

MUSIC AND DANCE IN *THE GREAT GATSBY*

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Abstract: *As represented in F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby, music and dance shed light on issues of race and ethnicity in the culture of the 1920s. Although having African-American origins, jazz music can create a racial rift. Fitzgerald's decision to incorporate "white jazz" can be seen as a way for Gatsby to eliminate his ethnic past and belong to the same social group as the Buchanans. This is similar to the way he changes his name from James Gatz to Jay Gatsby in order to dissociate himself from his supposed Jewish roots. This paper will examine how identity, jazz music, dance, and musical instruments not only represent the 1920s American culture, but also exemplify racial otherness and Gatsby's attempt at cancelling this otherness.*

Keywords: *culture, ethnicity, fox-trot, identity, jazz, otherness*

1. Introduction

F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) is a novel that can be viewed today as paradigmatic for the 1920s America. Gatsby's parties not only represent his rags-to-riches story and the American dream, but they also reveal the main aspect of the society of the time. An important feature of these parties is the presence of music and dance, especially jazz music, in which its history alone correlates to the idea of racial mixing and segregation. Dancing also has its own social history that mixes various cultures to create a unique American dance culture.

By adopting an ethnic and cultural approach, this paper will examine how music and dance, mainly featured at Gatsby's famous parties, inform depictions of race and ethnicity. While seeming to embrace a multicultural standpoint by portraying jazz music, associated with the African American cultural heritage, Fitzgerald, in fact, demonstrates his preference for a particular kind of jazz, called "white jazz", which pulls away from the roots of African Americans and immigrants. This is further complicated by Gatsby's shift away from his past as James Gatz. Therefore, Gatsby's identity relates to the ethnic "other", and one of the ways in which this is done in *The Great Gatsby* is through music and dance.

2. Identity

One of the perplexing things in the novel is Jay Gatsby's identity. Through Nick Carraway's narration, the reader begins to slowly unravel Gatsby's personality, from his mysterious past to his dubious connections. What becomes certain is Gatsby's longing to belong to Daisy Buchanan's social circle. The

Buchanans are not only upper-class citizens, but the epitome of the white Anglo-Saxon Protestants (or WASP). This desperate desire to belong is one of the aspects that reveal not only the ambiguity of Gatsby's identity, but also some of the reasons why he is so intent on making it into the world of the Buchanans. Tom Buchanan, for example, makes a point of telling Gatsby that he does not belong in his social circle:

“Self-control!” repeated Tom incredulously. “I suppose the latest thing is to sit back and let Mr. Nobody from Nowhere make love to your wife. Well, if that's that idea, you can count me out. . . . Nowadays people begin by sneering at family life and family institutions, and next they'll throw everything overboard and have intermarriage between black and white.” (Fitzgerald 1925: 130)

What is interesting about this outburst from Tom is that, instead of focusing on the act of infidelity, he seems to allude to Gatsby's uncertain background. Gatsby is “Mr. Nobody from Nowhere” and it is an outrage that upper-class Daisy should be associated with him. In addition, the correlation of their relationship to racial intermarriage places Gatsby in the category of the ethnic “other”.

Ethnic and cultural studies have always been interested in the “otherness” of the text. In his introduction to *The Cultural Studies Reader*, During (1999: 21) states that “[m]ost relevantly, within a discipline that has globalized itself through affirming otherness, it is important to remember the obvious point that everyday life is not everywhere the same, despite those modernizing effects of uniformity”. We can connect this to Gatsby's attempt at uniformity, in his desire to join the ranks of people like the Buchanans, which ultimately does not work, because Gatsby is not born into privilege: he must create it on his own, since he is the ethnic “other”. In ethnic and cultural studies, the “other” usually belongs to marginalized groups, at times focusing on race (African American, Asian, etc.) as well as on people of various ethnicities, for example the immigrant groups in the United States. It is interesting that, although a white man, Gatsby is nearly correlated to being black by Buchanan, but here, we can see that Buchanan may be mixing race and ethnicity, because it is Gatsby's supposed ethnicity that makes him different from WASPS like the Buchanans.

