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# The Great Gatsby

—An Analysis of the Novel's Initial Public Reception—

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## Abstract

The first publication of *The Great Gatsby* was not a commercial success. In reference to a letter from Edith Wharton to F. Scott Fitzgerald, the following paper compares Wharton's comments on *The Great Gatsby* to America's initial reception of the novel. This paper further explores the *Great Gatsby*'s depiction of prohibition, white supremacy and post-war trauma and how America's reaction to the 1925 novel resonated with Edith Wharton's correspondence.

## Introduction

In 1925, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* sold less than 22,000 copies. Fitzgerald's careful account of American social history, framed within the structure of a thwarted romance was too close to the American lives of the 1920s to be appreciated by the era. The following essay provides an analysis of a letter sent to Fitzgerald from the acclaimed American author Edith Wharton. This analysis will examine whether sections of Wharton's correspondence, shared a resonance with the 1920s American experience of prohibition, white supremacy, and post-war trauma, and how these events which were depicted in *The Great Gatsby*, actually contributed to the novel's initial reception.

## Background

Fitzgerald and Wharton first met at Scribner's New York publishing house in 1923. Wharton was born into a wealthy New York aristocratic family, spent a

great deal of time in Europe, and needless to say had quite a different upbringing than the middle class Minneapolis roots of Fitzgerald. The Roaring Twenties for the 24-year-old Fitzgerald started in New York with the immediate success of his first novel, *This Side of Paradise*. Celebrating in 1920s style, Fitzgerald and his wife Zelda, symbolized a generation (Brucoli & Smith, 1974), which drank hard, lived on credit and actively participated in what was described as seriously riotous socializing (Brucoli & Smith, 1981). By 1925, Fitzgerald and Wharton were both living as expatriates in France. Thirty-four years older than Fitzgerald, Wharton had already won the Pulitzer Prize for her novel, *The Age of Innocence*. The context of the novel drew on Wharton's own background: 50 years prior to the age of Gatsby. In July of 1925, as a thank you for a first edition of *The Great Gatsby*, Wharton invited Fitzgerald to her suburban Paris home. (Brucoli & Smith 1981; Campbell, n.d.). Preceding the meeting Wharton wrote to Fitzgerald, "I am touched at your sending me a copy, for I feel that to your generation, which has taken such a flying leap into the future, I must represent the literary equivalent of tufted furniture & gas chandeliers" (Fitzgerald, 1956, p. 309). Wharton's use of "flying leap" and "your generation" suggest reference to the documented antics of Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald. According to Fitzgerald's biographer Turnbull, Scott and Zelda's adventures included running hand in hand, in and out of traffic, down a crowded New York 57th Street, or going to a party with one of them on the roof of a taxi and the other on the hood (Turnbull, 1962, pp. 109–110). The escapades of the ultimate "Sheik" and "Flapper" (the Fitzgeralds) certainly represented a generation far removed from Edith Wharton.

## Prohibition

After Wharton recognized the obvious generation gap, her letter went on to express her disjointed feeling for the novel's drug store tycoon, Jay Gatsby:

My present quarrel with you is only this that to make Gatsby really great, you ought to have given us his early career (not from the cradle — but from his visit to the yacht, if not before) instead of a short resume of it. That would have situated him, & made his final tragedy a tragedy instead of a "fait divers" for the morning papers (Fitzgerald, 1956, p. 309).

According to the *New York Times* archives, the headlines of the early 1920s spoke of a young nation adjusting to the aftermath of World War One; the influence of the American mafia approached powerful heights, and at the same time, the whole country vibrated under the siege of prohibition. With such factual diversity in tandem, the sudden transformation from boat-hand James Gatz to the drug store tycoon/bootlegger Jay Gatsby seems entirely plausible. The quarrel that Wharton wrote about in her letter was not one to be taken up with Fitzgerald, but indicated the ever-growing chasm between Wharton and her homeland. In *Edith Wharton's, Letters from the Underworld* by Candace Waid, several exchanges are cited between Wharton and author, Henry James. James often criticized Wharton's work as lacking a sense of place, and commented that though Wharton was internationally well traveled; she was limited in her first-hand knowledge of America (Waid, 1991, p. 5). Having spent most of her childhood in Italy and France, Wharton declared in her unpublished autobiography that from the age of ten she never felt "otherwise as an exile in America" (Waid, 1991, p. 5). During the First World War Wharton played an active role as a volunteer with relief agencies in Europe ("Edith Wharton, 75," 1937). Being away from America before and after World War One, Edith Wharton lacked the historical context which created *The Great Gatsby*. The scaffolding of prohibition gave Fitzgerald all he needed for the character of James Gatz. Gatz's desire to get rich quick, his time in the trenches where he mixed with all social classes, and his knowledge as a boat-hand made the perfect resume for a character that earned his money in illegal alcohol sales.

