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Benjamin Franklin and Jay Gatsby: A Comparison of American Literary Self-Made Men

Benjamin Franklin a Jay Gatsby: Srovnání amerických literárních hrdinů, kteří se
vypracovali vlastní silou

BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

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1 Introduction: Franklin, Gatsby and the Link between Them

“They are in a peculiar sense indebted to themselves for themselves. If they have travelled far, they have made the road on which they have travelled. If they have ascended high, they have built their own ladder.”¹ This description uttered by Frederick Douglass refers to the key figure of the American myth of self-improvement and progress - the self-made man. Although this myth has its roots in the tendency in Puritanism that stressed the outer life, hard work and good conduct;² its emergence is commonly associated with Benjamin Franklin who is ranked among the most important political figures, inventors and authors of the 18th century. For David Hume, he is the first American great man of letters³; Thomas Carlyle addresses him as “the father of all Yankees”⁴ and John Adams regards him as “a great and eminent benefactor to his country and mankind.”⁵ Franklin contributed to the creation of national identity by inventing himself as a character in his *Autobiography*, the first American success story, in which he depicts his rise from poverty and obscurity to affluence and reputation by means of hard work and virtue. The book definitely fulfilled its didactic purpose; it provided the new democratic nation, which was largely composed of people who were experiencing the shift from dependence to independence, with the model of self-help and self-determination. According to Carla Mulford, Franklin’s figure was influential since it offered “a representative case of the multiple ways in which Americans

¹ Frederick Douglass, “Self-Made Men: Address before the Students of the Indian Industrial School at Carlisle,” *The Library of Congress*, 10 July 2011 <[² Richard Gray, *A Brief History of American Literature* \(Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2011\) 18.](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mfd&fileName=29/29002/29002page.db&recNum=0&itemLink=/ammem/doughtml/dougFolder5.html&linkText=7></p></div><div data-bbox=)

³ “America has sent us many good things, gold, silver, sugar, tobacco, indigo etc. But you are the first philosopher, and indeed the first great man of letters for whom we are beholden to her...” David Hume, “David Hume to Franklin, Edinburgh, May 10, 1792,” *Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography: A Norton Critical Edition*, ed. J. A. Leo Lemay and P. M. Zall (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1986) 231.

⁴ Walter Isaacson, *Benjamin Franklin: An American Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003) 479.

⁵ John Adams, “John Adams on Benjamin Franklin,” *Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography*, ed. J. A. Leo Lemay and P. M. Zall (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1986) 248.

have searched for a national culture.”⁶ Since his death, many well-known authors, such as Adams, Thoreau, Emerson or Whitman, have tended to comment on the themes set forward by this multi-talented founding father. The figure of a self-made man became gradually an integral part of American literature, which may be exemplified by Frederick Douglass, William D. Howells’ Silas Lapham, Henry James’s Christopher Newman and nearly all heroes created by Horatio Alger Jr. who became famous mainly as an author of success stories.

More than a hundred years after Franklin’s death, in the 1920s, Francis Scott Fitzgerald created a fictional character of Jay Gatsby, a young mysterious millionaire who throws splendid parties for the members of the Long Island high society; a romantic bootlegger who strives to bring back the past and to win back his former love, Daisy Buchanan. Chapter Six of *The Great Gatsby* reveals that the protagonist begun as James Gatz of North Dakota, a clam-digger and a salmon-fisher, and had to reinvent himself and to get involved in illegal activities in order to become Jay Gatsby of West Egg, who lives in a gaudy mansion and drives a large cream-colour car. However, unlike other tales of upward mobility, *The Great Gatsby* is not a story of success, but a story of failure; it shows “a self-made man in crisis.”⁷ Although it may seem that Gatsby has almost nothing in common with the original self-made man Franklin, there are some important reasons why the two should be discussed together.

Primarily, both Franklin and Gatsby have a special place in American literature and culture; they are perceived as symbolic, mythic figures and are frequently associated with the issues of national identity. In some critical works they are even described as characters who symbolize the country itself. For instance, J.A. Leo Lemay suggests that the story of

⁶ Carla Mulford, “Figuring Benjamin Franklin in American Cultural Memory,” *The New England Quarterly*, 72.3, Sept. (1999): 415.

⁷ Jeffrey Louis Decker, *Made in America: Self-Styled Success from Horatio Alger to Oprah Winfrey* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997) 29.

Franklin's rise may be read as an allegory of the rise of the United States.⁸ Similarly, Lionel Trilling claims that Gatsby "comes inevitably to stand for America itself."⁹ The *Autobiography* and *The Great Gatsby* are essentially "books about America" since they made a powerful commentary on a period, on the country and on its core myth which encompasses the above mentioned self-formation - the American Dream. According to Jim Cullen, it is "the most lofty as well as the most immediate component of an American identity, a birthright far more meaningful and compelling than terms like 'democracy,' 'Constitution,' or even 'the United States'."¹⁰ Although the phrase was first used by James Truslow Adams in his *Epic of America* in the 1930s, the traces of the idea behind it has been apparently present from the arrival of the first European settlers in America. As Cullen points out, it is a great irony that the foundations of the myth were laid by the Puritans, the people who rejected a belief that they had control over the course of their lives.¹¹ Their dream of the New Jerusalem, religious freedom and better life for their children was later secularized by Benjamin Franklin - the "Promised Land" became the country of possibility for "the incredible variety of people of the most assorted talents and drives."¹²

The American Dream does not have any fixed definition and the expressions that are used to formulate it tend to be ambiguous. For instance, the "pursuit of happiness"¹³ contained in the Declaration of Independence is probably the most famous phrase that refers to the American Dream and also one of the most controversial components of the

⁸ J. A. Leo Lemay, "The Autobiography and the American Dream," *Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography*, ed. J. A. Leo Lemay and P. M. Zall (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1986) 352.

⁹ Lionel Trilling, "F. Scott Fitzgerald," *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society* (Oxford University Press, 1981) 237.

¹⁰ Jim Cullen, *The American Dream* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) 5.

¹¹ Cullen 10.

¹² Lemay 353.

¹³ "We hold these truths to be self-evident: That all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness..." Thomas Jefferson, "Declaration of Independence," *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, ed. Nina Baym et al. (New York: Norton, 1989)

document. Is it meant as a social or individualist concept? Is it derived from the Lockean notion of “happiness” as “property” or from Hutcheson’s idea that benevolence and doing good for others is the source of “happiness”?¹⁴ There has been much debate about this phrase since it is open to a multiplicity of interpretations. Likewise, the understanding of James Truslow Adams’s description of the American Dream as “a dream of a better, richer and happier life for all our citizens” may vary from one individual to another.¹⁵ In this paper, the concept will be handled on the basis of Lemay’s essay “The Autobiography and the American Dream”. In contrast to Cullen who maintains that there are many American Dreams and discusses each of them separately, Lemay speaks of one Dream and distinguishes its aspects that he draws from Franklin’s *Autobiography*. Besides the economic aspect or the rise from rags to riches, the standard cliché that is supposed to express the whole myth, Lemay deals with the rise from impotence to importance or from helplessness to power; the philosophy of individualism; the philosophy of free will and the philosophy of hope or optimism. This approach is very convenient for describing the way in which Franklin’s conception of the American Dream differs from the American Dream as it appears in *The Great Gatsby* since one is able to say which aspects of it became more prominent and which are no longer important.

Secondly, *Gatsby* is very explicitly connected with Franklin by Fitzgerald himself. When *Gatsby* dies, his father shows the narrator, Nick Carraway, a flyleaf of a dime novel called *Hopalong Cassidy* on which young Jimmy Gatz had printed this schedule and list of resolutions:

¹⁴ *A Companion to The American Revolution*, ed. Jack P. Greene and J. R. Pole (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2004) 657.

¹⁵ James Truslow Adams, *The Epic of America* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1931) 8.

Rise from bed	6.00	A.M.
Dumbbell exercise and wall-scaling.....	6.15-6.30	“
Study electricity, etc.	7.15-8.15	“
Work.....	8.30-4.30	P.M.
Baseball and sports.....	4.30-5.00	“
Practice elocution, poise and how to attain it	5.00-6.00	“
Study needed inventions.....	7.00-9.00	“

GENERAL RESOLVES

No wasting time at Shafters or [a name, indecipherable]

No more smoking or chewing

Bath every other day

Read one improving book or magazine per week

Save \$5 [crossed out] \$3 per week

Be better to parents¹⁶

Such combination of a plan of daily activities and a plan of self-improvement may be found only in one other American book – Franklin’s *Autobiography*. As the third chapter of this thesis will show, most of the above mentioned items may be traced to Franklin’s schedule or to the list of thirteen virtues that he aimed to acquire. Many accomplished Fitzgerald’s critics, such as Charles Weir, Harold Bloom or Matthew Bruccoli, mention this important passage that reveals Gatsby’s identity in their studies; however, they do not seem to pay much attention to the connection between this character and Franklin. For example, Weir merely cites it and exclaims: “What childhood dreams of Franklin or Edison lay behind the scrawl ... what tradition that every American boy could make a million dollars or become a President!”¹⁷ Floyd C. Watkins, one of the few critics who examines this matter more thoroughly, asserts that the close parallels between Gatsby’s and Franklin’s plan “surely indicate that Fitzgerald had the *Autobiography* either in front

¹⁶ Francis Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York: Collier Books, 1980) 174.

¹⁷ Charles Weir, Jr., “An Invite with Gilded Edges,” *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, 20 Winter (1944): 110

of him or in his mind” when he wrote the schedule of his protagonist.¹⁸ Watkins suggests that the author followed Franklin in order to “give concreteness to the historical tradition and to make Gatsby something beyond a mere member of the lost generation.”¹⁹ It is apparent that the writer intended to relate his hero to the American success myth; nevertheless, he deliberately chose Franklin and his view of America; perhaps he wanted the readers to have this particular literary figure in mind when forming their opinions on Gatsby.

The aim of this thesis is to focus on the *Autobiography* and *The Great Gatsby* and to show that Franklin’s views of self-help, virtue, material wealth, social progress or religion may add another dimension to the analysis of the character of Jay Gatsby and his relation

to the American Dream. The comparison of the famous Fitzgerald’s hero and the model American self-made man enables the reader to achieve a deeper understanding of Gatsby’s individualism, idealism, materialism and of his failure. Moreover, it inspires further reflection on what or whom the mysterious millionaire represents. Gatsby is commonly perceived as an epitome of the Jazz Age and its illusions, parties and pleasures; as a dreamer who has been corrupted by materialistic society or as a mythic figure related to the Dutch sailors and the American past. Nevertheless, as I will attempt to demonstrate in this paper, he may also be seen as a representative of “other” history of America which is connected with the new immigrants, the nouveau riche and the gangsters of the 1920s.

