

The Great Gatsby: Siren Voice of Capitalism and the Entrapped

Jalal Farzaneh Dehkordi¹, Mohammad Amin Mozaheb²

¹Assistant Professor in English, Department of Foreign Languages, Language Center, Imam Sadiq University, Iran

²Assistant Professor in TEFL, Department of Foreign Languages, Language Center, Imam Sadiq University, Iran

***Corresponding Author:** Jalal Farzaneh Dehkordi, Assistant Professor in English, Department of Foreign Languages, Language Center, Imam Sadiq University, Iran

ABSTRACT

*The Great Gatsby as an epitome of the jazz age novel, reflects the socio-political conditions of America at 1930s. Although the novel is a melodrama based on a passionate love-story, it depicts the society of United States at the climax of its technological progress and increasing wealth. Clearly, these two characteristics which are the consequences of the capitalism, as a socio-economic school, had changed the Americans' lifestyle to a large degree. The change in social values, interaction between the people, family relations; also the yawning gap between the social classes are the consequences of such monetary and technologic progress. In this article, after the study of some characteristics of capitalism as a socio-economic school and the reasons of its formation, the influence of its strategies on the people's lives in *The Great Gatsby* will be studied. Then, by the analysis of the characters' behavior in the novel the way that they are assimilated by the capitalist society will be put under consideration. It will be also shown that even Fitzgerald himself was coopted by the social values of American capitalistic society.*

Keyword: *The Great Gatsby, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Capitalism, Social Values, Co-option*

INTRODUCTION

The reading of F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby* provokes a sense of melodrama in the readers' mind. The novel's urbane ambiance, the love stories that are reflected in the flashbacks, the jazz age extravaganza, and the mysterious Gatsby who is in the love of the *fame fetal* of the story construct the melodramatic characteristics of the novel. All these traits show that a large number of readers could enjoy the reading of such a novel. However, it is worth mentioning that the novel although a popular one, represents the social problems of an age which is changing very fast and its people should adapt themselves with the very furious changes of the age. So, the novel should be considered as a piece which reflects the history of jazz age in its very candid way; a society changed with the progressive technology and industry and the middle class people looming large everywhere in the social milieu. The social milieu of the novel, although it depicts the affluent, is more about the damage that the affluent have inflicted on the social values. So, beyond the love story of the novel exists a socio-political image that can be traced through the melodrama of the novel. As Patricia

Bizzell mentions, there is a sort of absence of "authentic orthodoxy" in *Great Gatsby*. This absence according to Bizzell besides showing the lack of Christianity in a developing materialist society produces a new "theoretical bridge between the absent (ideal, spiritual) and the material planes" (774). However, Bizzell considers the America as a society in which the American capitalist democratic ideology is prevalent and this ideology is signified in the tycoon protagonist of the novel.

Emphasizing the dominance of capitalism as the ideology of the novel, an idea that Fitzgerald himself was not aware of, shows the fact that the new orthodoxy needs to build its new system of morality and as again Bizzell mentions "wealth" and not "orthodoxy" mediates between the citizens and their ideal behavior. Retelling this idea, Bernard Tanner by considering *Great Gatsby* a *tour de force* and a parody of the story of Jesus Christ, endorses the idea of a new orthodoxy which is replacing the authentic orthodoxy of Christianity. Tanner even believes that the way *Great Gatsby* is written is somewhat like the parody of James Joyce in *Ulysses*. In other words if Joyce is mourning for the forgotten values of chivalry in Britain,

Fitzgerald's *Great Gatsby* is a sort of threnody for a society which has forgotten its God and now the "gigantic" eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg look at the people around instead of God.

By considering the damage which is inflicted to the Christian moralities and by the study of the social values of a society which is based upon money and wealth it can be said that "capitalism" as a general trend in the American economy has become the dominant ideology of the American society especially in Fitzgerald's novel. Clearly, the study of the general characteristics of capitalism and the attempt to trace them in the novel will help the reader understand the socio-political dimension of *The Great Gatsby*. Moreover, by considering the way that Fitzgerald eulogizes Gatsby, Fitzgerald's passion for the American dream will be studied in this article. This article, however, wants to study the scale of Fitzgerald's inclination towards American dream and the way he is co-opted by the capitalistic values.