As stated by Goldsmith (2003: 443), Gatsby does in fact have a certain aura of foreignness about him: “If the scandal of Gatsby's success lies in his ambiguously ethnic, white, working-class origins, the success of his scandalous behavior resides in his imitation of African American and ethnic modes of self-definition”. Therefore, Gatsby takes on identities of various races, as he does not have a common identity himself. It is not until the end, when his father attends his funeral, that we really see who Gatsby was and where he came from. We also find out that his real name was James Gatz. Jay Gatsby's change of name mirrors his attempt to erase his ethnic identity, including his “otherness”.

According to Will (2005), Gatsby's association with Wolfsheim, a gangster, who helped him make his fortune, only mirrors his innate Jewishness due to the ethnic tone of his real last name. This mirroring can act as a clue to the mystery of Gatsby's identity, as well as demonstrates that by his association with Wolfsheim, he cannot flee his supposed Jewish identity. However, Will (2005: 133) also suggests that the name Gatz is rather ambiguous; it can be Jewish, but not necessarily, because it is a surname that is used by both Jewish and non-Jewish people: “Neither identifiably black nor identifiably Jewish, the shifting, obscure,

ever-vanishing figure of James Gatz/Jay Gatsby troubles the category of 'whiteness', problematizing the force of this category at a moment when such force is of crucial significance". Gatsby hence does not have a racial identity. He is white, but there are instances about him that interrogate his "whiteness". What Gatsby is in the end is undefinable: nobody knows anything about him throughout the text. Nick eventually finds more information about Gatsby as the novel goes on, but everything in the beginning is a mystery, including his identity. The change of his name serves as a way for Gatsby to mask his own ethnic identity.

3. Jazz music

A way in which Gatsby attempts to mask his ethnic otherness is the entertainment he chooses, including dance and music. It may seem strange, since jazz music is synonymous with the growth of African American culture in the 1920s, but we shall see how this is the case by the selection of white and symphonic jazz. First, though, it is relevant to explain the origins of jazz music in order to understand its multicultural aspect, but also to see how white jazz began a segregation of entertainment. One reason why music and dance are chosen to explain Gatsby's "otherness" is that, as forms of entertainment, they give us a glimpse into the culture of those times. Dyer (1977: 374) remarks on how different means of representation, both in culture and history, correspond to different means of awareness: "This becomes clear when one examines how entertainment forms come to have the emotional signification they do: that is, by acquiring their signification in relation to the complex of meaning in the social-cultural situation in which they are produced". An overview of the history of jazz music and how it is represented in *The Great Gatsby* reveals the underlying stakes of ethnicity and race.

As claimed by Evans (2000: 10), jazz does not have one single origin, but emerged from several genres and can be seen as a cross between folk art and fine art. A cultural mix, then, is what mainly defines jazz. However, a debate also ensued at some point regarding the existence of and differences between black and white jazz, but the issue is more complex than that. The origins of jazz epitomize the racial mixing that would become synonymous with it: "Crucial to New Orleans jazz, for example, were Creoles of African, French and Spanish extraction" (idem: 11). Hence, we have a sense of jazz not being specifically white or black, but mixed. Nor was it purely American or European, but mixed again. In addition, there is even a Jewish culture that is associated with Jazz: "Many of the first jazz starts were Jewish New Yorkers, already proficient in ragtime, who now turned to another indigenous style to help themselves assimilate in the American Urban scene" (Peretti 1997: 3). Hence, the Jewish New Yorkers, who were at times considered outsiders, found solace in jazz as a means of assimilating into the American society. When Fitzgerald (1925: 49) mentions Vladimir Tostoff's *Jazz History of the World* which is played at the party, this recounts the ethnic aspect of jazz. According to Goldsmith (2003: 455), Fitzgerald planned for the fictional composer to be named Leo Epstien, and the "composer's name change, like Jimmy Gatz's, sublimates ethnicity and class". Both names, however, may have Jewish connections. Epstien is clearly Jewish and, since many immigrants from Russia to the United States were Jewish, and it is possible that Vladimir Tostoff may have been as well. Interestingly, Fitzgerald made the name sound more foreign, which

might suggest how cultural and religious differences are obliterated among the people at the party as they are all entertained by jazz music.