## White Supremacy

Despite Wharton's benevolence abroad, her charity did not extend to ethnic groups at home. In her letter Wharton drew specific attention to Gatsby's friend and business connection, Meyer Wolfsheim as follows "it's enough to make this reader happy to have met your perfect Jew" (Fitzgerald, 1956, p. 309). The fact that Wharton used the "the perfect Jew" without hesitation, indicates the racial climate of the era. Several Fitzgerald scholars have claimed that mafia-linked Jewish New Yorker Arnold Rothstein inspired the character of Wolfsheim. Book Critic for America's National Public Radio, Maureen Corrigan, believes that Wolfsheim symbolized the growing anti-immigration sentiment of the era.

From the 1880s, New York experienced a great influx of non-English speaking immigrants with darker complexions. Several native-born Americans did not trust the motives of these foreigners and furthermore often resented the financial success of such newcomers (Corrigan, 2014, p. 92). Perhaps Wharton's use of the "perfect Jew" is explained best by Ammons, "Wharton wrote as a raced writer: given her class and historical context, she wrote about what she understood from her experience of the era" (Ammon, 1995, p. 82). Wharton's cultural biases resonate with the historical and continued development of ethnic tensions in America, and examples of these tensions were carefully noted by Fitzgerald in the tale of James Gatz.

## Post-war Trauma

Wharton's experience of *The Great Gatsby* expressed further incredulity: "but the lunch with Hildesheim, (Wolfsheim in 1st edition of *The Great Gatsby*) and his every appearance afterward, make me augur still greater things" (Fitzgerald, 1956, p. 309). Wharton's inability to appreciate the context of the story is comparable to the naivety of *The Great Gatsby* narrator, Nick Carraway. Following the end of his wartime duty, Nick returned to the American Midwest, with a need to be validated for his service (Morris, 2015). Instead he found disappointment in post-war America's inability "to stand at some sort of moral attention forever" (Fitzgerald, 1925, p. 1). He recounts his participation in the counter raids of France, as enjoyable (Fitzgerald, 1925 p. 6) with no reference to the horrors of trench warfare or hand-to-hand battle. In what suggests a state of posttraumatic stress (Morris, 2015) Nick moved to New York, became a bonds man, and eventually part of Gatsby's grand plan.

Nick agrees to accompany Gatsby to New York City, and together they break bread with baseball gangster incarnate, Wolfsheim. Fascinated and full of disbelief, Nick ponders on the makings of Wolfsheim:

The idea staggered me. I remembered, of course, that the World Series had been fixed in 1919, but if I had thought of it at all I would have thought of it as a thing that merely happened, the end of some inevitable chain. It never occurred to me that one man could start to play with the faith of fifty million people — with the single-mindedness of a burglar blowing a safe (Fitzgerald,

1925, p. 73).

Nick's astonishment and assessment of Wolfsheim is childlike, and not unlike Wharton's distrust of Gatsby. Nick represents a man far too damaged by the realities of war to realistically consider the underpinnings that made men like Wolfsheim and Gatsby. He orders highballs with Gatsby and Wolfsheim "in a well-fanned forty-second street cellar," (Fitzgerald, 1925, p. 69). It is within this context that Gatsby meets the wealthy Tom Buchanan, husband of Gatsby's former lover, Daisy Fay-Buchanan. According to Lawson-Nickenzie, a 1922 Manhattan drugstore existed on the corner of Kenare and Mulberry, and in the basement resided a speakeasy known as the Saw Dust Inn (Lawson-Nickenzie, 2016). The question of whether the origins of the Saw Dust Inn would have affected the character of Nick is insoluble, but it could have satisfied Wharton's doubts and need to augment the historical context which created Jay Gatsby. The fact that the Saw Dust Inn stood and served Americans, who inspired the fictionalized characters of men like Tom Buchanan and Nick Caraway, meant there was a demand for men like Wolfsheim. Wolfsheim needed men like Gatsby, and Gatsby needed lost souls like Nick. In search of belonging in a world turned asunder by war, Nick Carraway and in fact James Gatz were easy prey in the 1920s underground economy depicted in *The Great Gatsby*.

## Conclusion

*The Great Gatsby* asked many questions to its readership; questions that involved all classes and walks of life, questions cleverly hidden within the folds of prohibition, white supremacy, and the post-war trauma of World War One. Wharton's letter to Fitzgerald was not fueled with questions about flappers and sheiks, the immigrant experience, or the demobilized soldier, or the illegal sale of alcohol. Wharton's inability to grasp the climate that made 1920s America is comparable to the innocence of Americans like Nick who drank highballs in speakeasies, but never interrogated the origins of his drink. The resonance between Wharton's letter and America's reception of *The Great Gatsby* resides in detachment. Wharton's letter represents a person estranged from her native land, and not interested in reading between the lines. *The Great Gatsby's* initial

commercial failure signifies an America in denial to the business of bootlegging, racism, and traumatized soldiers. Neither the letter of the Pulitzer Prize winning Wharton, nor the commercial reception of 1920s America resonate with *Publishers Weekly* (as cited in Publishers Weekly, January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2016), that listed *The Great Gatsby* as one the best-selling novels of 2015.

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