CAPITALISM AND ITS CHARACTERISTICS

Capitalism is a term defined in the domain of political economy. In other words capitalism stresses on a sort of economy which is based on more production and much benefit in the society. In his book, *Capitalism; a Very Short Introduction*, James Fulcher, adumbrates the technical and industrial enterprise of the Scots in cotton industry as a sample event in the progress of capitalist production. It is clear that the cotton industry of Scots which was set up with an initial capital of £1,770, in 1795, and achieved a return on capital of over 30% only after 30 years could be considered a very beneficial investment. It was very surprising that 40 years later this business accumulated a £22,000 capital for the investors and by 1880, only 50 years after the establishment of their cotton industry the Scots accumulated a £88,000 capital (Fulcher, 5). Clearly, this huge increase in the capital of the industrial cities which was continued by the investment of the newcomers changed the entire scenery, social system, and the cultural patterns of the era. Noticeably, the interest in more profit led to the investment on the new machinery and the employment of many wage workers. The child workers, the wage laborers and the changing green environment of the big cities into an industrial one is manifested through the Romantic and early-Victorian writers of the era such as Charles Dickens and Wordsworth.

In fact, the economic changes which were the result of the industrial revolution made a great

change in the lifestyle of the people and as it was explained, Capitalism more than being an economical term or school became a social and political term. That is why Allan McLean and Alistair McMillan, in their *Concise Dictionary of Politics*, consider the term Capitalism a relative latecomer. They maintain that Marx as a critical philosopher of his age preferred to use the two expressions the capitalist mode of production or bourgeois society instead of Capitalism (62). This mode of production, evidently, involves at least three major factors: 1. Employer (investors) 2. Wage workers and 3. Factories. The investors as the employers of the wage workers logically considered their profit. Naturally, the wage workers were also considering their own rights. They wanted to work less and be paid more. Furthermore, the factories, as new places which accommodated the wage workers for some hours a day, could be considered as highly disciplined places for more production. So, the capitalist mode of production introduced new dichotomies to the social life of man: the employers versus employees, the working places versus homes and working time versus leisure time. Undoubtedly, the capitalist mode of production's slogan of more profit, could be led to struggles between the employers and the workers:

Apart from the occasional heavy cost of new factories and new machinery, wages were the company's main costs. Its annual wage bill was over £35,000 by 1811 and over £48,000 by the mid-1830s. Wage costs were minimized not just by holding wage rates down but also by replacing craft workers with less skilled and cheaper labor, as the invention of automobile machinery made this possible. The cyclical instability of industry resulted in periodic slumps in demand, which forced employers to reduce wages and hours in order to survive (80).

The theory of class formation, however, is not the only result of the bourgeois mode of production. The class discrimination had existed in many societies before the capitalist era. The master and slave relations in feudal societies were a sort of class discrimination. Also, the exploitation of the people by the other men was prominent in other historical samples. However, the point at issue here was the Capital significance and its relation with the value based economy which Marx highlighted. Pekka Kosonen after rejecting the exploitation as the only characteristic of Capitalism maintains that

“what is decisive is that in Capitalism the capital relation and the law of value prevail” (371). Clearly, when the law of capital starts to prevail,

the spirit of competition is awakened. Kosonen shows a hierarchical classification for the method Capital is created.

**The Critique of Political Economy
the internal laws of capitalism - mode of realization
the internal nature of capitalism - competition
(‘capital in general - many capitals’)**

In his classification which is based on Marx’s ideas about the bourgeois mode of production, generally asserted in his *Das Capital*, it is the competition which is led to the capital in general. In *Werke* Marx and Engels explain the relation of competition and the capitalist mode of the competition as the following:

The immanent laws of capitalist production manifest themselves on the movements of individual capitals, where they assert themselves as coercive laws of competition and are brought home to the mind and consciousness of the individual capitalist as the directing motives of his operation (335).

According to the above quotation it can be assumed that many capitals or the petite capitals which make the whole capital of the society are gathered only through the process of the petite bourgeois productive activities. When the individual capitalist directs his motives, he tries to produce more not for the needs but, as Paul Sweezy defines capitalism, the production in capitalistic mode of production is only for the market (Lachmann, 48). So, the soul of competition obliges the factories to produce more and to sell more. Accordingly, the employees become the consumers. And the whole society enters a cycle of production and consumption. So, it can be deduced that in the capitalist society the dumb economic relations force the laborer to enter into a process of subjection. This process of subjection is quite different from the subjection of the slaves to the masters which was a political process. The subjection of laborer in a dumb way confines him in a vicious circle of work and holiday. In other words the laborer who has the power of buying different materials starts to believe in their necessity. These commodities start to define the meaning of life for him and he works more for buying and producing more at the same time.