In the second chapter of this thesis, the two texts will be examined in terms of the authors’ purpose, style and the way the central character is presented to the audience. I will explore the means Franklin uses to achieve the stylized self-presentation and I will

¹⁸ Floyd C. Watkins, “Fitzgerald’s James Gatz and Young Ben Franklin.” *The New England Quarterly*, June (1954): 252.

¹⁹ Watkins, 252.

compare it to Nick Carraway's view of Gatsby. In the third chapter, I will discuss the transformation of some aspects of the American Dream, considering Franklin's and Gatsby's schedules, their conception of individuality and material advancement and the role of religion in both works. In addition, I will deal with the parallel between Gatsby and Trimalchio and the historical dimension that Fitzgerald originally underlined by using the name of Petronius's character as the title of the first version of *The Great Gatsby*. Finally, I will focus on Gatsby as a representative of "Other" Americans and on the way in which he problematizes the category of "whiteness". This will require a commentary on the anti-immigrant sentiment, nativism and national stereotypes that pervaded American society in the 1920s.

2 *The Autobiography and The Great Gatsby: Purpose, Style and Meaning for Americans*

2.1 Benjamin Franklin, the Model American

2.1.1 Franklin's Purpose of Writing his *Autobiography*

The way Franklin disguises the real purpose of his *Autobiography* only confirms David Levin's remark that the art of this thinker is deceptive.²⁰ The readers are led to believe that it is meant as a private memoir dedicated to relatives and not intended for publication since Franklin directly addresses his son throughout the first part. Furthermore, when the author reproaches himself for interrupting the chronological account of his life to discuss his family, he claims that it is fortunately not necessary to "dress for a private Company as for a publick Ball."²¹ However, there are several indications that the *Autobiography* was meant for public eye from the beginning. Firstly, it would have been strange if Franklin's son William, a forty-year-old governor of New Jersey at that time,²² had not been already familiar with the information about his grandparents' character and the inscription on their gravestone. It is also apparent that the sequence of items in this and in other "rambling Digressions" possesses "an order which makes it more than fit for a public showing."²³ Moreover, Franklin unfolds that his story is meant to be exemplary right on the first page when he says "my posterity will be perhaps desirous of learning the means, which I employed...They may also deem them fit to be imitated."²⁴ The example was evidently not designated to affect the middle-aged son but much larger "posterity." In the opening of the

²⁰ David Levin, "A Puritan Experimenter in Life and Art," *Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography: A Norton Critical Edition*, ed. J. A. Leo Lemay and P. M. Zall (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1986) 337.

²¹ Benjamin Franklin, *Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography: A Norton Critical Edition*, ed. J. A. Leo Lemay and P. M. Zall (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1986) 8.

²² Robert Freeman Sayre, "Wordly Franklin and Provincial Critics," *Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography: A Norton Critical Edition*, ed. J. A. Leo Lemay and P. M. Zall (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1986) 317.

²³ A. B. England, "Some Thematic Patterns in Franklin's Autobiography," *Eighteen Century Studies* 5.3 (Spring 1972): 425.

²⁴ Franklin 1.

second part of the *Autobiography* Franklin shows that the mission of the memoir was nothing less than the education of the rising nation. He reveals this aim by including two letters from his friends who recognize the value of the text and ask the author to continue in writing it in the name of the American youth that needs to be guided. These two men point out what Franklin was certainly aware of, but he could not assert it himself. Abel James begs him to complete the work since it “would be useful and entertaining not only to a few, but to millions.”²⁵ Benjamin Vaughan adds that such text is important on the international level, considering the revolution the United States had just gone through and the attention the new state was going to get from the rest of the world. In order to accomplish all these goals, Benjamin Franklin, the printer, diplomat and scientist created Benjamin Franklin, the character in the *Autobiography*. Even D. H. Lawrence, an avowed objector of Franklin’s thought, noticed that the book recognizes “a kind of order and a view of self which imposed a planned control of natural feelings”²⁶ when he exclaimed ironically: “The ideal self!”²⁷ Franklin uses various devices to achieve the stylized self-presentation and to attract the widest and the most varied audience.

2.1.2 Style and Thematic Structure

The author of the *Autobiography* employs a style that underscores his aim. His writing is not completely innovative in this respect; he draws on the literary tradition which was very popular in America during his childhood – the Puritan personal literature that stresses self-consciousness and self-examination. According to Levin, Franklin is linked with Puritan preaching mainly by his use of symbolic anecdote or parable which involves a “careful addition of a conclusion that drives home the point for those who might otherwise

²⁵ Franklin 58.

²⁶ Levin 337.

²⁷ D. H. Lawrence, “Benjamin Franklin,” *Benjamin Franklin’s Autobiography*, ed. J. A. Leo Lemay and P. M. Zall (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1986) 289.

misunderstand it.”²⁸ Charles L. Sanford suggests that Franklin’s primary model was John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* and that he actually substituted this Christian story with a happy ending with the secular story with a happy ending.²⁹ In the *Autobiography*, Franklin expresses his admiration for Bunyan’s ability to draw the readers into his story³⁰ and adheres to this principle in his writing.

The author of the *Autobiography* aims to shape the emerging American character; thus, he does not use grandiloquent language; he is straightforward and takes pains to express himself clearly even when he talks about complex issues so that all sorts of readers may understand his point. In spite of the didactic purpose of the *Autobiography*, the book is not dignified or overly moralistic. Much of its attraction lies in the fact that the narrator appears to be personal, candid and casual. Franklin surprises the audience with his candour already in the opening paragraph when he confesses that he intends to gratify his vanity by recording his anecdotes. As Morton L. Ross puts it, what the reader enjoys about the text is “a sense of being taken into the projector’s confidence, made privy to the back-stage secrets of his self-projecting craft and thus invited to marvel at its workings...”³¹ Franklin worked on the memoir in four different periods of time, the first and the fourth section are separated by eighteen years. Although the first two parts slightly differ from the other two, which are characterized by “a general de-emphasis of self-revelatory detail;”³² Franklin manages to retain the same warm tone throughout the book.³³

²⁸ Levin 339.

²⁹ Charles L. Sanford, “An American Pilgrim’s Progress,” *Benjamin Franklin’s Autobiography*, ed. J. A. Leo Lemay and P. M. Zall (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1986) 310.

³⁰ “Honest John was the first that I know of who mix’d Narration and Dialogue, a method of writing very engaging to the Reader, who in the most interesting parts finds himself as it were brought into the Company, and present at the Discourse.” Franklin 18.

³¹ Morton L. Ross, “Form and Moral Balance in Franklin’s *Autobiography*,” *A Review of International English Literature* 7.3 (1976): 46.

³² Ross 49.

³³ Twentieth century critics differ in their opinions on the form of the *Autobiography*. Alfred Owen Aldridge maintains that “in form, Franklin’s work is a virtual disaster” and that there is “no kind of conscious art in Franklin’s over-all structure as opposed to the separate parts.” (A. Owen Aldridge, “Form and Substance in

Some of Franklin's digressions and comments seem to be unplanned as if he wrote them on a sudden impulse, but in fact he carefully selects episodes and characters that he wants to promulgate and suppresses others. He omits "all facts and transactions that may not have a tendency to benefit the young reader," as he wrote in a letter to Benjamin Vaughan³⁴ and also those incidents that are not convenient for his project of creating an exemplary character. For instance, he leaves out the foundation of a general-interest magazine and the open argument with John Webbe, who betrayed him and took the idea to Andrew Bradford, Franklin's competitor in Philadelphia;³⁵ or the birth of William, an illegitimate son, who was raised by his wife Deborah, much to her displeasure.³⁶ However, Franklin cannot be blamed for omissions and occasional inaccuracies or perceived as dishonest, because at the beginning of the book he does not promise to provide a factual record of everything that happened to him; that would be indeed impossible.

As for the characters, Franklin frequently emphasizes those who are in contrast with the protagonist of the *Autobiography*, such as the lazy drunkard Collins, the chaotic and greedy Samuel Keimer, the unreliable Governor Keith, the indecisive Lord Loudon and others. It is remarkable that although some of these people harmed him in the past, the author does not talk about them with rancour, but with "the charitable curiosity of a man who was once interested in learning from his experience with them something about human nature."³⁷ Franklin presents himself as a model character that prospers and that is generally popular due to his adherence to certain principles and values, but it does not

Franklin's *Autobiography*," *Essays on American Literature in Honor of Jay B. Hubbel*, ed. Clarence Gohdes [Durham, 1967] 48.) On the contrary, Morton L. Ross points out that the structure of the *Autobiography* may be seen as a contribution to the moral balance of the author's ethical program because it is characterized by a movement from self-advertisement to self-effacement. See Ross 49.

³⁴ Benjamin Franklin, "To Benjamin Vaughan (October 24, 1788)," *Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography*, 206.

³⁵ It is probable that Franklin did not include the incident, because Webbe attacked Franklin's indirect insinuation which was, as he wrote, more dastardly than the audacity of a direct liar. However, Franklin believed that this method is less offensive and thus better than confrontational argument. See Isaacson 116.

³⁶ Gordon S. Wood, *The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2004) 34.

³⁷ Levin 342.

mean that he portrays himself as infallible. He occasionally mentions his errors or “Errata”, particularly those through which he is taught an important lesson or those that he manages to correct during his lifetime, such as the debt to Vernon or the misconduct to his future wife Miss Read. Furthermore, he shows that he is not completely successful in everything that he does. For example, he confesses that he gave up his attempt to perfect order, one of the virtues included in his “Project of arriving at moral perfection”, because of the “little Progress in Amendment and frequent Relapses.”³⁸ The account of this project and other youthful actions is accompanied by gentle self-ironic comments of the old narrator.³⁹

The *Autobiography* gives the reader an impression that almost everybody is able to accomplish what Franklin does; that is in the power of every man to achieve some degree of virtue, reputation, prosperity and affluence. As Steven Forde points out, Franklin portrays his level of virtuousness, reasonableness and sociability as an “acquisition or contrivance, rather than as something native to him.”⁴⁰ The author of the book shows his willingness to learn and stresses the constant self-cultivation as a source of happiness. He does not describe himself as virtuous, but as a man who strives to acquire virtue since “vicious actions are not hurtful because they are forbidden, but forbidden because they are hurtful.”⁴¹ According to his spiritual vision, virtue and happiness are “not only correlated but discernible and achievable.”⁴² His Art of Virtue is designed to apply to a wide range of people because it leaves out religion, it is linked with material advancement to some degree and the thirteen virtues themselves, as Franklin identifies them, are “hardly models

³⁸ Franklin 72.

