interpreted from various perspectives. *The Great Gatsby* was a window to an idealized past, a time of peace after The Great War, which included an American self-made man who fought for a dream making use of all means at his disposal, a romantic hero who wanted to repeat the past. Indeed, the book had the American spirit and a nostalgic element that matched perfectly with the motivations behind the Books for Victory Campaign: "As a weapon in the war of ideas, a book has a place to fill in this war; whether as a source of morale or part of our fighting equipment." (Andrew). In addition, for most readers, the book was still a jazz-age book that stood out for its writing style, and was reinforced by nostalgia. However, it was in this context perhaps that the dissonance of the book with the American Dream began to connect with its readers, "The story of unrequited love and the failure of the American Dream resonated with the young men fighting abroad." (Edwards). *The Great Gatsby* was no longer just a "blended for irony" novel, but for the first time had the chance to become a demythologizing work about

American values. Half a year before the end of the Second World War, the Armed Services Edition was published, which consisted of 155,000 copies—which was roughly eight times the initial copies sold by Scribner in 1925—. This created a new readership and accordingly, the novel suddenly became popular and began to receive more attention from the American society.

The Fitzgerald Revival started shortly after the author's death in 1941 and lasted two decades. The revival was driven by friends and close individuals to the author such as his own daughter or Edmund Wilson, who flagged *The Great Gatsby* as his *magnum opus* (Alworth 383). During the early 1940s, *The New Republic* published several essays by Malcolm Cowley on behalf of Fitzgerald and his literary production. The “Fitzgerald fever” slowly spread, and in 1945 there were five new editions of *The Great Gatsby* — one published by Scribner— due to an increase in demand. After the end of the Second World War, *The Great Gatsby* had a completely new stream of articles and reviews flooding journals. This growing acceptance of *Gatsby* in the literary canon manifested through authors and literary critics such as Lionel Trilling, who stated that “Fitzgerald is now beginning to take his place in our literary tradition” or William Troy, who concluded that it was Fitzgerald’s only completely successful novel. In 1946, John Berryman called it a “masterpiece” (cited in Bruccoli 5). Nevertheless, during this decade the publishing industry also had a decisive role in the revival of the book, as more people had access to the novel thanks to the introduction and popularization of mass-market paperbacks. For instance, Bantam released in 1946 a twenty-five-cent paperback of *The Great Gatsby*, along with classics by Mark Twain and John Steinbeck (Alworth 30), which increased its popularity among the less affluent sector of the population. In 1951, the revival was well consolidated and Fitzgerald’s work started to be included in the syllabus of colleges. During these years,

literary critics, academics and scholars started to decode the underlying themes and symbolism of the book thanks to the formalist movement of New Criticism. This critical approach was imperative to the permanence of the novel as a cultural touchstone, as it emphasized the close reading of myths and symbols in the work, rather than the style or diction that already drew some attention back in 1925. Therefore, critics no longer solely explored Fitzgerald's writing style and descriptive dexterity, but expanded their analysis towards the symbolic and mythic themes of the work. More importantly, academics signaled the capabilities of the work to question the morals of American ideology and the power of wealth. As quoted by Bruccoli, Jay Gatsby became the central object of study, an embodiment of the American myths (28). This was unimaginable three decades ago, when Mencken compared Gatsby to a "clown".

The inclusion of *The Great Gatsby* in university classrooms was an important milestone during the revival period, since it introduced the work to millions of students who were fascinated by the formalist close reading of the work. As the amount of readership grew between university students, papers and essays also increased proportionally. In fact, Fitzgerald's novel is one of the most frequently cited works since the 1960s according to *The Modern Language Association International Bibliography*. At the same time, *Gatsby* started to be studied together with other American classics such as *Huckleberry Finn* (1884), which might have facilitated its recognition as an American classic by the end of that decade. There are other aspects that could have played in favor of establishing *Gatsby* in the literary canon that are worth mentioning, even though it might be difficult to establish a direct correlation. One example could be the baby boom that occurred in the mid-twentieth century, or the impact of the Vietnam War in the American consciousness, which originated an entire new cultural movement that questioned morals and myths. This can be observed

through new generational approaches, where *Gatsby* was used as a template in some Vietnam-era books of black-humor protest such as Ron Carlson's 1977 novel *Betrayed by F. Scott Fitzgerald* (Brucoli 34).

