Research Journal of English Language and Literature (RJELAL)
A Peer Reviewed (Refereed) International Journal
Impact Factor 6.8992 (ICI) http://www.rjelal.com;
Email:editorrjelal@gmail.com ISSN:2395-2636 (P); 2321-3108(O)

Vol.7.Issue 4. 2019 (Oct-Dec.)

RESEARCH ARTICLE

INTERNATIONAL STANDARD SERIAL NUMBER INDIA
2395-2636 (Print):2321-3108 (online)

"BROODING ON THE OLD, UNKNOWN WORLD" – SHADOWS OF EPIC HEROISM IN THE UNHEROIC WORLD OF F. SCOTT FITZGERALD'S *THE GREAT GATSBY*

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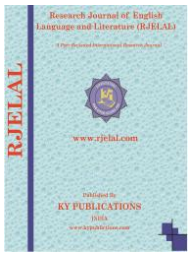
doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.74.50



ABSTRACT
The literary tradition of epic poetry has been a major influence on the shaping of the western canon, as the elements of Homeric epics have been reinvented as recurring motifs in several novels down the ages. In The Great Gatsby, F. Scott Fitzgerald situates the tropes and motifs of epic poems in the modern age, delineating the failure of epic heroism in an unheroic age. This paper explores the parallels between the novel F. Scott Fitzgerald and the Homeric epics, focusing on the figure of Jay Gatsby as the failed Odysseus, whose flawed heroism ultimately culminates in disenchantment. The paper also highlights the impossibility of epic heroism in a consumerist world antithetical to romance, although governed by human desires that remain unaltered across the centuries.
Keywords: Homeric epic, Jazz Age, American dream, Consumerism.

"Take out of any old poem, history book, romance or legend (for instance, Geoffrey of Monmouth, or Don Belianis of Greece), those parts of story which afford most scope for long descriptions. Put these pieces together, and throw all the adventures you fancy into one tale. Then take a hero you may choose for the sound of his name, and put him into the midst of these adventures. There let him work for twelve books; at the end of which you may take him out ready prepared to conquer, or to marry; it being necessary that the conclusion of an epic poem be fortunate."

Alexander Pope, *A Receipt to Make an Epick Poem*

One of the earliest genres of the western literary tradition, the Homeric epics plays a key role in the conception of multiple literary works down the ages, as its tropes and themes percolate into the substratum of the western literary scene. One the most important instances of such generic transformations may be traced back to *The Great Gatsby*, the modern romance by F. Scott Fitzgerald, where a sense of strong idealism, boundless optimism, and single minded pursuit of destiny from the Hellenic epics manifest themselves in the deliciously decadent and vividly amoral Roaring Twenties. Fitzgerald famously labelled the 1920s as the "Jazz age", a moniker that succinctly captures the shimmering ethereality of the "sea-change of faces and voices and colour under the constantly changing light" (Fitzgerald p45). In *The Great Gatsby,* Fitzgerald flawlessly captures the failure of a heroic endeavour in an unheroic world characterized by the corruption of the American Dream.

Ever since its inception, the foundations of America have been cemented by values and principles that are thoroughly Christian. The United States Declaration of Independence clearly enunciates the Christian morality that was operative in its formulation: "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." However, Fitzgerald's impression of The United States of America is far removed from the Puritan vision of the "Promised Land" ordained by the "word of God" to be a land of immense prospects. In the Roaring Twenties, an almost bacchanalian exhilaration enveloped the nation as the economic prosperity brought with it a life of excess, an unanchored and directionless existence that often culminated into discontent and disenchantment. In absence of the Christian *pietas* of the early settlers, the Jazz Age was immersed in the "worship of the bitch goddess success", (James p234) as the corruption of the American Dream inevitably engenders moral degeneration, as reflected in Fitzgerald's novel. As a result, in the world of *The Great Gatsby,* Jordan Baker cheats at golf, Myrtle Wilson indulges in adultery, and Tom and Daisy spend a monotonous existence as the "smashed up things and creatures and retreated back into their money or vast carelessness" (Fitzgerald p191). With the gradual erosion of moral and ethical values, the ephemeral world of Fitzgerald's novel seems to regress into a burlesque of the Hellenic culture, where honour is synonymous with reputation, and affluence is a remedy for guilt.

In Book IX of *The Odyssey*, Homer provides his readers with a disconcerting description of the lotophagi, who exist in a state of perpetual intoxication and indolence:

> "Lotus-eaters
>
> who had no notion of killing my companions, not at all,
>
> they simply gave them the lotus to taste instead ...
>
> Any crewmen who ate the lotus, the honey -sweet fruit,
>
> lost all desire to send a message back, much less return,
>
> their only wish to linger there with the Lotus-eaters,
>
> grazing on lotus, all memory of the journey home
>
> dissolved forever."
>
> (Homer IX.103-110)

Odysseus's description of the languid and apathetic lotus-eaters may be appropriated to describe the lackadaisical and supine individuals portrayed in *The Great Gatsby*, who inhabited the "slender riotious island" (Fitzgerald p7) of Long Island. Although the island of West Egg transforms itself into the rocky shores of Ithaca for the war-ravaged and lovesick modern-day Odysseus Jay Gatsby, the landscape of the novel focalized through Nick Carraway is reminiscent of the "dead land"(Eliot 1.2) strewn with "stony rubbish" (Eliot 1.20) depicted in T.S. Eliots's *The Waste Land.* In the age of consumerism and superficiality, the rolling "fields of the Republic" (Fitzgerald p193) have deteriorated into a "valley of ashes" (Fitzgerald p26) – the modern Ithaca is no longer just a "rugged island slanting down to the sea", it is an "arid land"(Eliot 1.425) where the shameless pursuit of money, lust and gluttony by the capitalist populace seems to parody the pursuit of *Kleos* by epic heroes of antiquity. The eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleberg thus become a symbol for the all-seeing eye of Zeus, who disinterestedly observes the degeneration of mankind in an age where "God" is an obsolete concept:

