

The Identity Crisis of the Modernist Era

Chase Huskey, English 428

Throughout the modernist time period, people tried to establish identity, whether it be individual or national identities. The struggles that mirror the struggle for identity are the women's rights movements and the animosity between whites and minorities. A modernist text that best emphasizes this issue is F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel, *The Great Gatsby*. In his book, *Writing Jazz*, Nicholas M. Evans links the issue directly with the novel by Fitzgerald by stating, "*Gatsby's* particular articulation of the desire for authentic identity and of anxiety of inauthenticity ... is not necessarily universal or timeless, but emerged in conjunction with twentieth-century modernity and its contradictions" (201). Not only does *The Great Gatsby* express the particular issue at hand, but according to Evans, this issue is solely identifiable with this time period. This "identity crisis" not only affects individuals in their personal struggles to discover themselves, but also affects groups of people in terms of discovering their true national identity. Fitzgerald's novel provides an excellent perspective for the reader to observe the struggles of at least one of the main characters as Nick Carraway acts as the first-person narrator of the story.

The Great Gatsby begins with Nick explaining to the reader, in reference to his narration of the novel, that he is "inclined to reserve all judgements" (Fitzgerald 5), yet he also states that "reserving judgements is a matter of infinite hope" and that "a sense of the fundamental decencies is parceled out unequally at birth" (6). These conflicting statements occur within only a page of one another and reveal a narrator who seems to be uncertain of where he stands on reserving or creating judgments as he states that he will try to look at people and situations in an unbiased view, yet comments that it is only a matter of hope and that the decency of individual people are not equal when one is born. This sort of reaction to judgment and decency make Nick appear to view himself as unequal and more privileged than the average person during this time. Because of the contrast of statements, the reader can see that the type of identity conflict Nick is going through is individual at this point in the novel, but national identity will become an issue for the narrator as well as the story continues.

Within the novel, US international identity is represented through four settings: New York City, the two peninsulas of Long Island (East Egg and West Egg), and the "Valley of Ashes" on the commuter train route between the two. In the second chapter of the novel, the reader is exposed to "the valley of ashes" which is the location that has the poorest atmosphere and is a byproduct of the Eggs and the actions of the people who live within them. Although the novel as a whole could be seen as a statement solely about American national identity as it critiques the American dream and whether it is dying or not; the Eggs as well as other locations such as the valley of ashes and New York City act as microcosms of nations as the people of each location differ in their overall identities as seen by fellow inhabitants or those who live in another Egg or town. The only poor people in the novel are shown to reside there which is reflected by the gray surroundings that lack the beauty seen in the other three locations in the novel. Although the valley of ashes is portrayed as poor and lacking the "decency" of the other three locations, it is the only setting that is straightforward in its portrayal of its identity. West Egg, East Egg, and New York City contain the same decay because of the effects of capitalism and moral crises on their populations; yet industrial dumping in the valley of ashes prevents any extravagant, sparkling illusion to be placed over the valley like in the cities although the cities are just as decayed as the gray valley itself.

The Eggs are the suburban communities where the illusions of comfort and wealth are most obvious. In the third chapter of *The Great Gatsby*, the distinguishing characteristics of people from West Egg and East Egg are explained. Both groups of people from the Eggs are rich, but the people from West Egg are "new money" while those from East Egg are the "old money." The newly rich do not have the manners of the experienced wealthy, but as Jay Gatsby is finally introduced in the novel, the lines between the two classes are blurred as he hosts a party at his mansion. Gatsby himself creates a new example of an identity crisis as he hosts a party that includes many East Eggers, yet it is hosted at his mansion in West Egg. The reader may already conclude that Gatsby has no concrete identity among any of the people from either Egg as this character is introduced.

The perversion of the American dream expressed through the characters of the novel provides insight into just how corrupted the national identities of the characters are. In the article "What is Americanism?" which was written during the modernist era, it is encouraged that "Americans should increase their emphasis upon the

principle implied in the foregoing, that the final standard of life, whether of individuals, of minor groups, or of nations is not material but moral.” The article continues discussing what true success is by stating,

The measurement of success of living, thus far, is the kind of people we are—not the kind of people that we all are, considering that whether we will or no we are collectively engaged in an adventure of realizing the potentialities of persons, and that these potentialities are realized in the highest degree, not in the most notable achievements of segregated personalities, but in the teamwork between persons which gives to each the most aid from all, and to all the most aid from each in the universal task of achieving higher human values. (“What is Americanism?” 485)

According to this article, Americanism is the national identity of all Americans as it should be. Moral achievements such as higher human values should be the standards for success, not material gains. Although capitalism is a huge part of the American society and dream, it has corrupted the environments of the characters in *The Great Gatsby*. Not only have their values and desires become strictly material, but morality has become almost nonexistent as it has become overshadowed by material gain and desire. The lack of true Americanism as defined and encouraged by the article shows just how misguided the people of the Eggs are in not only individual identity, but also national identity. They are striving for what they believe is the American dream, but their quest for it distorts their identities as Americans since the view of Americanism by some during the modernist era was one of moral growth instead of solely material growth.