THE APPLICATION

In a letter to Maxwell Perkins in April 1925, F. Scott Fitzgerald, expresses his worries about the publishing of *The Great Gatsby*. In that letter

Fitzgerald believes that maybe the women will not like the book because no significant woman exists in the story. Fitzgerald’s other concern is that the critics maybe will not be satisfied with the book because it is about the rich people and there is no trace of the villagers of *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* in the novel. Fitzgerald, however, was misjudging his novel. It seems that he did not know that the villagers of *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* have no place in the modern jazz age society of the United States which was moving forward in a very high speed to a very high technology. Fitzgerald was however unconscious about the fact that the grandsons of the villages of *Tess* are living in his novel. The point was that only the social relations were superficially changed and the new technology by renovating the old social relationships between the classes has changed the facade of the western culture.

Fitzgerald in his *Gatsby* had presented those social inequalities by putting the proletariat class in the margins of his narrative. In other words, although in his letter to Perkins he confesses that *The Great Gatsby* is about the rich people; by depicting their satiation and material affluence he shows their depressions and unorthodox flaws. The narrative of the novel however propels forward around two domains. One of them is the Valley of Ashes and the other New York suburbs with its luxurious mansions. At the beginning of the 2nd chapter of the novel these two domains and their very clear cut separation is explained explicitly:

About half away between West Egg and New York the motor road hastily joins the railroad and runs beside it for a quarter of mile, so as to shrink away from a certain desolate area of land. This is a valley of ashes – a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens; where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and, finally, with a transcendent effort of ash-grey men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air. Occasionally a line of grey cars crawls along an invisible track, gives

out a ghastly creak, and comes to rest, and immediately the ash-grey men swarm up with leaden spades and stir up an impenetrable cloud, which screens their obscure operations from the sight (p. 16).

Also, the domain of New York Suburbs, in the novel is divided into two parts; Gatsby's mansion "a factual imitation of some Hotel de Ville in Normandy" is located in West Egg. Also, among the white mansions of the East Egg exists the Buchanans' mansion. So, the geographical setting of the novel shows the three domains of ideologies and lifestyles. The West Egg is the residence of Gatsby a practical, new-comer, with an obscure character who gives parties. The East Egg is the domain of Tom and Daisy Buchanan, a pair who has inherited their whole wealth. Clearly, the social class tensions are shown in the explicit geographical divisions of the novel. The explanation of the social inequalities and looking at the psychological behavior of the characters in each domain will explain the great economic problems that the unrestrained industrial capitalism brought only about a decade after the writing of *The Great Gatsby*.

GATSBY A SOCIAL-CLIMBER, SON OF GOD AND VICTIM OF CAPITALISM

In a comparative study of the character and life of J. Gatsby and Jesus Christ, Bernard Tanner believes that in the story of *The Great Gatsby*, "Fitzgerald gives us his most outspoken allusion to the jazz-like parody of the life of Christ which he plays in a minor, sardonic key throughout the novel" (468). This idea is important in the reading of the character of J. Gatsby. Gatsby is a social climber who has reached from rags to riches by his illegal acts. Gatsby, who has abandoned "his parents named "shiftless and unsuccessful farm people", tries to become a gentleman in the social milieu of New York. But the abandoning of father is not the main technique that Fitzgerald uses for characterization of Gatsby. Fitzgerald introduces Gatsby "a son of God"; a Christ-like figure who instead of being a spiritual figure at the service of God becomes "at the service of a vast, vulgar, and meretricious beauty" (63). The process of his entrapment in the capitalist net is completed when he visits Dan Cody a fifty-year-old womanizer who could be separated from his money by the women. In his comparison between Gatsby's story and Jesus Christ, Tanner compares Dan Cody "the pioneer debauchee" to Saint John the Baptist, the religious teacher in the New Testament of the Bible who baptized

Jesus in the river Jordan (468). After being baptized, James Gatz becomes Jay Gatsby and enters in the service of his God's business of "vast, vulgar, and meretricious beauty".