³⁹ There are many instances of self-irony in the book. The most well known one is the response of the old narrator to his youthful decision to abandon the vegetarian diet because cod were seen to have smaller fish in their stomachs. He says: “So convenient a thing it is to be a reasonable creature, since it enables one to find or make a Reason for everything one has a mind to do.” Franklin 28.

⁴⁰ Steven Forde, “Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography* and the Education of America,” *The American Political Science Review* 86.2 (June 1992) 363.

⁴¹ Franklin 75.

⁴² Cullen 63.

of moral strictness.”⁴³ Furthermore, the protagonist of the *Autobiography* admits that if one finds himself incorrigible with respect to certain virtues, it is useful to cultivate at least their appearance.⁴⁴

Similarly, Franklin does not characterize himself as a serious scientist but as a man of inquiry who measures the distance at which George Whitefield’s voice may be heard,⁴⁵ who ponders on the improvement of the street-lightning and street-cleaning, who explores the effects of lading on the speed of merchant ships and who, by the way, invents a wood stove and a lightning rod. James Campbell observes that Franklin is generally portrayed in histories of American thought as “an inveterate gadgeteer or tinkerer, or perhaps a clever inventor,” but not as a real scientist.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, it was Franklin himself who underemphasized his theoretical knowledge and stressed the importance of experimenting and practical sense in science. He wanted to appear as an amateur scientist; as a common man who is interested in many branches of knowledge, so that the readers would be tempted to imitate him. Franklin is also depicted as very sociable in the *Autobiography*, but again he does not imply that the facility with which he makes friends was native to him. In order to achieve social success, he had to change some of his manners; for example, he abandoned his offensive method of dispute and started to express himself less positively in argument, or he struggled to overcome his natural inclination to pride.

⁴³ Forde 359.

⁴⁴ In respect to humility, Franklin stated: “I cannot boast of much success in acquiring the reality of this Virtue; but I had a good deal with regard to the Appearance of it.” Franklin 324.

⁴⁵ Franklin informs us in his *Autobiography* that George Whitefield was an itinerant preacher who came to Philadelphia in 1739 and was obliged to preach in the fields, which was not a problem for him. He was known as a strong, vibrant preacher who stirred up his listeners and who was proud of his loud voice that could be heard more than a mile away, as many witnesses including Franklin testify. “I love those that thunder out the Word,” said Whitefield. “The Christian World is in a dead sleep. Nothing but a loud voice can awaken them out of it.” Edward M. Panosian, “George Whitefield: The Awakener,” *Faith of Our Fathers: Scenes from Church History*, ed. Mark Sidwell, 29 July 2011 <<http://greatawakeningdocumentary.com/items/show/33>>

⁴⁶ James Campbell, *Recovering Benjamin Franklin: an exploration of a life of science and service* (Peru: Open Court Publishing Company, 1999) 42.

2.1.3 Franklin's Education of America

It was mainly because of his successful transition from dependence to independence, his optimism and belief in possibility, his emphasis on practical knowledge; in short, it was because of his *Autobiography* that Franklin became a national icon. He would certainly become a celebrated personage even if he had not written it, but he would not have influenced the discourse of the nationhood of the United States as much as he had. The patriotic services of his later life were so complex and so ill-recorded that many people in the nineteenth century did not really understand his political importance, as opposed to, for example, George Washington.⁴⁷ He was generally known as an industrious, virtuous, self-taught man who rose from poverty to affluence and who was noted for his scientific experiments rather than a politician. Richard D. Miles asserts that for most Americans, “their country’s cause was in much greater degree an economic and moral thing” than political thing and in these matters, Franklin’s two works served very well.⁴⁸ Franklin’s image was shaped by his popularizers, such as Parson Weems or Samuel Goodrich, who retold his story according to the *Autobiography* and focused mainly on his industry, frugality and scientific experiments. They obviously lacked Franklin’s charm, humour and self-irony; thus, they were moving away from the author’s original conception of himself. He was even successfully transformed into a Christian by these writers. Carla Mulford states that numerous representations of Franklin were produced in the 1850s and 1860s that were directed especially at new immigrants and young people. They provided instruction about “how Franklin’s personal greatness helped to foster the nation’s destiny for greatness.”⁴⁹ Franklin’s American image was affected after the Civil War, at the time of

⁴⁷ Richard D. Miles, “The American Image of Benjamin Franklin” *American Quarterly* (Summer 1957): 123.

⁴⁸ Miles 123.

⁴⁹ Mulford 423.

nationalism and search for a proper definition of what makes an American.⁵⁰ His ideas were fitted to the American cause and his character was the one through which “a sense of unity could be socially imagined,” as Mulford puts it.⁵¹ Franklin was also a very convenient figure for the process of “Americanization” of the new immigrants since his ideal was within the grasp of almost everybody and people could easily identify with him. However, during the 1920s and 1930s, Franklin’s reputation fell into eclipse. Among other things it was caused by the attack of famous writers and critics, such as D. H. Lawrence, William Carlos Williams or Charles Angoff who criticized him for being morally base, materialistic, calculating and utilitarian.⁵² It seems that these men reacted to the popular image of Franklin, to the myth which was created during the nineteenth century rather than to the narrator of the *Autobiography* and that they blame him for faults and vulgarities which are not his but “those of men we are encouraged to believe are his ethical heirs.”⁵³

2.2 Jay Gatsby, “the advertisement of the man”⁵⁴

2.2.1 Fitzgerald’s Intention

In the 1920s, the age of disillusionment and of cultural conflicts between pre-war Victorian past and modern changes, when “the dull and admonitory Victorian Franklin was so conclusively smashed,”⁵⁵ a young and hopeful writer Francis Scott Fitzgerald started to conceive his third novel. In contrast to Franklin, his central aim was not to educate, to provide a positive or negative example for his readers. He was determined that his new

⁵⁰ Miles 137.

⁵¹ Mulford 426.

⁵² Charles Angoff asserts: “Franklin represented the least praiseworthy qualities of the inhabitants of the New World: miserliness, fanatical practicality, and lack of interest in what are usually known as spiritual things.” (Charles Angoff, *A Literary History of the American People* [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1931] 295.) D.H. Lawrence’s attack was even more harsh: “Old Daddy Franklin will tell you. He’ll rig him up for you, the pattern American. Oh, Franklin was the first down-right American. He knew what he was about, the sharp little man. He set up the first dummy American.” Lawrence 289.

⁵³ Sayre 314.

⁵⁴ Fitzgerald 119.

⁵⁵ Sayre 314.

book would be the artistic consummation of his life, a “consciously artistic achievement.”⁵⁶ In a letter to his editor Maxwell Perkins, Fitzgerald reveals the intention to abandon the essentially expressive form of his earlier works, which encouraged him to describe emotion rather than to embody it,⁵⁷ and to create “something new, something extraordinary and beautiful and simple + intricately patterned.”⁵⁸ Furthermore, the fact that the author renounced his original plan to set the novel in 1885 and produced a book which takes place in 1922 shows his secondary purpose – to capture the spirit of the Jazz Age, the era that he knew best and for which he coined a term. It does not mean that by writing *The Great Gatsby* he primarily wanted to establish himself as a historian of ideas, as the chronicler of the Jazz Age, as he was dubbed later. He was a poet who transmuted his impressions; who “experienced the idea, felt it anew and as if no one had ever experienced it before, and felt it therefore wholly in terms of the world he lived in.”⁵⁹ His concern was “to fix and preserve evanescent experience.”⁶⁰

2.2.2 Style and Thematic Structure

One may say that Fitzgerald accomplished what he had set out to do. Although he did not employ the typical devices of literary modernism, such as stream of consciousness or repetition, *The Great Gatsby* was certainly a pioneering novel in terms of style. In order to distance himself and from the subject, Fitzgerald wrote a story that is filtered through the consciousness of a first-person narrator, Nick Carraway. As many critics have noticed, this strategy reminds of Joseph Conrad and his Charlie Marlow; however, the author of *The Great Gatsby* went beyond it. George Garret states that the novel is a complex composite

⁵⁶ *Letters of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, ed. Andrew Turnbull (New York: Scribners, 1963) 163.

⁵⁷ John W. Aldridge, “The Life of Gatsby,” *F. Scott Fitzgerald*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2006) 45.

⁵⁸ *Correspondence of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, ed. Matthew J. Bruccoli and Margaret M. Duggan (New York: Random House, 1980) 112.

⁵⁹ Arthur Mizener, “Scott Fitzgerald and the 1920s,” *Minnesota Review* (Winter 1961): 162.

⁶⁰ Matthew J. Bruccoli, “Introduction,” *New Essays on The Great Gatsby* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985) 9.

of several distinct kinds of prose, set within the boundaries of Nick's narration, "a composite style whose chief demonstrable point appears to be the inadequacy of any single style by itself to do justice to the story."⁶¹ For example, Chapter 4 of the novel contains a first-person narration by Jordan Baker in her own words, Chapter 7 includes a "matter of fact and vaguely journalistic"⁶² third-person account of Myrtle Wilson's death⁶³ and in Chapter 9, there is a direct speech from the dead Gatsby, in an appropriate vernacular for him.⁶⁴ This variety of styles is made possible because the narrator is not telling the story to others as Conrad's Marlow, but writing it; and the product of the activity is a book, presumably the same one as the readers are holding in their hands.⁶⁵ Moreover, Carraway implies that the text is in the process of being created and that the reader participates in it when he claims that he is rereading what he has written so far and when he explains his narrative choices.⁶⁶

The Great Gatsby is also characterized by its poetic intensity and symbolic imagination. According to Milton Stern, Fitzgerald tendency towards lyricism and evocative description has already been apparent in his first novels – *This Side of Paradise* and *The Beautiful and Damned*, but he was not able to attain the proper balance of the objective circumstance and lyrical description until his third novel.⁶⁷ The high poetic style is used mainly in the sections concerning Gatsby's life – his youth, his encounter with

⁶¹ George Garrett, "Fire and Freshness: A Matter of Style in *The Great Gatsby*," *New Essays on The Great Gatsby* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985) 114.

