

TRAUMA AND F. SCOTT FITZGERALD: A STUDY

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Abstract—F. Scott Fitzgerald has been a versatile writer of the 1920s America portraying the 'American Dream' and the cultural and societal manifestations of the Jazz Age. The representation of these traumas is archetypal of the age in which the novelist lived and also allows an acute analysis of historical traumatic psychology. The individuals lose their ability to differentiate between fantasy and reality and a loss and alteration of identity also occurs as a repercussion of that trauma. The effect of a trauma-induced memory can lead to severe manifestations of trauma and contemporary trauma theories can be utilized to analyze them. The depiction of idealized love and the loss of that love propel the protagonist into a distorted realm of fantasy which can be explored using trauma theory. This paper would try to locate and trace the traumatic psychosis and fantasies experienced by the protagonists Jay Gatsby and Monroe Stahr and how the loss of emotions and relationships alter the life of the individuals.

The romantic idealism of Jay Gatsby becomes a tragedy where we see the disintegration of an individual with potential into nothing. The loss corrupts him and his trauma makes him survive in an illusory world filled with images and the longing for Daisy. His defeat nevertheless in the hands of fate heightens his trauma and leaves him fixated on his past, alone and traumatized. The fixation of Monroe Stahr on the memory of his dead wife also traumatizes him and he starts stagnating at that fixed point of time in his life. He tries to search for his dead wife and ultimately fails and dies, vanquished and detached from reality.

F. Scott Fitzgerald has been considered as a prolific writer of the American literary canon and his significant contribution to literature has been acknowledged not during his lifetime but later during the Fitzgerald revival. His novels reflect his life and his protagonists are so keenly associated and intricately linked to his persona that it is difficult to separate his life from his art. The reality that he defined through his works was the one related to society and he remained focused on the complexities of societal life and the innumerable dimensions of human experience. His works do not reflect a profound philosophy but it grappled with the lives of ordinary individuals. His novels are testimonies of loss and failure and deals with the subjective self, depicting emotions which he had experienced or which were known to him. The representation of hysteria or extreme angst ensuing from reminiscences of traumatic occasions can be expansively found in the novels of Fitzgerald. The emotional trauma and its resultant memory equivocate between incidences of

delusions and recollections and thrust the individuals into profound worlds of imagination. Fitzgerald's protagonists-in fact all of them, thrash about in pain embroiled in the distresses caused from these inestimable traumatic events and agonizingly never seem to disentangle themselves from the isolated memories of trauma resulting in a disenchanting collapse. Jay Gatsby, the protagonist of *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald suffers from the trauma of losing his beloved and ultimately succumbs to it when he is unable to reconcile to it.

The term 'trauma' in the framework of Freudian theory has been infused with a psychological repercussion. It is a depiction of a wound caused on the mind in place of the body as an effect of an unexpected emotional shock. Freud says "...it is the wound of the mind—the breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world—is not, like the wound of a body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that, is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness, until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor." (Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 24). Jay Gatsby, a young military officer with a humble background is taken out of his bounds when he falls in love with Daisy Fay Buchanan, a beauty who belonged to the elite class of the society. His love is pitted against material wealth and the class consciousness which pervades the society. Though they pledge their love to each other yet Daisy goes ahead and marries a rich society guy Tom Buchanan while Gatsby is away serving his country. After he comes back from the war and realizes that he has lost Daisy forever his carefully created world of love and happiness falls apart. He is traumatized and fails to resuscitate himself from this trauma. He yearns to go back to that world which he had created for himself five years ago—the world where he was in love with Daisy and she reciprocated that love. "But his heart was in a constant, turbulent riot. The most grotesque and fantastic conceits haunted him in his bed at night. A universe of ineffable gaudiness spun itself out in his brain while the clock ticked on the wash-stand and the moon soaked with wet light his tangled clothes upon the floor. Each night he added to the pattern of his fancies until drowsiness closed down upon some vivid scene with an oblivious embrace. For a while these reveries provided an outlet for his imagination; they were a

satisfactory hint of the unreality of reality, a promise that the rock of the world was founded securely on a fairy's wing." (*The Great Gatsby*, 75)