However, there were opposing views to this “moral Americanism” as seen in a supplement to the “What is Americanism?” article that appeared only two months after the main article in March 1915. In this supplement, emphasis is put onto labor group representatives and Americanism is described in a way much similar to that of the way the characters of Fitzgerald’s novel would have most likely defined it. The quote “This is Americanism!” is used after the author continuously provides examples from America’s history to support his argument for the definition of the term. This definition is clearly stated as “To a lesser extent elsewhere, it is capitalism, but nowhere else, without an uprising, has it reached the perfection attained in the land the portals of which are guarded by the Statue of Liberty” (“What is Americanism? Supplement” 614). This view sees capitalism as the driving force for what the American dream truly is and could be used to support the claim that the characters in the novel have completely stable national identities regardless whether their individual identities are stable or not.

Another article that supports the idea that perhaps the national identities of the characters are stable is simply titled, “Nationalism.” In this article, S. Gale Lowrie writes that individuals, whether they be states or people, must conform to the greater nation. He quotes a man named Professor Holcomb who says that “A nation is a body of people united by a common sentiment of nationality.” Lowrie continues by writing that the nation “springs from a common heritage of memories and is a mutual feeling which binds members irrespective of differences in religion, economic interests, or social position” (Lowrie, 45). Although this argument does not speak for the concept of capitalism specifically, it suggests that nationalism and its true definition lies with the feelings of multiple individuals united together regardless of their individual identities.

Within the novel, the lack of a common social heritage drives the characters to erase and reinvent their identities and their pasts. The fourth chapter of Fitzgerald’s novel recalls the story of Jay Gatsby’s past in which Gatsby claims to be the son of wealthy, deceased parents and lists many accomplishments that he has done throughout the course of his life so far. Nick had first gotten the impression that Gatsby had a huge hope for the future, but the capitalist ideals expressed by Gatsby in this chapter quickly overshadow that aspect of his personality until the connection to Daisy Buchanan is revealed. Once Nick discovers that Gatsby is in love with Daisy, an aspect of happiness that is not material is introduced that is expressed through Jay Gatsby as a change described by Nick as “simply confounding” (94). As Nick recalls, Gatsby’s true name was once James Gatz before he changed it to become a yacht assistant to a man named Dan Cody. In fact James Gatz had dropped out of school and been a janitor prior to becoming Cody’s assistant. Later, Cody died and left Gatsby an inheritance, but Gatsby was unable to claim it due to Cody’s mistress interfering. From that day forward, Jay Gatsby decided to achieve the American dream and live a better life by becoming a successful and wealthy man, despite his earlier life which was quite the opposite.

As the novel continues, the reader learns that the luxurious parties that Gatsby holds for the wealthy of both West and East Eggs were only a ruse. Despite their capitalist appearances, they were only tools to acquire an immaterial desire: Daisy Buchanan. This revelation makes Jay Gatsby perhaps the greatest example of an identity crisis in the novel. Nothing the man says or does means what it seems. Not only has Gatsby changed his name,

public personality, and lifestyle; but everything he does now has double meanings. His quest for the American dream seems capitalist in nature, but it is for an immaterial purpose once that illusion is broken. His desire for wealth is a tactic used to achieve what he considers success, which is to win Daisy's heart. This type of success, although not exactly moral, is immaterial and supports the argument for Americanism being a moral standard of living. Although capitalism is a factor in Gatsby's success, it is not the driving force; therefore, it is not Americanism according to him.

The final moments of the novel begin with the death of Jay Gatsby. When Nick finds him floating dead in his own pool and muses about the world that Gatsby may have discovered if he had finally realized that his dream was a hopeless cause. The statement, "A new world, material without being real, where poor ghosts, breathing dreams like air, drifted fortuitously about" (Fitzgerald 169). Although Nick is literally describing the world Gatsby may have reluctantly discovered in his final moments, the text actually describes Gatsby as an individual as well. Although he sought the immaterial, he has become materialistic in the new world of West Egg. He had changed his name and was not real and now he was only a name, a ghost of who he once was during life. At the end of the novel, Nick regains sight of Americanism and moves back to the Midwest because of the lack of morals of the Eggs. The "body of people united as a nation" as described by Lowrie has broken as everyone moves their separate ways and now even "national" identities are in crisis.

Nick further raises this conflict between capitalism and morality in terms of national identity and Americanism at the end of the novel. By stating that Tom and Daisy "retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made," Nick creates a perspective that perhaps wealth can take the place of morality in defining the identity of an individual. The article and supplement titled "What is Americanism?" provides insight into an issue that was occurring back in the early twentieth century during the modernist era. As the United States was undergoing mass development and improvements following the First World War, it is easy to consider that a struggle between material wealth and morality would develop. The ego of the nation was also developing at this time as schools were teaching nationalistic ideas and had an "emphasis on citizenship" in which they taught the importance of being a good citizen (Pierce 119). Pierce also comments that this national growth was nothing new as nationalism had always "been conditioned by contemporary social, economic, and political thought" even before the Civil War (117). This conflicts with the view that Evans held decades later in which he stated that the issue of identity in the modernist era was not exactly timeless, but rather unique to this era in American history. Could the reaction of struggling between morals and material possessions really be a phenomenon that occurred only in this particular era of national growth? No, but the particular historical context raised the issue to prominence and sparked a modernist crisis of identity.