⁶² Garrett 113.

⁶³ "The young Greek, Michealis, who ran the coffee joint beside the ashheaps was the principal witness at the inquest. He had slept through the heat until after five, when he strolled over to the garage, and found George Wilson sick in his office..." Fitzgerald 138.

⁶⁴ "But, as they drew back the sheet and looked at Gatsby with unmoved eyes, his protest continued in my brain: 'Look here old sport, you've got to get somebody for me. You've got to try hard. I can't go through this alone.'" Fitzgerald 166.

⁶⁵ "Only Gatsby, the man who gives his name to this book, was exempt from my reaction." Fitzgerald 2.

⁶⁶ "He told me all this very much later, but I've put it down here with the idea of exploding those first wild rumors about his antecedents, which weren't even faintly true." Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* 102.

⁶⁷ Milton R. Stern, "Tender is the Night and American History," *The Cambridge Companion to F. Scott Fitzgerald*, ed. Ruth Prigozy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 95.

Daisy, his lavish parties or his last moments⁶⁸ and it somehow underscores his status of a mythic hero. It is remarkable that the poetic language lives simultaneously and at ease with the casual spoken vernacular, with the hard-knuckled matters of fact.⁶⁹ This contrast and the suggestiveness of the details indicate that there are two levels in *The Great Gatsby*, the “literal” sense of the story and the symbolic connotation. Many elements of the novel are invested with symbolic meaning, not only the characters’ cars, the broken clock falling of the mantelpiece during Gatsby’s reunion with Daisy, the green light at the end of Daisy’s dock or the Valley of Ashes, but also people’s names⁷⁰ and actions. The lyricism and symbols contribute to the “hauntedness” that the author meant to give to his prose. In order to achieve this quality,⁷¹ he had to “start from a small focal point” that impressed him, as he explains in a letter to Maxwell Perkins.⁷²

Above all, Fitzgerald is remembered by critics and readers as a writer who managed to capture the atmosphere of the twenties in Long Island. Malcolm Cowley remarked that the writer never lost a sense of living in history, as if he “wrote in a room full of clocks and calendars.”⁷³ Besides, he had an extraordinary sense of mood. Fitzgerald did not strive to depict how it was as much as how it felt; he was able to describe the emotions evoked by

⁶⁸ Although it is still Nick Carraway who tells the story, the narrative in these sections may be described as a third-person omniscient one. As an example I quote Gatsby’s death scene: “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.” Fitzgerald 162.

⁶⁹ See Garrett 111.

⁷⁰ Linda C. Pelzer and others assert that Daisy and Myrtle have floral names suggestive of their nature. (Linda C. Pelzer, *Student Companion to F. Scott Fitzgerald* [Westport: Greenwood Press, 2000] 97.) Daisy, a short-lived flower with white petals and gold centre is appropriate for Gatsby’s love who “blossomed” for him when they first kissed and will never do it again.

⁷¹ Some critics assume that Fitzgerald’s “hauntedness” reflects Joseph Conrad’s conviction that “the purpose of a work of fiction is to appeal to the lingering after-effects in the reader’s mind” which is expressed in his preface to *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”*. Fitzgerald cites this passage in a letter to Hemingway. Janet Giltrow and David Stouck, “Pastoral Mode and Language in *The Great Gatsby*,” *The Great Gatsby*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2010) 103.

⁷² *The Letters of F. Scott Fitzgerald* 551.

⁷³ Malcolm Cowley, “Fitzgerald: The Romance of Money,” *Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby: The Novel, The Critics, The Background*, ed. Henry D. Piper (New York: Scribners, 1970) 141.

particular moments. In the new world of the twentieth century, when America rejected its prim Victorian past, new language means were needed to express feelings. Fitzgerald used rhythms, colours and words that seemingly do not match and created very original and memorable phrases, similes and metaphors, such as “the yellow cocktail music,”⁷⁴ “the laughter spilled with prodigality”⁷⁵ or to appear “like an angry diamond.”⁷⁶

Another important feature of Fitzgerald’s portrait of the Jazz Age is its “doubleness”. *The Great Gatsby* reflects the author’s ambivalent attitude towards the rich and the life in the 1920s; his picture is at once lyrical and critical. On one hand he shows the recklessness, shallowness, carelessness of the high society, on the other hand he depicts the parties and material possessions as dazzling and beautiful. He shows both the devastation that can be caused by long-cherished illusions and the necessity to dream. New York is both the city of “wild promise of all the mystery and beauty in the world”⁷⁷ and the sombre night scene by El Greco. This “doubleness” or even “manyness” is one of the reasons why the novel cannot be classified as a work of literary realism although it falls into the nineteenth century tradition of the “great expectations” and “lost illusions” in a way. Nor can it be described as a moral fable, despite the writer’s belief that he is “a moralist at heart.”⁷⁸

Gatsby too has a multiple nature; he is a dreamer and a criminal, a romantic and a pragmatist, an Oxford man and a bootlegger, a man who has turned himself into God and a farm boy who is still a roughneck. People in the novel are not able to trace the path leading to him; he is “Mr. Nobody from Nowhere,” as Tom Buchanan claims. The rumours of his party guests transform him into many shapes; he becomes “a German spy during the war”

⁷⁴Fitzgerald 40.

⁷⁵ Fitzgerald 40.

⁷⁶ Fitzgerald 50.

⁷⁷ Fitzgerald 69.

⁷⁸ Cowley 142.

and “a nephew or a cousin of Kaiser Wilhelm’s” at once. He seems “endlessly replicated and mirrored in the text”, as Arnold Weinstein puts it.⁷⁹ Gatsby’s identity is inconsistent; his personality is fragmented into a number of roles. In this sense, he is not a real man, but “the advertisement of the man,” as Daisy calls him; a man whose face is drawn many times a day in the art of commercial realism. He reminds of Henry Adams’s image of the Ego degraded into a “manikin”, a figure on which the toilet of education is draped and which “has the same value as any other geometrical figure of three or more dimensions used for the study of relation.”⁸⁰

2.2.3 *The Great Gatsby* – a Persistent Presence in American culture

Neither identifiably modernist, nor realist, *The Great Gatsby* was not easy to categorize for critics and hence rejected by some of them. Most reviewers were positive in their comments; they recognized Fitzgerald’s development as a writer and considered it a brilliant period piece. However, they generally reckoned that it would not transcend its era. Commercially, the book was very disappointing, compared to *This Side of Paradise* and *The Beautiful and Damned*.⁸¹ It was almost dead in the market before the end of 1925 and it was not rediscovered until after its author’s death, in the 1940s. Subsequently, the wave of nostalgia for the Jazz Age, which swept the United States in the 1950s, fostered a popular awareness of Fitzgerald. Many people identified the author with his most famous protagonist and the fusion has served to make Gatsby a figure of nostalgic mythologizing with power to stir imaginations that have never encountered the pages of the novel.⁸² *The Great Gatsby* became a classic. Its cultural significance is apparent, considering not only the scholarly interest, sales figures, but also the references and tributes in the works of

⁷⁹ Arnold Weinstein, “Fiction as Greatness: The Case of Gatsby,” *NOVEL: Forum on Fiction* (Autumn 1985): 29.

⁸⁰ Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams* (New York: Dover Publications, 2002) 12.

⁸¹ “The two printings in 1925 totalled 23 870 copies.” Brucoli 2.

⁸² Richard Anderson, “Gatsby’s Long Shadow: Influence and Endurance,” *New Essays on The Great Gatsby* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985) 18.

other writers, for instance in *The Catcher in the Rye*.⁸³ According to Aldridge, the book “has created an American legend of the twenties, which at the present time is a common legend, and like Moby-Dick and Huckleberry Finn, it has helped to create, by endowing with significant form, a national unconscious.”⁸⁴

2.3 Old Franklin and Nick Carraway

Having commented upon the aim of the authors, style and thematic structure of the two works and on their position in American literature, I will now take a closer look at the narrators and the way in which Franklin and Gatsby are presented to the audience. As for the narrative technique, the main difference between the *Autobiography* and *The Great Gatsby* is that Franklin tells his story himself whereas Gatsby is actually allowed to say very little. Franklin interprets his own actions and thoughts, but Gatsby’s deeds, memories and mental states are transmitted to the readers by Nick Carraway. In the *Autobiography*, Franklin is both the focalizer and focalized object. In *The Great Gatsby*, the centre of perception is Nick, a witness-narrator, who is a character on his own right and who views the story from what Norman Friedman calls “the wandering periphery.”⁸⁵ Neither Franklin nor Carraway have more than ordinary access to the minds of others unless the characters open out to them. This fact is not very important for the former since he primarily portrays himself and his own perceptions. The latter does not seem to be restricted by it information easily because other characters tend to confide in him.

The *Autobiography* is an example of a “dissonant self-narration,”⁸⁶ a disagreement of the narrating-I with the acting and experiencing-I. The reader clearly sees two Franklins - the young, ambitious, innocent hero and the old, experienced, indulgent narrator who

⁸³ “I was crazy about *The Great Gatsby*. Old Gatsby. Old sport. That killed me.” J. D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1951) 183.

⁸⁴ John W. Aldridge 45.

⁸⁵ Norman Friedman, “Point of View in Fiction,” *PMLA* 70. 5 (Dec., 1955): 1174.

⁸⁶ Luc Herman and Bart Vervaeck, “Ideology,” *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, ed. David Herman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 228.

reflects upon his life and is frequently critical of his past actions. For example, the old Franklin agrees with his father that he was “too Young to manage Business of Importance” when Governor Keith offered it to him⁸⁷ or introduces his project of arriving at moral perfection as “bold and arduous”⁸⁸ However, in *The Great Gatsby*, the distinction between I-character and I-narrator is blurred. The readers may trace only few instances when Nick, the narrator living in the present of the narration, shows himself as different from the character living in the past of the narrative. As Herman and Vervaeck point out, these fragments never imply a “clear criticism or final statement of ideological stance;” therefore, past and present seem to be continually interwoven.⁸⁹

Franklin and Nick Carraway have something in common as narrators - they are both frequently referred to as commonsensical in critical essays. Nevertheless, a close examination of these men shows that their conceptions of common sense differ. Franklin’s common sense may be defined in opposition to metaphysical excesses, over-theorizing and religious fanaticism. There is nothing esoteric in his approach to religion and science; he analyses common experiences for common readers. He believed that actions, results and consequences are what matter to the lives of humans whereas theorizing and speculation that do not contribute to human betterment are secondary.⁹⁰ These notions anticipate Pragmatism, a trend in American philosophy of the late nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century. Franklin was apparently influenced by some ideas of the Enlightenment thinkers for whom common sense became an important object of study; it was viewed as standing in a complex relation with scientific thought. In the *Autobiography*, he mentions his reading of Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Furthermore, he was a friend of David Hume who emphasized practical reason in his *Enquiry Concerning Human*

⁸⁷ Franklin 27.