Although it seems that the work began to grow in popularity precisely during the historical periods in which the American dream was put under question, it would be an error to only attribute the revival and popularization of *Gatsby* to New Criticism or to its underlying mythic and symbolic themes. This does not mean that a change in attitude was not necessary for the work to stand out, since it provided a new dimension to explore the cultural implications of the American nation. Nevertheless, paradoxically, the work also resonated even among the most headstrong and patriotic American readers. It is possible that Fitzgerald created a well-balanced work, which failed to attract its contemporary readers, but managed to fascinate future generations as a romantic jazz-age book. The skillful illustration of the roaring twenties, the innocence of Jay Gatsby and his idealistic vision, the narrative technique materialized through Nick Carraway and the American fascination with success —not economic accomplishments, but the realization of a chivalrous dream— combined to the degree of mesmerizing the world into accepting his dreams. On the other hand, it inspired academics, students and postmodernist writers with its sense of national mythos, symbols and themes. *The Great Gatsby* provides ambiguous possibilities when it comes to interpretation, it has the potential to bring a connection with fundamental American values or with a postmodern and subaltern narrative that intends to debunk national myths. This state of liminality might have also played a crucial role in its popularization; perhaps, such state was the element that made *Gatsby* to become a classroom staple and one of the permanent touchstones of American culture.

CONCLUSION

This essay has intended to provide an approximate description of the most significant factors that might have influenced *The Great Gatsby*'s initial fiasco and revival. The analysis has also tried to share awareness of the different aspects that come into play when analyzing the popularity of a novel, so the reader could have a better understanding of the significant relation between literature, the book publishing industry, societal-historical context and the materiality of books. The work has discussed the probable reasons behind the fact that *Gatsby* fell just short of being "great" when published during the jazz-age, due to the disconnection between the novel's themes and the American public consciousness. As mentioned above, the different sensibility of the US population was connected to the low interest in the criticism towards the American myth due to the affluent economy of the period. Thus, material abundance and the seemingly working American Dream might have been one of the main reasons behind this dissonance.

The initial criticism has also been recognized as a potential factor that fostered *Gatsby*'s commercial failure. Firstly, the initial feedback from Scribner, although it was mostly positive, forced Fitzgerald to rewrite certain sections of the work based on the editor's opinions. In addition, it has also been explained how the varied reviews might have been the result of the omission of the work's underlying themes and symbols, which were ultimately sentenced to oblivion by Mencken's imperative review, who reduced the object of analysis to Fitzgerald's innovative narrative technique and writing style. Lastly, the failure in sales might also be attributed to the seemingly superficial romantic resonances inspired by Jay Gatsby and Daisy, which could have prompted a vague inspection of the subtextual

elements of it. Overall, it was concluded that *Gatsby's* mixed critical reception showed a lack of understanding that might have affected the book's popularity.

Next, it has been shown how the marketing decisions also played an important role. As explored, the sales of the first edition were slow, which was attributed to the paratextual elements of the book such as the blurb or the title. The absence of prominent female characters and the novel's theme has also been mentioned as a possible factor. According to Fitzgerald, female readers were dominating the novel scene at that moment, and the satiric approach towards the upper classes might have resulted in the rejection of it. In addition, the lack of the American Dream as a sale strategy was mentioned also as an important factor in the commercial failure of the work, as the blurb and theme's did not fully incorporate this element in order to draw the attention of a wider readership. Finally, the consequences of the poor number in sales were mentioned as a conclusion to this section.

As a final point, this work has explored the factors that led towards the revival of the book. The WW2 Books for Victory Campaign and the Fitzgerald Revival movement were mentioned as the main reason behind *Gatsby's* back on the up. As shown, the American publishing industry had also a determinant role, as it managed to give universal access to the work due to the popularization of the paperback and the advances in the industry. The function of academics has also been analyzed, as they finally began to examine the book from a different angle, which ultimately led to the implementation of the novel in American education. To conclude, this section also mentioned how the academic popularity facilitated the book to fall upon the category of an American classic and as one of the cultural bedrocks of American literature.

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