Gatsby's parties feature another foreign entertainer: "A celebrated tenor had sung in Italian, and a notorious contralto had sung in jazz, and between the numbers people were doing stunts all over the garden" (Fitzgerald 1925: 46). The mention of the "tenor" and "contralto" suggests a more operatic tone, and therefore a bond between jazz and other styles of music, which denotes a musical assortment and the ability for jazz to adapt to different styles. This stylistic diversity is in relation to the diversity of people present at Gatsby's party, which ultimately foregrounds the idea of "otherness" mentioned earlier. At this point in the story, neither Nick nor the reader has seen Gatsby, or knows anything about him besides the fact that he is wealthy and throws extravagant parties. We can therefore infer something about Gatsby, judging by the entertainers he employs and by his guests. According to Prigozy (2006: 346), "The guests at Gatsby's party are *nouveau riche*, with names that reflect their immigrant origins, and even Nick, walking alone in New York City, recognizes how insurmountable is the wall that separates wealth from poverty". Through this representation, we can see that Gatsby's wealth is not the type associated with WASP Tom Buchanan, and therefore the ambiguity of Gatsby's identity is seen at first glance by the entertainment and people present at his parties.

One reason for the quick popularity of jazz was that many groups of people were able to identify with it. This feeds back into the stylistic diversity previously mentioned. Among these styles, the "white jazz" has a prominent presence in *The Great Gatsby* and alludes to and complicates the issues of ethnicity. According to Evans (2000: 11), the founders of "white" ethnic jazz were usually of immigrant descent, especially Italian, Irish, German, and Russian Jewish. This represents another angle of the otherness, because, while the Creole music would have relied on the older generation of immigrants, the newer jazz included members of the new immigrants that were flowing into America.

"White jazz" provides a useful ambiguity in the economy of the novel. Those considered "the others" participate in it, but so do WASP-ish characters. Jazz itself is moulded into different directions, creating diverse sounds. With an intermingling of adaptations of different types of jazz, one may think that this helps to break racial barriers. In fact, it only exacerbates the segregation between whites and blacks: "Twenties racism was a formidable barrier between white and black jazz. Few white listeners or musicians found the "hot" styles of Armstrong or Ellington to their taste" (Peretti 1997: 57). Therefore, jazz became a barrier between races. "White jazz" emerged as a way to bypass this segregation. There were several white musicians who were interested in "hot" styles, but the wider public preferred a white-washed version, their own jazz that they would listen to, and their own clubs that they would visit on the weekends.

Jazz would also become more formal with the emergence of what would become known as "symphonic jazz", which was initiated by musicians such as Paul Whiteman. One of his songs is mentioned in the scene where Nick is leaving, and Daisy is saying goodbye to him, after one of Gatsby's parties. "Her glance left me and sought the lighted top of the steps, where *Three O'Clock in the Morning*, a neat sad little waltz of that year, was drifting out the open door" (Fitzgerald 1925: 108). This song was recorded by Whiteman in 1922, so Fitzgerald's contemporary reader, who read *The Great Gatsby* when it was published in 1925, would have

remembered the song, just as we today would remember popular songs heard on the radio and television three years ago.

Whiteman's mention is important in that it alludes to the important yet ambiguous role of jazz. As Jerving (2004: 657) also points out,

Like many of the broader melting pot and consumertopia narratives through which the story of jazz would be told, Whiteman's oft-told tale for jazz evaded and elided questions of cultural or class difference and conflict within the imagined national community.