⁸⁸ Franklin 66.

⁸⁹ Herman, Vervaeck 228.

⁹⁰ Campbell 253.

Understanding. He wrote: "...indulge your passion for science, says she (nature) but let your science be human and such as may have a direct reference to action and society."⁹¹ For the rising nation of Americans where power was meant to be placed with the people, the notion of common sense as an ultimate rule was relevant. Franklin's friend Thomas Paine also appealed to it in his pamphlet supporting American independence. In contrast to Franklin's conception of common sense which is related to optimism, practical effects of knowledge and the new nation itself, Nick Carraway's common sense may be defined in opposition to romanticism and idealism and it is closer to scepticism and conventionality. Nick is a non-eccentric realist who decides to enter the investment field because everybody he knew "was in the bond business,"⁹² who realizes the shortness and nastiness of life⁹³ and who has almost no dreams and hopes for the future.

Although Franklin records some of his mistakes and misconducts, he explicitly presents himself as a positive, exemplary character throughout the book; he creates a consistent view of the self. On the contrary, the central character of Fitzgerald's novel is a deliberately mysterious, elusive figure. Unlike Franklin, who is still present and "visible" for the reader, Gatsby is everywhere and nowhere. Gatsby's mysteriousness is also reinforced by the disjointed structure of the novel. *The Great Gatsby* does not follow a straightforward chronology; the history of its main character is dispersed throughout the book in bits and pieces. The readers of Fitzgerald's novel have to reconstruct and evaluate the information about the protagonist, as opposed to the *Autobiography* where it is largely evaluated by Franklin himself. The view of Gatsby is inconsistent because it is indeed

⁹¹ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Forgotten Books, 1958) 30 July 2011 <http://books.google.com/books?id=H1rKYw9SnTgC&dq=indulge+your+passion+for+science,+but+let+you+ur+science+be&hl=cs&source=gbs_navlinks_s>

⁹² Fitzgerald 3.

⁹³ Nick's skepticism is evident when he turns thirty. He thinks of "the portentous, menacing road of a new decade," "a thinning list of single men to know, a thinning briefcase of enthusiasm and thinning hair." Fitzgerald 136.

impossible for a narrator like Nick, who is “within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life,”⁹⁴ to find a single referent for Gatsby. He is unable to say what Gatsby is “like.” On one hand, he is apparently drawn by the charisma of his wealthy neighbour and occasionally describes him in very positive terms (“You’re worth the whole damn bunch put together.”⁹⁵); on the other hand, he admits that Gatsby represented everything for which he had “an unaffected scorn”⁹⁶ and that he “disapproved of him from the beginning to end.”⁹⁷ Nick has ambivalent feeling towards Gatsby; he is both embarrassed by him because the times are too much for Gatsby and proud of him because he is, in some respects, better than the times.⁹⁸ Nick’s descriptions of Gatsby and the experiences with him are sometimes as elusive as the protagonist; they frequently include phrases like “blurred vision,” “uncommunicable memories,” “unintelligible gestures” and words that do not have a single meaning, such as “perception” or “form.”

2.4 From the Model American to the “Advertisement of the Man”

This chapter has shown that Gatsby cannot be simply contrasted to Franklin; his character is very complex in itself. Like Adams’s “manikin,” he is “a sort of pluralistic self,” appropriate to the conception of “a pluralistic and thus unfinished universe,” which anticipates postmodernism.⁹⁹ As opposed to Franklin, who strives to construct his self as a secular version of Protestant ethic and perceives himself as a unit of a unified, harmonious and intelligible universe, Gatsby is not the “central man.” The dissociation of his

⁹⁴ Fitzgerald 36.

⁹⁵ Fitzgerald 154.

⁹⁶ Fitzgerald 2.

⁹⁷ Fitzgerald 154.

⁹⁸ Richard Lehan, “Focus on F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*: The Nowhere Hero,” *American Dreams, American Nightmares*, ed. David Madden, 11 Aug 2011 <<http://fitzgerald.narod.ru/critics-eng/lehan-nowhere.html>>

⁹⁹ John Carlos Rowe, “Introduction,” *New Essays on the Henry Adams*, ed. John Carlos Rowe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 20.

personality is related to what Henry Adams called the “twentieth-century multiplicity.”¹⁰⁰ Adams sees the progress of humankind between 1200 and 1900 as a movement from unity into diversity, from order into chaos. In his *Education*, he discusses the relation between “The Virgin,” the unifying cultural power of the medieval period, the agent of the order, which “had acted as the greatest force the Western world ever felt”¹⁰¹ and the Dynamo, a symbol of the uncontrollable energy that began to emerge as “the Virgin” disintegrated. Richard Lehan describes the Dynamo as “the random physical power that feeds off the natural universe and goes beyond the romantic containment” and thus gives rise to the diversity that fragments self as well as culture.¹⁰² Gatsby’s inner conflict between these visionary and physical realms may be interpreted as his inability to cope with the diversification of the world. While Adams was mainly worried about the forthcoming incoherence of society and culture, Fitzgerald had extended the idea and created a world in which even personality is fragmented; in which the main hero is a mere advertisement and God is represented by the big blue eyes on the billboard of Dr. Eckleburg.

¹⁰⁰ As we may read in the Preface, Adams gave a subtitle to his *Education* - “A Study of Twentieth-Century Multiplicity.” Adams, *Education of Henry Adams* 9.

¹⁰¹ Adams, *Education of Henry Adams* 292.

¹⁰² Richard Lehan, “The Text as a Knot: Narrative Constructs and Narrative Unfolding,” *The Great Gatsby*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2010) 62.

3 Franklin and Gatsby: The Rise and the Withering of the American Dream?

Many specialists would probably agree with Lemay's assertion that Benjamin Franklin is the one who gave America the definitive formulation of the American Dream.¹⁰³ Jay Gatsby is, on the contrary, frequently associated with its withering or collapse.¹⁰⁴ In order to determine in what way was Franklin's version of the central American myth transformed or corrupted, I will compare the schedules of the protagonists, examine the role of religion in both texts and analyse Franklin's and Gatsby's conception of individualism and the economic aspect of their dream. Subsequently, I will attempt to trace whether Fitzgerald constructs the figure of Gatsby and the image of the 1920s as the repetition of Petronius's character Trimalchio and Neronian Rome or whether he reinforces the notion that history brings always something new and unexpected.

3.1 The Art of Virtue and General Resolves

The most proper starting point for the discussion of the transformation or corruption of the American Dream is the passage in which Fitzgerald's novel sets itself up in an intertextual dialogue with Franklin's *Autobiography* - Gatsby's schedule and General resolves that have been quoted in the Introduction of this thesis. As the readers learn in Chapter 6 of *The Great Gatsby*, there was James Gatz's "Platonic conception of himself" at the beginning of his story. It is apparent that Gatsby read the *Autobiography* and that he took its protagonist as an exemplary self-made man. Like Franklin, he strongly believed in the possibility of accomplishment and decided to proceed systematically and by means of self-discipline.

¹⁰³ Lemay 350.

¹⁰⁴ Marius Bewley's claim that the "theme of *The Great Gatsby* is the withering of the American Dream" is repeated in many critical essays. (Marius Bewley, "Scott Fitzgerald's Criticism of America," *The Sewanee Review* [Spring 1954] 5 July 2011 <<http://fitzgerald.narod.ru/critics-eng/bewley-criticism.html>>) Another essay that Bewley wrote about Gatsby and that I will quote later is called "Scott Fitzgerald and the Collapse of the American Dream."

Nevertheless, his imagination was also fed by books like Hopalong Cassidy, a story of a cowboy hero whose life is informed by a romantic code of honour. Furthermore, he saw his unsuccessful shiftless parents and the character traits that contributed to their failure. All these influences are reflected in the identity he produced for himself, “the sort of Jay Gatsby that a seventeen-year-old boy would be likely to invent.”¹⁰⁵ Thus, Gatsby’s adaptations of Franklin’s schedule and the list of the thirteen virtues come across almost as a parody.

At first sight, the schedules of the two heroes seem to be similar; both of them wake up early, devote most of their time to work and learn. Franklin plans to continue with the study of the philosophers, languages or perhaps science every morning whereas Gatsby pursues the study of “electricity, etc.” which was “one of the most practical (and American) aspects of his model’s career.”¹⁰⁶ His determination to learn something about “needed inventions” also reveals Franklin’s influence and Gatsby’s ambition to attain fame. The recreation of Fitzgerald’s protagonist is more active and less intellectual, he plays “baseball and sports” while his predecessor engages in “music, or diversion, or conversation.” However, Gatsby includes something which may not be found in the schedule of the model American - a concern for physical appearance beyond Franklin’s “Cleanliness”; an effort to develop the ability to attract. He strengthens his body by “dumbbell exercise and wall-scaling” and practises “elocution and poise.” These items on his schedule confirm Warren Susman’s statements about the early twentieth-century culture. He claims that charm, clothing, personal appearance, effective speech and ‘good manners’ were very important after the turn of the century, but there was little interest in

¹⁰⁵ Fitzgerald 99.

¹⁰⁶ Watkins 251.

morals. “Every American was to become a performing self,” he asserts.¹⁰⁷ And that brings us back to the “manikin” and the “advertisement of the man.”

Gatsby’s resolutions are much more specific and much less demanding than those marked out by his model in the list of thirteen virtues. Franklin’s “Temperance” is transformed into “No more smoking or chewing”; “Frugality” is “Save \$5.00 [crossed out] \$3.00”; “Industry” becomes “No wasting time at Shafters”; “Justice” or perhaps “Moderation” is “Be better to parents” and “Cleanliness” is adapted as “Bath every other day.” Gatsby aptly omits Franklin’s Silence, Sincerity, Chastity, Humility and Order, since he does not consider them as useful in the modern world of the twentieth century. In short, although God is left out from Franklin’s tables, except for the somewhat vague note “address Powerful Goodness” and although there are certain loopholes in his definitions of virtues, one can still find a system of belief behind it – he intends to achieve success mainly through moral integrity. The means are as important for him as the ends. On the contrary, Gatsby’s list shows that he primarily yearns to be prosperous and it does not matter for him how exactly he will accomplish this goal - perhaps by means of good looks, perfect speech, sport skills or a new invention. He wants to be prepared for any opportunity, so he prescribes for himself all activities that show some promise of an amazing career. In addition, Gatsby’s schedule and resolutions demonstrate the absence of spirituality that pervades the era as it is portrayed in the novel.