Clearly, Gatsby, as it was mentioned before, does not belong to the social and economic class of Buchanans. He is a "nouveau riche" who has gained his money through the new culture of capitalism. As it was mentioned before, the establishment of the firms and factories and the development of them had separated the working hours and leisure time of the people. So, entertaining people became a great business itself. Gatsby's participation in the clandestine Wolfsheim's activities which some of them are obscurely introduced as lottery and alcoholic drinks business shows that he has made a gentleman of himself by participating in the immoralist and unrestrained capitalistic activities. In other words, although Gatsby himself is not taking part in his pleasure parties, he is a propagator of the culture of capitalism. In his parties barrels of alcohol are served, the people dance, become intoxicated and the parties continue to the dawn. The philosophy of giving parties although comes from the Gatsby's hope for the Daisy's participation even in one of them; shows the fact that people do appreciate such kind of parties and although people do not pay for taking part in Gatsby's parties, the entertainment business could be a profitable one during the jazz age.

From another point of view Gatsby's success in the clandestine activities that are generally related to the leisure time of the people comes from the capitalists' competition in increasing the amount of capital. Gatsby's whole interest and motivation for gaining much money and constructing a chateau in the West Egg is only for drawing Daisy's attention to his new lifestyle. Gatsby's great problem comes from his origin as a person of the lower class. In the first meeting of Gatsby and Daisy which has taken place in Daisy's home, Gatsby understands that his style of life as a penniless soldier is not enough for attaining Daisy's love. He is absorbed in the luxury and wealth of the household and tries to change his lifestyle.

But he [Gatsby] knew that he was in Daisy's house by a colossal accident. However glorious might his future as Jay Gatsby, he was at present a *penniless* young man without a past, and at any moment the invisible cloak of his uniform might slip from his shoulders...

He might have *despised* himself, for he had certainly had her under false pretenses. I don't mean that had traded on his phantom *millions*, but he had deliberately given Daisy a sense of security; he let her believe that he was a person from much the same *strata* as herself - that he was fully able to take care of her. He knew that Daisy was extraordinary ... She vanished into her *rich* house, into her *rich full life*, leaving Gatsby-nothing.

... Gatsby was overwhelmingly aware of the youth and mystery that *wealth* imprisons and preserves, of the freshness of many clothes, and of Daisy gleaming like silver safe and proud above the *hot struggles of the poor* (94-95). (Italics are mine.)

As the frequency of the words show in this passage of *The Great Gatsby*, Gatsby's encounter with Daisy is intermingled with the complete sense of inferiority complex. Gatsby is not rich and this is a boundary impossible to cross in a capitalist society. Because of the inferiority complex that the capitalist society imposes on him, Gatsby should enter the competition of gaining money. This competition, however, is not fair. He should move from the low levels of austerity to high levels of affluence. Competition in capitalist society makes him to enter a process through which he becomes a parody of Christ.

As Patricia Bizzell believes, throughout the capitalist society of United States, "Capitalism attempts to make the material world itself a bridge to the abstract world, wealth and orthodoxy will mediate between the citizen and the desired ideal behavior" (774). Stitching of the abstraction of love to the reality of money is impossible for Gatsby. He gains money in order to win Daisy's heart but in a catastrophic climax Tom Buchanan in Hotel Plaza's room succeeds to ruin Gatsby's reputation very easily. By calling Gatsby "Mr. Nobody from Nowhere" and considering his car "a circus wagon" Tom tries to prove that Gatsby is not noble and high born.

THE GREAT GATSBY, THE ADVOCATOR OF CO-OPTION OR RESISTANCE?

The class struggle of the different social strata of the American Jazz age was explained in the previous parts of the article. However, the question is "Is it possible for the characters of *The Great Gatsby* to change their social situation, resist against the prevalence and dominance of capitalism and find their voice in the novel? In other words, can Fitzgerald as an

American, who is compassionate towards American Dream, provide any way out of the capitalist society?