Therefore, a music genre such as jazz, which was mostly noted for its ethnic origins, became popular also among white middle-class audiences, albeit in a slightly domesticated version. Whiteman, also crowned "the King of Jazz", seems to be notoriously known for ignoring the African presence in jazz music, and for addressing only the white consumer society that was listening to him. Jerving (2004: 659-660) focuses on Whiteman's unwillingness to accept that jazz came from African Americans:

The grand but empty historical gesture was recognizable enough already by 1925 to serve as the punch line to F. Scott Fitzgerald's portrait in *The Great Gatsby* of an unmistakably Whitemanesque symphonic jazz band at one of Gatsby's parties.

The songs by Whiteman and (the fictional) Tostoff appear in the text as a means of suggesting a version of jazz that is more comfortable to the society in which Gatsby is trying to forge a place for himself. Of course, this can be interpreted as Fitzgerald's ignorance of black jazz, but, more likely, it could also represent the way both upper and middle-class societies picked up on music that was specifically performed for people like them. Fitzgerald could be merely giving a social comment on the leisure of the white society and their unwillingness to include black members, which may be seen in the lack of representation of black characters, who are only mentioned briefly, in passing.

What is significant about this is that the type of jazz that is represented in the novel could be a way for Gatsby to mask his ethnic identity. Just as he changes his name, he selects the type of music that people such as Daisy would have been entertained by. Similarly, this is also done by the way in which dance is represented.

4. Dance

Another interesting aspect of the song *Three O'Clock in the Morning* is that, instead of being an upbeat tune, it is a sad little waltz that is drifting, and therefore it brings up dancing, which has an impact in the novel as well. Although during the scene where the song features nobody is dancing, the mention of the waltz might prove relevant. According to Buckman (1979: 123), the waltz originated in Germany and had roots to folk dancing. Eventually it became quite scandalous and was banned in some areas because of the close way people were dancing and its "lewd grasp" among partners (idem: 124). This closeness, which is both new and old, plays a role in the novel:

There was dancing now on the canvas in the garden; old men pushing young girls backward in eternal graceless circles, superior couples holding each other tortuously,

fashionably, and keeping in the corners- and a great number of girls dancing individually” (Fitzgerald 1925: 46).

While the waltz is used to connote a closeness that might be acceptable due to its traditional elements, the newer dances featured in the text emphasise the defiant elements, and the overall frenzy of the various dance moves suggests the modification of dance freedom from the times when the “lewd grasp” was scandalous. This would be true of the fox-trot, which was very popular in the 1920s, and when Daisy and Gatsby dance, it is the fox-trot that they do. This dance has its origins in America and was initiated by the music hall performer Harry Fox (Buckman 1979: 168). It eventually made its way to England, but still had American ties: “Though many English ballrooms closed upon the outbreak of war, they were soon reopened owing to public demand, and when they become crowded with American soldiers after 1917, the fox-trot enjoyed a spirited revival” (idem: 169). It turns out then, that this dance too acquired a dimension of acceptability, and was something Americans could identify with.

In the novel, and in the society as a whole as well, these dances connote a certain respectable freedom. As fashion and lifestyles were changing, so was music and dance. As Peretti (1997: 40) points out, “White residents there both deplored the passing of the old Victorian and real ways of life and were delighted by the temptations of the cinema and the fox-trot”. The fox-trot changed the cultural life of the Americans and signified a move forward from a more traditional era. As the change of fashion allowed more movement for women in the 1920s, the dance moves had the ability to be freer as well. The social aspect of dancing is significant also because, as Giordano (2007: 39) points out, this was an era when people had more leisure time, as the average workweek decreased and thus they had more of an opportunity to dance on the weekend. It was during this time when dance instruction became popular, and Arthur Murray began his career (idem: 43). Today, the Arthur Murray dance studio is where many people flock to learn the ballroom dancing, and the 1920s was where it all began.