Michelle Balaev in *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory* describes a trauma novel as "a work of fiction that conveys profound loss or intense fear on individual or collective levels. A defining feature of the trauma novel is the transformation of the self, ignited by an external, often terrifying experience, which illuminates the process of coming to terms with the dynamics of memory that inform the new perceptions of the self and the world. The external event that elicits an extreme response from the protagonist is not necessarily bound to a human or collective disaster such as war or tsunamis (Balaev,150)." Jay Gatsby suffers from the intense trauma which doesn't allow him to lead a normal life. The memory of his happy days with Daisy haunts him and he wants to return to that point of time five years ago. He tries desperately to turn back time and his failure to do so pushes him to a different lifestyle altogether. His analysis of his loss leads to the realization that Daisy had to yield to the marriage because Gatsby belonged to a lower stratum of the society and would be unable to provide Daisy the social security and status which comes with money and affluence. Daisy was used to a luxurious lifestyle and he had nothing to offer in terms of material wealth and prosperity. However he cannot forget the loss as the love of Daisy was the only saving grace of his life which had helped him sustain himself through the tumultuous days of the war. The war has also altered his personality a great deal as he had lost his carefree self and the harsh realities of war and death had made him more realistic and matured. The days that he had spent in Louisville was punctuated with love, life and laughter and the radiant and beautiful Daisy was something which he had cherished. He had never imagined that such a beautiful, wealthy and accomplished girl like Daisy would accept his love and when she did so his life changed forever. She became the trophy which he had won and which could be displayed to the envying world at large. "her porch was bright with the bought luxury of star-shine; the wicker of the settee squeaked fashionably as she turned towards him...and Gatsby was overwhelmingly aware of the youth and mystery that wealth imprisons and preserves, of the freshness of many clothes".(*The Great Gatsby*,115)

"Identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think. Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation."(Hall, 222) Identity thus ceases to be what an individual considers being his sense of self and proves to be that character or personality of an individual as recognised by society. The trauma experienced by Jay Gatsby transforms him completely. From the idealistic young military officer with dreams in his eyes he turns into a money- minded individual who resorts to all underhand ways to accumulate a massive wealth in a very short time. "Almost five years! There must have been

moments even that afternoon when Daisy tumbled short of his dreams-not through her own fault, but because of the colossal vitality of his illusion. It had gone beyond her, beyond everything. He had thrown himself into it with a creative passion, adding to it all the time, decking it out with every bright feather that drifted his way" (*Gatsby*, 72). Whatever he does now he does it with the sole purpose of getting Daisy back in his life. That is his only motivation as Daisy pervades his life-his dreams and his waking moments are all filled with the presence of the absent Daisy. He tries to recreate those lost moments in his life with a passion and fervor which leaves him with no other vocation in his life. He earns money ruthlessly forgetting his scruples and subscribing to an altered identity.

Michelle Balaev further stipulates that the construction of trauma in an individual's life is a persistent process and the ability of the memory to reproduce earlier experiences is also indicated "if remembering is an imaginative reconstruction rather than a reduplicative action, then a person's traumatic memory is shaped as much by the present as it is by the past" (Balaev,30). He pursued his ideal relentlessly trying to nullify the effect of that unbearable loss of Daisy. He bought a huge mansion for himself just opposite to the place where Daisy stayed with her husband and daughter. He looked out for her across the bay at night, threw lavish parties where strangers came to enjoy themselves. Nick Carraway his neighbor and Daisy's cousin describes his parties when he says that "There was music from my neighbor's house through the summer nights. In his blue gardens men and girls came and went like moths among the whisperings and the champagne and the stars" (*The Great Gatsby*, 29). The description of his opulent lifestyle however cannot camouflage his agony, pain and loss and his subsequent trauma as a repercussion of that loss. His guests who attended his lavish parties did not form any connection with him. Most of them didn't even know him. This speaks about the inertness of all relationships in his life and his incapability and reluctance to establish any human connection. "Sometimes they came and went without having met Gatsby at all, came for the party with a simplicity of heart that was its own ticket of admission" (*The Great Gatsby*, 31). He moves further away from the reality of his existence and tries desperately to make things right grappling with the loss and trauma in his life. Balaev justifies the requirement of a varied approach to trauma as it is "individually experienced even within a collective." (*The Nature of Trauma in American Novels*, 27) Balaev's definition of trauma is pertinent to the analysis of Gatsby's character which defines trauma as "a person's emotional response to an overwhelming event that disrupts previous ideas of an individual's sense of self and the standards by which one evaluates society" (Balaev,150). Jay Gatsby had in reality altered his identity, his way of existence, his ideals in order to bring Daisy back into his life. The loss of Daisy has been a life altering experience for him. "He had come a long way to this blue lawn, and his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did

not know that it was already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity....” (*The Great Gatsby*,140).