3.2 Secular Scripture and the Eyes of Dr. Eckleburg

Franklin too has been associated with irreligion or a lack of spiritual depth by certain commentators. The nineteenth century French philosopher Ernest Renan branded him as a worldly and materialistic man “beyond whom there are none in the world more

¹⁰⁷ Warren Susman, “Personality and the Making of Twentieth-Century Culture,” *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984) 275.

atheistic”¹⁰⁸ and above mentioned essay of D. H. Lawrence denounces his religious and moral thought as simplistic and shallowly utilitarian. The famous writer describes it in these terms: “God is the supreme servant of men who want to get on, to produce. Providence. The provider. The heavenly storekeeper.”¹⁰⁹ The *Autobiography* itself proves that these assumptions are exaggerated; that Franklin can neither be called atheist nor is his concept of God solely meant as a justification for the values and aspirations of his class.¹¹⁰ The thinker assures his readers that he never doubted the existence of the deity and shows that he is intensely concerned with religious questions, though he is more inclined to Deism than to Christianity.¹¹¹ In the *Autobiography*, Franklin’s approach to religion is mainly moral and social, rather this-worldly than otherworldly. Although he believes in God who indirectly rules the world with an eye toward human well-being, he suggests that it is reason and science and not scriptural traditions that should guide people’s attempts to organize their lives; he is opposed to supernaturalism, dogmatism and orthodoxy.¹¹² He implies that all denominations should primarily inculcate moral principles in order to make good citizens out of people and not only good members of the sects. In the *Autobiography*, God is removed from the everyday reality, but his order is still present. As Sanford puts it,

¹⁰⁸ Kerry S. Walters, *Benjamin Franklin and his Gods: Beyond Providence and Polytheism* (University of Illinois Press, 1998) 3.

¹⁰⁹ Lawrence 290.

¹¹⁰ It is not easy to summarize Franklin’s religious views since they were developing and changing during his life and his reflections concerning this subject are scattered throughout his writings. I am referring only to his *Autobiography* in this paragraph.

¹¹¹ In the *Autobiography* Franklin states that although he became “a thorough Deist” after reading some books against Deism, he began to suspect that this doctrine “was not very useful” because the deistic God of nature was too remote for humans who naturally long for some contact with the divine. (Franklin 46.) Walters maintains that Franklin sought a unifying principle that would serve as a catalyst for the synthesis of Calvinism and Deism, “an organic bond that would absorb without duplicating features of both.” Walters 9.

¹¹² In 1738 Franklin wrote to his father: “I think vital religion has always suffered when orthodoxy is more regarded than virtue; and the scriptures assures me, that at the last day we shall not be examined what we thought, but what we did; and our recommendation will not be that we said, Lord! Lord! but that we did good to our fellow creatures..” “Social and Familiar Correspondence,” *Memoirs of Benjamin Franklin, Vol. 1* (Philadelphia: M’Carty & Davis, 1837) 233.

Franklin “gives to his secular rise a moral and spiritual meaning discoverable in the special blessings of God.”¹¹³

A comparison with Franklin’s book makes the absence of God and religion in *The Great Gatsby* even more obvious. The only object that evokes the presence of deity in this novel is Dr. T. J. Eckleburg’s billboard with gigantic blue eyes on it that look out of no face, which is situated in the so called valley of ashes, a place between the Long Island Eggs and New York. According to Tom Burnam, these eyes “serve as a focus and an undeviating base, a single point of reference in the midst of monstrous disorder.”¹¹⁴ When George Wilson tells his unfaithful wife that she can fool him, but cannot fool God and takes her to the window to see Dr. Eckleburg, it becomes clear that this billboard is a symbol of modern deity. In the world where spirituality is replaced by commerce, God has become a mere advertisement, indifferent and faceless. The image is all eyes because God is supposed to see everything. Ironically, they are sightless. The real eyes of the omniscient Christian God have done exactly the same thing as Nick says about the oculist; they “sank down into eternal blindness” or “moved away.”¹¹⁵ Alan Lupack claims the “physical deterioration of the valley of ashes mirrors the moral despair of its few remaining who are bereft not only of hope but also vitality.”¹¹⁶ Here, the implication of Fitzgerald’s text may be that God of the Pilgrim Fathers left the country which was to be a promised land, a new Eden, as it became in moral and spiritual terms a “valley of ashes.” There seems to be a parallel between the image of the solitary signpost with the huge eyes in the middle of this arid plane where “ashes take form of houses and chimneys” and the lines from Elliot’s

¹¹³ Sanford 311.

¹¹⁴ Tom Burnam, “The Eyes of Dr. Eckleburg: A Re-Examination of *The Great Gatsby*,” *College English*, 14.1 (Oct. 1952) 12.

¹¹⁵ Fitzgerald 23.

¹¹⁶ Alan Lupack, and Barbara T. Lupack, *King Arthur in America* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1999) 146.

Wasteland, which Fitzgerald “knew by heart,” as John W. Bicknell notes:¹¹⁷ “What are the roots than clutch, what branches grow / Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man, / You cannot say or guess, for you know only / A heap of broken images, where the sun beats / And the dead tree gives no shelter...”¹¹⁸ This part of the *Wasteland* and Fitzgerald’s image both reflect the barren culture and the fragmentation of human consciousness and faith.

The only person who remembers the idea of religion that people can turn to in the moments of distress is George Wilson, the man who lives in the valley of ashes and who is regarded as spiritless by other characters. He invokes God when he discovers his wife’s infidelity. However, although he is the only person in the novel besides Gatsby who apparently believes in something, he is not able to go further and refuses to contact his church as his friend advises him. Other references to the divinity in the book seem to be related to the eyes of Dr. Eckleburg too. When Gatsby promises Nick to reveal “God’s truth” about his past, he immediately starts to tell lies. Furthermore, Gatsby, “the advertisement of the man,” is aptly referred to as a “son of God” who “must be about his father’s business, the service of a vast, vulgar and meretricious beauty.”¹¹⁹ He is a son of the blank and commercial God of the valley of ashes. As Harold Bloom points out, even his mindless idealism has no relevance to Christian terms.¹²⁰

3.3 Individualism

According to Lemay, the American Dream is a dream of “the manifold possibilities that human existence can hold for the incredible variety of people of the most assorted talents and drives.”¹²¹ For the individual, it is the hope for a new beginning for any of the

¹¹⁷ Lupack 146.

¹¹⁸ T. S. Elliot, *The Annotated Waste Land with Elliot’s Contemporary Prose*, ed. Lawrence Rainey (Yale University Press, 2005) 58.

¹¹⁹ Fitzgerald 99.

¹²⁰ Harold Bloom, “Afterthought,” *F. Scott Fitzgerald*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2006) 234.

¹²¹ Lemay 353.

numerous things that this variety of human beings may want to do. Thus, the philosophy of individualism is an important aspect of the American Dream. Both Franklin and Gatsby believe that the world may be affected and changed by individuals, that the individual is unconstrained by culture and history. Franklin's individualism is frequently referred to as liberal and utilitarian since it embodies notions of the good life in which every man has the right to manage himself, his work and his property as he wishes. Verner Crane describes it also as "circumscribed individualism" since it is limited by the rights of one's neighbours and by certain moral philosophy.¹²² In spite of being an individualist, Franklin was supportive of the community; he was an "admixture of self-reliance and civic involvement and what he exemplified became part of the American character."¹²³

Gatsby's individualism is quite problematic since it incorporates some opposing features. There are traces of Franklinian individualism in his pursuit of social advancement. One may also discover traits of romantic individualism in Gatsby's behaviour because of his passionate, rebellious intensity. Some critics, such as Barbour associate him with Emerson and his unconstrained Nature, non-conformism and the idea of freeing the ordinary self from materialism and stagnancy.¹²⁴ It is true that there are no limits for Gatsby; he lacks self-control in his quest. He does not care about the fact that he is up to his neck in shady deals, he denies that Daisy has become someone's wife and absolutely ignores the existence of her daughter. Gatsby denies even the flow of time. When Nick warns him that he cannot repeat the past, he exclaims: "Why, of course you can!"¹²⁵ He wants Daisy to obliterate her matrimony with Tom with one sentence and to go

¹²² Verner Winslow Crane, *Benjamin Franklin, Englishman and American* (Providence: Williams & Wilkins Company, 1936) 54.

¹²³ Isaacson 240.

¹²⁴ Barbour, "The Great Gatsby and the American Past," *Southern Review*, 9 (Spring 1973): 291.

¹²⁵ Fitzgerald 111.

back to Louisville and be married from her house “just as if it were five years ago.”¹²⁶ His self-absorption is excessive. However, Emersonian individualism rejects acquisitiveness and Gatsby is acquisitive in a way. Emerson maintains that the materialist only thinks he stands on solid ground; he mocks “at the star-gazers and dreamers,” but he is himself a “phantom.”¹²⁷ Gatsby cannot embody one kind of individualism because he is both the star-gazer and the phantom. However, as pointed out above, he can also be seen as a mere vacuous semblance, or, euphemistically, “advertisement”, of an individual.

3.4 China Bowl and Hydroplane: The Economic Aspect of Franklin’s and Gatsby’s Dream

The American Dream is nowadays commonly identified with the rise from rags to riches, as if financial success was the only important aspect of this concept. In Franklin’s *Autobiography*, the economic rise of the protagonist is one of many other themes. Lemay regards it even as a “minor subject.”¹²⁸ Franklin mentions his private wealth rarely and indirectly, for instance when he informs the readers that his wife purchased a china bowl and a silver spoon because she thought her husband deserves these things as well as any of his neighbours or when he says that he had secured leisure for the rest of his life by “the sufficient tho’ moderate Fortune”¹²⁹ after his retirement. Franklin is certainly not an unregenerate materialist as some of his objectors declare and he does not imply that financial success is the basis of human felicity.¹³⁰ He believes that “virtue alone is sufficient to make a Man Great, Glorious and Happy”¹³¹ and that nothing is useful which is

¹²⁶ Fitzgerald 111.