> "'God sees everything,' repeated Wilson.
>
> 'That's an advertisement,' Michaelis assured him."
>
> (Fitzgerald p170)

The meaninglessness of existence in Fitzgerald's unheroic world is further highlighted by Gatsby's summer parties, where the guests "conducted themselves according to the rules of behavior associated with amusement parks" (Fitzgerald p45). The Bakhtinesque carnival and saturnalia that characterized Gatsby's party seem to mirror the torpor and avarice of the parties at the house of Telemachus, as his grandiose mansion seems to be a descendant of Milton's "Pandemonium", which Robert Roulston describes as "a fantasy land as bizzare as Disney World, Trump Tower and William Randolph Hearst's San Simeon" (Roulston 1995). Through the elegiac narrative of Nick Carraway, the epic narrator of Fitzgerald's dark

parody, the superficiality of Gatsby's world is sharply contrasted against the heroic code it attempts to emulate. This artificiality is also evident in the voice of the narrator: unlike Homer's bards who, inspired by the muses, voiced the unmitigated truth, Nick Carraway's uncertainty and lack of commitment undermines his narratorial authority. A sense of unreality reigns over West Egg: inspired by "Midas and Morgan and Maecenas" (Fitzgerald p6), Nick plays the equivocator in a world lacking in moral absolutes.

"There are in English Literature two chief versions of the hero," writes David Parker:

> "The first kind of hero is the one whose prototype we find in medieval romance and ancient epic: an idealist, loyal to some transcending object, and relentless in his quest for it… the second kind, though doubtlessly developed from the first, is in sharp contrast: if he has a quest, it is essentially an inward one. Circumstances compel him to explore his own being, to discover and perhaps modify his own identity." (Parker 2008)

In *The Great Gatsby*, the two types of heroes as delineated by Parker are seamlessly fused in the character of Jay Gatsby. In the novel, Gatsby emerges as the archetypal Odysseus: a war-ravaged hero on a quest to reunite with his beloved. In Fitzgerald's modern epic, however, the distance traversed by the epic hero is measured through time and experience. Not unlike Odysseus, Gatsby also relies on deception and manipulation to achieve his ends; however, Fitzgerald's modern Odysseus is revealed as self-centeredness masquerading as heroic vision.

The various speculations that surround the figure of Gatsby – "he was a German spy during the war," (Fitzgerald p48) or "he's a nephew or a cousin of Kaiser Wilhelm's," (Fitzgerald p36) also seem to echo Nestor's observation regarding the return of Odysseus: "Who knows if he will return someday to take revenge on all their violence? Single-handed perhaps or with an Argive army at his back?" (Homer III. 349) Not unlike the divine intervention that assisted Odysseus on his quest to return to Ithaca, Gatsby's quest for wealth and social approval is also aided by deities of the world of materialism: millionaire mining tycoons like Dan Cody and gangsters like Meyer Wolfsheim. However, in this sinister burlesque of the Homeric epics, the modern epic hero's quest is inevitably terminated by disenchantment: unlike Penelope, Daisy Fay does not wait for Gatsby to return, as she chooses convenience and comfort over loyalty in a world enveloped by reckless insincerity. Gatsby's self – aggrandizement has been a recurrent motif throughout the novel: he disparages Tom's love for daisy as merely "personal", implying that his love is on a far higher, ideal plane. The reality, on the other hand, portrays Gatsby as a dishonest bootlegger who seeks to buy love. Thus, the epic hero of the unheroic world is reduced to an American Everyman: whatever is 'great' about Gatsby is obscured by his unremitting selfishness and blatant disregard for humanity.

Another parallel that may be drawn between Gatsby and Odysseus pertains to their demise. The death of Odysseus, although not depicted in *The Odyssey,* is alluded to in the prophecy of Tiresias: "And at last your own death will steal upon you …/ a gentle, painless death, far from the sea it comes…" (Homer XI. 677-678). The death of Gatsby, not unlike Odysseus, is also death by water: Nick discovers his body on a pneumatic mattress floating in the swimming pool:

> "A small gust of wind that scarcely corrugated the surface was enough to disturb its accidental course with its accidental burden. The touch of a cluster of leaves revolved it slowly, tracing, like the leg of compass, a thin red circle in the water." (Fitzgerald 173)

The plight of the modern man in a thoroughly dehumanized world is succinctly portrayed in Matthew Arnold's *Dover Beach*:

> "Ah, love, let us be true
>
> To one another! for the world, which seems
>
> To lie before us like a land of dreams,

So various, so beautiful, so new,

Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,

Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;" (Arnold 29-34)

Thus, in Fitzgerald's novel, an epic quest can culminate only in disillusionment, as the noble achievements of the heroes of antiquity cannot be recreated in the waste land of capitalism and consumerism, where human values are terminated at their inception. However, the epic that is the *The Great Gatsby* convinces its reader that Gatsby's capacity for illusions is poignant and heroic, in spite of the banality of his aspirations and the worthlessness of the object of his dreams. In the closing passage, there is a vision of America as the continent of lost innocence and lost illusions: a vision of "a fresh, green breast of the new world," that heralded the early Dutch settler– "something commensurate to his capacity for wonder" (Fitzgerald 192). However, for Gatsby, there was no continent to wonder at: in the wasteland where the wheels of destruction are in the hands of the rich and careless, Gatsby's tale remains a dark burlesque of an epic, obscured by the sterility of the unheroic world that surrounds it.

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