The issue of identity was perhaps such a historically-specific phenomenon because of the fact that the United States was still a young country and the First World War had been the first opportunity for them to enter the international arena. The identity of the nation as a whole seemed to reflect those of the individual identities that composed it, which supports the claim about unity among peoples by Lowrie in "Nationalism." The unity of peoples is also expressed in an article by Arthur Feiler, titled "Economic Nationalism," albeit in a different context. In his article, his discussion links the ideas of morality to the development of the capitalism of the country during this time period. According to him, the "spiritual attitude" of the country that included the idea of free trade became known as "economic nationalism" (Feiler 203). As the article continues, he explains that the nation still undergoes post-war problems twenty years after the First World War ended. However, America is not the only country enduring a deep sense of nationalism because of the war. According to Lowrie, national identity is formed by the union of individual identities. Feiler uses this idea to relate nationalistic emotion to the growth of state powers in the economy of the United States as well as the growth of private economic interests. As both types of identities develop, so does the capitalism of the country.

So how does *The Great Gatsby* engage and respond to the issue of identity in the modernist era? After analyzing the characters and locations of the text, the reader will undoubtedly notice the struggle between morality and materialism at least in the character of Jay Gatsby. His attainment of vast wealth and popularity are results of a quest for the heart of a woman named Daisy Buchanan who is also a key to the capitalist class. This particular series of actions parallels what Feiler was stating about capitalism taking root in the "spiritual attitude" of the nation in his article. Capitalism and material wealth may have been the major outcomes of both circumstances, but they had begun merely as factors in a quest for something immaterial. However, the character of Gatsby diverges from a parallel with America once one looks at their search for a place in the world. During the modernist era, the United States was still trying to find its place in the world especially since a large proportion

of the world fought in WWI. When the reader is exposed to Gatsby's life story and his search for a place in the world in the sixth chapter of the novel, he or she is introduced to a serious identity crisis that is not only individual, but also regional and national. Jay Gatsby is revealed to be going by a name that he was not born with and began his work life as a janitor then a yacht assistant, two jobs that rarely result in capitalist success. His parties in West Egg with East Eggers combine both "old money" and "new money" to expose a regional identity crisis as Gatsby does not identify himself as a member of either Egg's. As for the question of national identity, the four locations act as microcosms of nations themselves. The Eggs and New York City are revealed to be beautiful on the outside, but moral disaster areas as one digs deeper. The novel on the whole critiques the state of all national identity, including that of the United States. Most may have seemed successful at that time as they were recovering from WWI, but deep down, they lacked significant moral values and social coherence.

The idea of Americanism brought up in *The American Journal of Sociology* questions the notion that Americanism is the act of striving for higher moral values. In this article, America's use of capital to get out of situations and as its main driving force to achieve its goals is an exact mirror to the description Nick gives of both Tom and Daisy. These two individuals are portrayed by Nick as finding comfort from their mistakes by escaping into their money. Yet Nick's rejection of Tom and Daisy shows the novel is critiquing pure materialism. As the novel ends, Nick's decision to move back to his home in the Midwest reveals a tentative moral identity for Nick—although he denies it. This movement to the west also relates to the movement to the west side of the country during an earlier time when America was first looking westward to expand its horizons. Although the separation of the individual identities of the characters results in a separation of the "national" identity of the microcosms of their cities, not all hope is lost as Nick looks to the west. Perhaps this is a statement by Fitzgerald that even if America loses sight of its true identity and becomes corrupt, that there is still hope for the future and the American dream.

Works Cited

- Evans, Nicholas M. *Writing Jazz: Race, Nationalism, and Modern Culture in the 1920s*. New York: Garland, 2000. Print.
- Feiler, Arthur. "Economic Nationalism." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 180.1 (1935): 203-206. *JSTOR*. Web. 2 Dec. 2008.
- Lowrie, S. Gale. "Nationalism." *International Journal of Ethics* 41.1 (1930): 35-49. *JSTOR*. Web. 2 Dec. 2008.
- Pierce, Bessie Louise. "The School and the Spirit of Nationalism." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 175.1 (1934): 117-122. *JSTOR*. Web. 2 Dec. 2008.
- "What is Americanism?" *The American Journal of Sociology* 20.4 (1915): 433-486. *JSTOR*. Web. 2 Dec. 2008.
- "What is Americanism? Supplement." *The American Journal of Sociology* 20.5 (1915): 613-628. *JSTOR*. Web. 2 Dec. 2008.