¹²⁷ Barry Maxwell Andrews, *Emerson as Spiritual Guide: A Companion to Emerson’s Essays for Personal Reflection and Group Discussion* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2003) 83.

¹²⁸ Lemay 351.

¹²⁹ Franklin 100.

¹³⁰ “Human Felicity is produc’d not so much by great Pieces of good Fortune that seldom happen, as by little advantages that occur every Day. Thus if you teach a poor young Man how to shave himself and keep his Razor in order, you may contribute more to the Happiness of his Life than in giving him a 1000 Guineas. The Money may be soon spent, and the Regret only remaining of having foolishly consum’d it.” Franklin 108.

¹³¹ Campbell 56.

not honest.¹³² Nevertheless, as Forde observes, he uses money “as an incentive to virtue by insisting that virtue is the surest path to wealth.”¹³³ Franklin is convinced that the pursuit of one’s true self-interest will not lead to social conflict, therefore; he does not identify the impulse to material advancement as a moral failure. He primarily wished to direct people towards virtue and he realized what Alexis de Tocqueville wrote half a century later – that moral teaching in the democratic age has to reconcile itself, to some extent, to the material and self-centred preoccupations of the majority in order to be effective.¹³⁴ In the *Autobiography*, Franklin explains that the numerous proverbs in *Poor Richard’s Almanac* and *The Way to Wealth* that encourage industry and frugality were a kind of elementary message for common people who did not buy any other books. He assumes that certain amount of prosperity is a precondition for virtue since “it is hard for an empty Sack to stand upright.”¹³⁵ Franklin’s own career exemplifies that his memoir as a whole is directed strongly away from wealth as an end in itself. In his major work he shows that the rise from helplessness to power, from dependence to independence is far more important for him than material advancement. He could have continued in making money but he retired from his private business at the age of forty in order to pursue higher goods – scientific research and public service.

The *Autobiography* is deliberately optimistic about mankind and about the future. The American Dream, as Franklin formulated it, believed in the goodness of man. His conception was that of a society of virtuous individualistic citizens improving their material lives. However, some of his notions were naturally reduced in the course of time; the second part of the idea that industry and frugality are “the Means of procuring wealth

¹³² Franklin 7.

¹³³ Forde 358.

¹³⁴ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 2004) 281.

¹³⁵ Franklin 79.

and thereby securing virtue”¹³⁶ seems to be lost and some of other virtues that he promoted became irrelevant when the interest in get-rich quick schemes increased, as it is noticeable in Gatsby’s schedule. As a result of this, the economic aspect of Franklin’s American Dream became more prominent than it is in the *Autobiography*.

It is precisely this “rags to riches” element with which young James Gatz equates his dream at first. Subsequently, due to his “romantic readiness,” he associates it with a woman, Daisy Fay, and then with an idea of himself that had gone into loving her. Thus, his dream incorporates both love and money. Gatsby’s sentiments towards Daisy, or his idea of Daisy created in his imagination, are sincere and genuine; he does not want to use her, he wishes to be a member of high society, because she is there. Gatsby’s dream of love “depends upon an alchemy that metamorphoses wealth into eros.”¹³⁷ He does not want to meet Daisy anywhere else than near his house so that he could express his love to her by displaying all his possessions, including the profusion of his clothes, and by revaluating everything “according to the measure of response it drew from her well-loved eyes.”¹³⁸ To Gatsby, Daisy is like “the tinselly department store window at Christmastime to the urchin in the street,” as Louis Auchincloss puts it.¹³⁹ To his ears, her voice is “full of money,”¹⁴⁰ full of possibility that money represents. Gatsby exemplifies the fact that the emotions elicited by commercials and pop-culture in general have replaced the high romantic love which identifies the emotion with absolute concepts such as Eternity or Immortality; the love that Kundera termed “extra-coital.”¹⁴¹

¹³⁶ Franklin 79.

¹³⁷ Harold Bloom, “Introduction,” *F. Scott Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby* (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2006) 8.

¹³⁸ Fitzgerald 92.

¹³⁹ Louis Auchincloss, *The Style’s the Man: Reflections on Proust, Fitzgerald, Wharton, Vidal, and Others* (New York: Scribners, 1994) 175.

¹⁴⁰ Fitzgerald 120.

¹⁴¹ See *Time Refigured*, ed. Martin Procházka and Ondřej Pilný (Praha: Litteraria Pragensia Books, 2005) 117-118

It is not only love that Gatsby expresses in monetary terms, sometimes it seems that this romantic money maker who does not have a sense of who he is, apart from his “Platonic conception of himself,” attempts to derive his identity from the luxurious and extraordinary items he owns. When he first meets Nick, he tells him, instead of introducing himself, that he has bought a new hydroplane which they may try together. When he wants to impress Daisy by the greatness of his house, he shows it to her with similar anxiety as if he was revealing his inner self. In addition, his guests may all use his private beach, diving tower, Rolls Royce, library and many other things although majority of them do not know him at all. For Gatsby, success has to be visible; it is measured in material possessions. In this respect, he resembles the “rotten crowd”, as Nick labels the Buchanans and other people from higher circles, yet his approach to money slightly differs. His money is “new” and, as Roger Lewis claims, the newness gives it “some purpose and vitality.”¹⁴² Gatsby’s money is not divested of dreams as Tom’s; he has a prodigious faith in it. When he buys his fantastic estate, he thinks he is buying his dream and not simply a property. As opposed to the arrogant Tom who has been rich since he was born, Gatsby “is completely innocent of the limits of what money can do.”¹⁴³

Gatsby rises from rags to riches, but, in contrast to Franklin, he does not experience the rise from helplessness to power, to reputation. His parties are attended by many interesting and celebrated people; they speculate about their host’s past, they admire his possessions, but they do not respect him; they do not even care for him. As Bewley stresses, the guests come to his parties “blindly and instinctively;” they “accept the rhythm

¹⁴² Roger Lewis, “Money, Love and Aspiration in *The Great Gatsby*,” *New Essays on The Great Gatsby* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985) 51.

¹⁴³ Lewis 51.

of Gatsby's unreal vision in terms of their own tawdry illusions."¹⁴⁴ There is no bond between the host and his guests, no friendship, just a mutual need for each other. When the protagonist of Fitzgerald's novel dies, nobody besides Owl-Eyes comes to his funeral, even Klipspringer, the "boarder", is more concerned about the tennis shoes that he left in Gatsby's house than about his host's death.

3.5 Gatsby and Trimalchio

The society that Fitzgerald depicts in his most famous novel is generally loveless, material and fragmented and it seems that Fitzgerald sought some structural model for his critical approach to it. He apparently found one of such cultural models in Neronian Rome¹⁴⁵ because in Chapter 7, he makes an allusion to a character from Petronius's *The Satyricon* by saying that Gatsby's "career as Trimalchio was over."¹⁴⁶ There are some significant parallels between Trimalchio and Gatsby and between Rome in the stage of moral decline and New York in the 1920s. Trimalchio is a freedman and a parvenu that amasses wealth and luxurious objects. Like Gatsby, he throws lavish parties and invites celebrities and interesting people to his house so that he can show off. The readers perceive the sense of pervasive consumption and lack of spirituality in the descriptions of Trimalchio's and Gatsby's parties; even libraries are regarded as indicators of social status in both cases. The protagonists have almost no ties with their guests and are gossiped by them since Gatsby is mostly not present among them and Trimalchio often goes to the lavatory. On the other hand, as Ward Briggs suggests, the two characters differ in that Fitzgerald has made

¹⁴⁴ Marius Bewley, "Scott Fitzgerald and the Collapse of the American Dream," *The Eccentric Design* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963) 275.

¹⁴⁵ According to Ward Briggs, Petronius was better known in the 1920s than at any previous time in the modern era. Fitzgerald might have become familiar with it because of the appearance of the Petronian epigraph to *The Waste Land* or because of the high-profile censorship case concerning *The Satyricon*. Ward Briggs, "Petronius and Virgil in 'The Great Gatsby'," *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 6.2 (Fall 1999) 226.

¹⁴⁶ Fitzgerald 113.

Gatsby a figure of romantic aspiration while “Petronius only laughs at the cartoonish Trimalchio.”¹⁴⁷ Gatsby has a sentimental motive for his extravagance and his creator sympathizes with him to some extent, but Petronius evidently despises his obscenely rich character and the society that has produced him. In addition, the personality of Petronius’s character does not appear to be fragmented as Gatsby’s; he has a strong sense of identity and holds a very central position at his party, as if he was an emperor. He is carried to the dinner to the sound of music; presides over the table and directs his guests. In contrast to Gatsby, who searches for some meaning of his life, Trimalchio is obsessed with pompous monumentalization of his existence after death as he demonstrates by the plans for his grave monument¹⁴⁸ and by persuading his guests to pretend they actually are at his funeral so that he could enjoy it too.

The single reference to *The Satyricon* in *The Great Gatsby* is quite innocent and may be unnoticed or misunderstood by many readers. However, Fitzgerald originally wanted to publish *The Great Gatsby* under the title “Trimalchio” or “Trimalchio at West Egg,” which would have shaped the novel in a different way. If the writer had accomplished this intention, Gatsby would have been directly equated with the vulgar Petronius’s character, which would automatically cast a pejorative shade on him. Above all, Fitzgerald would have stressed the notion of history as repetitive cycles of growth and decay, a concept which appeared already in Ancient Greece in Polybius’s works, which was prevalent during the Enlightenment era and which was also expressed by Lord Byron in his *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*: “First freedom and then Glory - when that fails,/ Wealth, vice, corruption, - barbarism at last./ And History, with all her volumes vast/ Hath

¹⁴⁷ Briggs 227.

but *one* page...”¹⁴⁹ Had Fitzgerald called his novel “Trimalchio,” he would have implied that the United States or the “American Empire” exhibits the same lamentable cycle of rise and fall as Roman Empire and that America is a temporary phenomenon in history. Nevertheless, the writer suppressed this conception and he seems to reinforce the notion of history as unexpected and uneven, consisting of unpredictable discontinuities and ruptures, which anticipates post-structuralism, for example Derrida’s theory that the concepts of chance and discontinuity are indispensable and that the appearance of a new structure, of an original system, “always comes about by a rupture with its past, its origin and its cause.”¹⁵⁰ Post-structuralism also works with the concept of “Other”, the silenced, marginalized Other of the normative subject.