Gerald Graf a scholar of New-historicism in his article "Co-option" tries to find the possibilities and ways according to which the established system of power can co-opt their dissidents or even the citizens who are under their authority? (150) The word cooption however is more than controlling someone, in Merriam-Webster's collegiate Dictionary the verb co-opt has two meanings: to choose or elect as a member and to take in a group. It is clear that the word denotes not only the meaning of controlling people by the established power or ideology but also it denotes the acceptance or absorption of these people in the power establishment in equal situations.

The study of relations in *The Great Gatsby* shows that Fitzgerald cannot believe in such an idea. The first challenge shows itself in Tom Buchanan's confrontation with the Wilsons. The Wilsons are from a working class. Wilson works as a mechanic in a very scruffy garage and his desire is attaining Tom's car in order to repair and sell it for more profit. His life of austerity makes a slave of him. As Kosonen deduces from Marx's assertions, in contrast to Feudal society in which exploitation was based on an immediate force, in bourgeois society it is "the dumb compulsion of economic relations" that "completes the subjection of the laborer to the capitalist"(372). Consequently, Tom, as a bourgeois and capitalist, gives this right to himself to have love affair with a married woman of lower class and proves that he considers Wilson only as a subject to himself. And when he and Nick are at the Valley of Ashes and in Wilson's garage, he justifies his immoral action by calling the Wilsons' place awful to live.

'Terrible place, isn't it,' Said Tom, exchanging a frown with Doctor Eckleberg.

'Awful.'

'It does her good to get away'

'Does her husband object?'

'Wilson? He thinks she goes to see her sister in New York. He is so dumb he doesn't know he is alive.' (18)

The love relation between Tom Buchanan and Myrtle is also based on capitalist ideology which is hidden in Myrtle's assumptions about material living in America and especially in New York society. In the apartment, which is

provided by Tom for her, Myrtle explains the reasons of her absorption to Tom. She explains to Nick that in her trip from the valley of ashes to New York for spending the night with her sister, she sees Tom in the train and becomes infatuated with him. The reasons of Myrtle's infatuation are Tom's expensive clothes and his capitalist social position. Myrtle considers this sort of infatuation as a gate for attaining happiness and a weapon for coming upon transiency of life.

He had on a dress suit and patent leather shoes, and I couldn't keep my eyes off him... When we came into the station he was next to me, and his white-shirt front pressed against my arm... I was so excited that when I got into a taxi with him I didn't hardly know I wasn't getting into a subway train. All I kept thinking about, over and over, was "You can't live forever; you can't live forever." (24)

Interestingly, Myrtle accuses his husband as an incompetent family man only because he cannot earn lots of money. The dress imagery is repeated in Myrtle's accusations against Mr. Wilson when she exclaims that Mr. Wilson had "borrowed someone's best suit to get married in" (Ibid). So it can be said that Myrtle is co-opted with the capitalist system. She easily forgets her husband, considers him a useless man and cheats him.

The dress imagery and its relation with the material infatuation is also repeated in about Gatsby. Before his last taking-leave from Daisy, Gatsby is infatuated with Daisy's affluence hidden in Daisy's freshness of many clothes. Remarkably, the narrator's poetics for Gatsby's *conge d'amour* is replete with monetary and class struggle imagery. So, at the moment of his departure Gatsby is

...overwhelmingly aware of the youth and mystery that *wealth imprisons* and preserves of the freshness of *many clothes*, and of Daisy, gleaming like *silver*, safe and proud above the hot struggles of *the poor*.(95) (Emphases are mine)

When, after five years of separation, Gatsby returns to West Egg and buys a very luxurious mansion in Daisy's neighborhood, he tries to practice the same thing that Tom is committing in his relation with Wilsons. Gatsby chooses Nick Carraway as a mediator, invites Daisy to Nick's house indirectly and reminds her of their whole love-story. Then he brings Daisy to his home and tries to infatuate her with the luxury

of his house. The dress imagery which was seems to be a symbol of richness or poverty in the novel is repeated in Gatsby's house. Gatsby opens "two hulking patent cabinets" and exhibits "his massed suits and dressing-gowns and ties, and his shirts" which are "piled like bricks in stacks a dozen high". In a very flaunting gesture, Gatsby starts to throw the shirts before Nick and Daisy:

He took of a pile of shirts and began throwing them. One by one, before us, shirts of sheer linen, and thick silk and fine flannel, which lost their folds as they fell and covered the table in many-colored disarray. While we admired he brought more and the soft rich heap mounted higher – shirts with stripes and scrolls and plaids in coral and apple-green and lavender and faint orange, with monograms of Indian blue. Suddenly, with a strained sound, Daisy bent her head into the shirts and began to cry stormily. 'They're such beautiful shirts,' she sobbed ... (56)

Gatsby's act of drawing Daisy's attention to himself is parallel with Tom Buchanan's secret relation with Myrtle, and Daisy's act of being infatuated with Gatsby is parallel with Myrtle's infatuation. Both Gatsby and Tom are unwelcome intruders that destroy the others' family lives.