What is important about the dances chosen in Fitzgerald’s text is that they provide a mix of old world European (the waltz) and new world American (the fox-trot) dances. In this way, we see how dancing, like music, utilizes an amalgamation of styles, and Fitzgerald chooses carefully the styles that are represented. The style needs to be modern, to fit the modern world of the 1920s, but there also needs to be something classy and traditional about it. After all, even though Gatsby belongs to the “new money”, he desires to belong to the social circle of people who were born into wealth.

5. Musical instruments

The use of musical instruments in the novel also demonstrates a mix of the old and the new world and has a strong connection to both race and the American culture. The first time that Nick attends Gatsby’s party, there is a mention of banjos, once when they are part of the orchestra and then as a background sound: “The moon had risen higher, and floating in the Sound, was a triangle of silver scales, trembling a little to the stiff, tinny drip of the banjos on the lawn” (Fitzgerald 1925: 47). This inclusion of the banjo is suggestive of black presence. Durman (2008: 797) discusses string bands and their history in the African American culture: “African Americans brought an instrument modern players

would recognize as the gourd banjo, along with their playing techniques, tunes, songs, and a variety of tuning methods”. However, it is interesting that it only serves to produce background music and being accompanied by “silver scales” appears to give the music an upper-class quality that would mask the banjo’s humble roots.

An instrument that is almost synonymous with jazz is the saxophone, which is mentioned when Fitzgerald incorporates the scenes when Daisy and Gatsby reminisce about the past: “All night the saxophones wiled the hopeless comment of the Beale Street Blues while a hundred pairs of golden and silver slippers shuffled the shining dust” (Fitzgerald 1925: 151). The song “Beale Street Blues” refers to the Beale Street in Memphis, Tennessee, which was known for African-American entertainment. The saxophone, however, has its origins in Europe. As Gelly (2000: 5) explains in his useful survey, it was invented by Adolph Sax who was born in 1814 in Belgium. He then moved to Paris where he invented the instrument around 1840 and it spread throughout Europe for the next few decades. The saxophone then made its way to the American vaudeville stage and after World War I it was incorporated into jazz (ibid). Given its relative newness in jazz at the time of *The Great Gatsby*, it is interesting that the novelist chooses this particular instrument to accompany the protagonists’ tribulations.

The sounds of drums are heard in a party scene as well: “There was a boom of the bass drum, and the voice of the orchestra leader rang out suddenly above the echolalia of the garden” (Fitzgerald 1925: 49). Drums have their history from all over the world and according to Nicholls (1997: 8), “percussion historian James Blades has cited evidence of percussion instruments dating back 30,000 years”. The bass drum however would become more prominent as the jazz era went on. The idea of drums alone brings a whole multi-cultural aspect to the book and the particular way in which they are used, not foregrounded, but always somehow there, echoes the way in which Gatsby would like to fashion himself in Daisy’s life.

6. Conclusion

Music and dance not only play a vital role in the representation of 1920s culture in *The Great Gatsby*, but they have a connection to Gatsby’s identity, or rather his desire to mask his past. Jazz seems to be synonymous with the 1920s, which is the reason why that decade is referred to as “the Jazz Age.” Even the instruments have certain connotations that suggest their use in other cultures. Although social dancing had been around long before the 1920s, this era made advancements when it came to defining an American identity as well as drifting away from an old-fashioned society. Dancing and music became social commodities and something to which people of various races and culture were able to relate. Jazz was altered in various ways, which can be viewed positively, since everybody was able to relate to it, but there are also negative implications, since it intensified racism. Furthermore, what seems to be a preference for using “white jazz”, rather than other types of jazz, may relate to Jay Gatsby’s desire to detach himself from his roots as James Gatz and the ethnic “others”. Therefore, we can say that, just like “white jazz” attempts to obliterate the cultural ties of jazz with its African American roots, James Gatz becomes Jay Gatsby in order to obliterate his mysterious ethnic roots. Both Gatsby’s identity and the representation of music and dance serve as masks that conceal his background and enable him to join the WASP upper class society, to which he so desperately wanted to belong.

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