3.6 Gatsby as the Representative of “Other” Americans

Since the birth of the United States, and even before it, there were always some groups of migrants that have been looked upon with suspicion by the natives of the republic. Although the *Autobiography* implies that everybody can create himself in the United States, including new immigrants, Franklin himself expressed opposition especially towards Germans or “Palatine Boors,” who moved to America mostly for economic reasons, in his treatise from 1751. Nevertheless, the official discourse was generally pro-immigrant and there were no lawful restrictions on immigration until 1882. In 1783 George Washington wrote that the bosom of America is open not only to the opulent and respected strangers but also to the oppressed and persecuted of all nations and religions.¹⁵¹ In the first two decades of the twentieth century the immigrant population increased to the highest level in the history of the country and the prejudice against foreign born people and the

¹⁴⁹ George Gordon Byron, “Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage,” *The Complete Works of Lord Byron* (Paris: A. and W. Galignani and Co., 1837) 145.

¹⁵⁰ Jacques Derrida, “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1966) 279.

¹⁵¹ Jacob L. Vigdor, *From Immigrants to Americans: The Rise and Fall of Fitting in* (Lanham: The Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009) 28.

anxiety about ethnicity and racial balance became more intense. The anti-immigration feeling culminated in 1920s, when the Immigration Act was passed, when Ku Klux Klan was revived and when the popular pseudo-scientific nativist discourse divided Europeans into “races” – Nordics, Alpines, Mediterraneans and Jews. In the works of the most well-known advocates of nativism, Madison Grant or Lothrop Stoddard, the Nordics are regarded as a group that has a greater claim to American identity since they possess a common racial stock with the founders of the nation and that should not be mingled with other races.¹⁵² In consequence to these ideas, the concept of “whiteness”, which formerly included all Europeans, was redefined to encompass only the “old stock”. Immigrants that could not fit into this category became racial “Other”.

This increasing hostility towards ethnic minorities and the concern about the loss of white Anglo-Saxon supremacy is reflected in Fitzgerald’s novel. Gatsby’s ethnicity is never fully revealed; he represents, as Barbara Will asserts, “a mode of racial indeterminacy.”¹⁵³ The only indicator of his descent would be the original surname “Gatz” which he decided to replace by Anglo-Saxon sounding “Gatsby”. He rightly assumed that even if his uplift was legal, other people would question the ethical nature of his enterprise because of the original surname. “Gatz” has ethnic overtones due to the inflection which is characteristic for both German and Jewish names.¹⁵⁴ The hypothesis that the protagonist had Jewish ancestors cannot be excluded, but it is more likely that his father or grandfather had come from Germany because Gatsby attended a small Lutheran college when he was young and a Lutheran priest is invited for his funeral.

¹⁵² Ronald H. Bayor, *Race and Ethnicity in America: A Concise History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003) 145.

¹⁵³ Barbara Will, “*The Great Gatsby* and the Obscene Word,” *The Great Gatsby*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2010) 133.

¹⁵⁴ Gatsby’s original name “Gatz” seems to be derived from German “gacken” – to burble, prattle. Perhaps Fitzgerald chose this name on purpose, to indicate that Gatsby is a person whose speech is comical, unintelligible.

However, Gatsby deliberately chooses the side of “Other” by his association with immigrant crime, his “gonnegtion” with Meyer Wolfsheim. Jews were together with Italians the most deprecated group in the United States in the 1920s. Besides the traditional stereotypes of greedy, pushy, acquisitive, weak Jews; they were seen as rootless revolutionaries and were connected with Bolshevism and illegal enterprise, such as bootlegging.¹⁵⁵ The idea of international Jewish conspiracy to destroy Christian civilization was spread by the media. Even some prominent Americans expressed certain anti-Semitic ideas, for instance, the automobile magnate Henry Ford published a four-volume set entitled *The International Jew: The World’s Foremost Problem*, maintaining that Jews control the world’s finances.¹⁵⁶ Barbara Will suggests that it is “Wolfsheim’s crudely stereotyped, animalistic Jewishness that most seems to ‘taint’ Gatsby.”¹⁵⁷

Tom Buchanan, Daisy’s husband, tends to see Gatsby as “Other”, as not fully white, precisely because of his racial indeterminacy and his association with Jews. Tom appears as obsessed with ethnic divisions. He is a devoted reader of the nativist writing and draws his rhetoric from the book called “The Rise of the Colored Empires” which supports the idea that the increasing immigration to America will dilute the Nordic gene pool and cause degradation of the white race. “It’s all scientific stuff, it’s been proved,” he exclaims.¹⁵⁸ He thinks of himself as doubly white, as an Anglo-Saxon and also as a member of the “old money” class which he regards as a pinnacle of “whiteness”. He perceives Gatsby’s money as impure from the beginning. The people who enjoy the extravagance of Gatsby’s parties are also inclined to suspect their host of fraudulent acts,

¹⁵⁵ Bootlegging business was really run by men from recent immigrant groups, Italians, Jews, and Poles especially, “who were looking for economic opportunity and found traditional routes, legal or criminal, blocked by established entrepreneurs.” David E. Kyvig, *Repealing National Prohibition* (Kent: The Kent State University Press, 2000) 26.

¹⁵⁶ Bayor 148.

¹⁵⁷ Will 133.

¹⁵⁸ Fitzgerald 13.

for example of murder or of being a German spy during the war, although they do not know much about his original name and his bootlegging and other illegal activities. Even Nick himself does not believe that his neighbour comes from a rich and “white” family when he first meets him. He would have “accepted without question the information that Gatsby sprang from the swamps of Louisiana or from the lower East Side of New York,” places connected with non-whiteness and immigration.¹⁵⁹ It is evident that the “old money” class sees “new money” as something suspicious in the 1920s; something that does not “smell” right, something that must be based on corruption. For them, only inherited wealth is respectable, in contrast to the time of Franklin when inherited privilege was not the merit to attain eminence.

According to Will, Tom is disturbed by the fact that Gatsby “signals the vanishing of whiteness into indeterminacy, and thus threatens the whole economic, discursive, and institutional structure of power supporting the social distinctions and hierarchies at work in *The Great Gatsby*.”¹⁶⁰ Tom repeatedly uses ethnic insults as a means to degrade his rival. At first, he calls Gatsby “Mr. Nobody from Nowhere” and then, as Peter Slater points out, he attempts to associate him with miscegenation.¹⁶¹ When he finds out that his wife has an affair with Gatsby, Tom complains: “Nowadays people begin by sneering at family life and family institutions and next day, they’ll throw everything overboard and have intermarriage between black and white,”¹⁶² as if he was more outraged because Daisy is in love with a “not quite white” person than because of the fact that she is unfaithful to him. Nick regards these remarks as irrelevant, as “impassioned gibberish,”¹⁶³ but he is also somewhat sensitive towards ethnic difference. Whenever he notices some physical

¹⁵⁹ Fitzgerald 49.

¹⁶⁰ Will 134.

¹⁶¹ Peter Gregg Slater, “Ethnicity in *The Great Gatsby*,” *Twentieth Century Literature* 19.1 (Jan. 1973): 54.

¹⁶² Fitzgerald 130.

¹⁶³ Fitzgerald 130.

distinction or mannerism, he mentions it, and he classifies people according to their original nationality, although they might have become Americans long time ago. Thus, the reader's attention is drawn to a scrawny Italian child, a Finnish servant, a young Greek Michaelis, three modish negroes, a group of Southeastern Europeans with "tragic eyes and short upper lips,"¹⁶⁴ and of course to Meyer Wolfsheim, whom Nick quite stereotypically depicts as a small, flat-nosed Jew with large head and hairy nostrils.

The Great Gatsby reflects that history indeed brought something new and unexpected - the influx of people who are not fully "white", because of the narrowing definitions of "whiteness", and who use various, sometimes very shady schemes to get rich.¹⁶⁵ This fact troubles those who regard themselves as the "old stock", such as Tom, but even Nick, and their notions of Americanism. Nativism, the anti-immigrant sentiment and also the disillusionment with the efficacy of individual effort weakened the authority of the traditional myth of the self-made man; people started to create themselves in a different way than it was before, using different means. This chapter implies that Gatsby's dream is not merely a corrupted version of Franklin's; but that it may be perceived as a new structure. It is not as much the product of the past as it is a product of the early twentieth-century civilization.

¹⁶⁴ Fitzgerald 69.

¹⁶⁵ I do not mean to imply that only immigrants were involved in the illegal activities, such as bootlegging.

4 Conclusion

Jay Gatsby clearly intended to become the traditional self-made man when he was a little boy in North Dakota since he decided to imitate the advancement of the most famous purveyor of success, Benjamin Franklin. However, he immediately discovered that Franklin's model of virtuous uplift was no longer applicable, as it is apparent in his schedule; he completely left out most of the recommended virtues and started to concentrate on the enhancement of the physical image and elocution instead. Even this youthful act shows that Gatsby's dream would be the product of his time; the age of materialism, consumerism and the fragmentation of culture, which was anticipated by Henry Adams, and also the age when the anxiety about ethnicity was most evident on the surface of national life.

It is difficult to compare Franklin's dream which encompasses the free pursuit of personal and social growth and his exemplary, positive self with Gatsby's fragmented personality and his vision which is connected with opposing concepts, such as materialism, pragmatism, idealism and romantic love. Furthermore, Fitzgerald's hero with his ethnic surname and his association with Jews stands more on the side of immigrants and gangsters, the "Other" Americans. Gatsby's dream of perfect love, or maybe the idea of himself that shared a moment out of time with Daisy, which he pursues through the instruments of fraud is perhaps not a part of American history related to Founding Fathers, but a part of a "new" history which started to be written after the rupture occurred, after the World War I.

The comparison of Franklin and Gatsby demonstrates that the theme of Fitzgerald's novel is not really a "withering" or "collapse" of the American Dream, as Bewley puts it, but rather a transformation of the concept. Fitzgerald shows that Gatsby, whose vision is influenced by commercialism and pop-culture as well as by romantic existentialism, wants

too much; both the dream and its realization, which has a tragic outcome for him. However, the author does not criticize the form of Gatsby's aspiration after his death; he situates it in the chain of likeness with other versions of the American Dream and keeps it alive. He implies that the essential aspect of the American Dream, the belief in possibility, which connects the Dutch sailors who discovered Long Island, Franklin and Gatsby, cannot collapse since "tomorrow we will run faster, stretch our arms farther...and one fine morning——”¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁶ Fitzgerald 182.

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