In the third chapter of the novel when Jordan Baker is motivated by Gatsby to ask Nick bring Daisy to his home, Nick is surprised by the strange coincidence that has put Daisy and Gatsby beside each other. But he is informed by Jordan that it has not been "a coincidence at all"; "Gatsby" has brought "that house so that Daisy would be just across the bay" (50). The whole story is based upon this fact that Gatsby cannot forget his lost love and tries to do everything to bring her back to his own life. However, this extraordinary behavior is not condemned by Nick, as the narrator of the novel or Fitzgerald. The only thing that can be heard is the chivalric approval of Gatsby's action which can be heard in the adulterous oriental song of the children which is rising through the hot twilight:

'I'm the sheikh of Araby.
Your love belongs to me.
At night when you're sleep
Into your tent I'll creep' (50)

Clearly, in the novel Gatsby is considered a victim of his American Dream and his behavior is not considered reprehensible. His chivalric act of waiting till the dawn at Daisy's window to

become sure that Tom will not bother her after the quarrel at Hotel Plaza and his rejection to escape from New York are considered as gallantry. Here and there in the novel the voices which praise Gatsby can be heard. When Gatsby's father comes to his home after Gatsby is murdered, the father do not reproach Gatsby for forsaking his family; instead, he believes that "if he'd lived, he'd of been a great man... He'd of helped build up the country" (107). Somewhere else in the novel, Nick compares Gatsby to the other characters of the novel calling them "a rotten crowd" and considers Gatsby as a person who is "worth the whole damn bunch put together" (99).

At the end of the novel you can only understand that the difference between Gatsby and the others is not his piety or moralistic actions; his only difference is that he cannot understand that he has walked into the trap of capitalism. And, when he springs the trap, he does not try to escape. In other words, instead of rejecting the whole game of capitalism, Gatsby starts playing the game and when Daisy and Tom give the game away Gatsby's whole idealism smashes.

The only person in the novel who does not accept to be fraudulent is Gorge Wilson the owner of a garage in the Valley of Ashes. Although, Tom considers Wilson a "dump" man who even "doesn't know he is alive", Wilson understands that his wife is cheating on him. He reminds Myrtle that "she might fool me [Wilson] but she may not fool God" (102). At the end of the novel, although Wilson knows that his wife has been unfaithful, he seeks revenge for the murder of his wife. Although his vengeance is a blind one, it has some elements of resistance against capitalist system. However, Wilson, exonerating himself from his seeming dumbness tells Michaelis that "I'm one of those trusting fellas and I don't think any harm to nobody, but when I go to know a thing I know it" (101).

CONCLUSION

As it was explained in this article the bourgeois mode of production is based on the competition not necessity of the produced materials. The petite bourgeoisie by the exploiting the wage workers tries to produce more goods. The necessity of producing more merchandises leads to the culture of consumerism.

This consumerism defines the life of the middle-class people of the society. In *The Great Gatsby* the moralistic values of the society are changed into the materialistic values, a form of consumerist culture which Gatsby tries to define himself by absorbing into that. Gatsby as a false prophet of the American Dream is a victim and victimizer. As a gangster and tycoon, Gatsby tries to be absorbed in the Capitalistic culture of the American society. This fake "son of God" at the end is drowned in the maelstrom of conflicting emotions which he has created himself. As an ignorant object of capitalistic society he shines and then fades away. The evaded issue is that Fitzgerald himself praises Gatsby's behavior. His eulogy at the end of the novel about Gatsby's believe in the green light the orgiastic future shows that the narrator of the novel is not aware of the fact that Gatsby beside being a victim is a victimizer. So, in political terminology of resistance it can be said that Fitzgerald himself is co-opted by American capitalist society.

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