“Gatsby’s obsessive longing to recreate the past, to win back Daisy, is his most intense manifestation of orality. Lacking a sense of basic trust, Gatsby as an infant was afflicted with an unusually acute sense of loss, in Erikson’s words, ‘a universal nostalgia for a lost paradise’, the effect of which is a strong orally sadistic yearning to merge into a larger identity later represented by the beautiful and wealthy Daisy Fay” (Stavola, 137) Gatsby’s “relentless, uncritical pursuit of Daisy” (Stavola,139) becomes the only motivation of his life. He tries in vain to bring those happy memories back into his life. Meanwhile Daisy has moved ahead in her life and was unrepentantly enjoying the privileges of a wealthy husband. The void in Gatsby’s life has been created due to the loss of his beloved and this deficit cannot be fulfilled unless he wins back Daisy and so he tries to reverse the circumstances which could have probably contributed to this loss. The “lack” in his life according to Dominick LaCapra might be a probable reason for his trauma. “Lack nonetheless indicates a felt need or a deficiency; it refers to something that ought to be there but is missing....lack is frequently understood as implying a loss, especially in conventional narrative...” (LaCapra, 53) He lives happily with the memories of the past and this past is something which cannot be changed. But this has a severe repercussion on his present as his present transforms itself into a dream with no connection with reality and trying to establish a connection with the past. As Shoshana Felman puts it, the victim can never completely recuperate from a trauma when “trauma survivors live not with memories of the past, but with an event that could not and did not proceed through its completion, has no ending, attained no closure, and therefore, as far as its survivors are concerned, continues into the present and is current in every aspect. The survivor, indeed, is not truly in touch either with the core of his traumatic reality or with the fatedness of its reenactments, and thereby remains entrapped in both” (Felman, 69)

Michelle Balaev in *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory* writes “trauma is a lived experience....If the larger social, political and economic practices....are the background contexts or threads in the fabric of a traumatic experience in the first place, then trauma’s meaning is locatable, rather than permanently lost.” (Balaev,7-8) He reestablishes his relationship with Daisy through the assistance of Nick Carraway and invites her over to his mansion to make her realize his success and opulence. He shows her his awesome collection of shirts, his hydroplane, and his library stocked with books and all other objects which symbolizes his wealth and his status in society. “He literally glowed; without a word or a gesture of exultation a new well-being radiated from him and filled the little room.” (*The Great Gatsby*,67). He impresses her but never realizes the frivolous nature of his beloved. To her it is all a distraction from her boring and inevitable lifestyle. She treats Gatsby with a fervor which convinces him of the sincerity of her emotions. When they meet in a hotel room in the presence of her husband

Gatsby tries to impress upon Tom Buchanan that Daisy loved him and no one else and had been forced to marry Tom. But Tom succeeds in pointing out the difference between their wealth—one was old money which signified elitism and the other was newly minted through doubtful ways which signified that it could never be associated with class and grandeur. Gatsby could feel Daisy slipping away from him for the second time in his life. “But with every word she was drawing further and further into herself, so he gave that up, and only the dead dream fought on as the afternoon slipped away, trying to touch what was no longer tangible, struggling unhappily, undesperingly, toward that lost voice across the room” (*The Great Gatsby*,103). He had lost her again and this time for good. All his efforts have been futile, his wealth, his life all started seeming meaningless to him. Balaev further posits that interference of memory, personality and relation to others occurs due to traumatic experience and are “mediated by cultural values and narrative forms rooted in a place that allow or disallow certain emotions to be expressed” (Balaev,18)

Monroe Stahr is presented to the readers by the narrator Cecilia Brady, a junior-year student at Bennington College. Familiar with Stahr all her life as he was a partner in her father’s “picture business” (269) she is on her way home to Los Angeles when “In the corridor of the plane I ran into Monroe Stahr and fell all over him, or wanted to” (279) Stahr’s influence on the rapidly emerging movie-making industry and to the financial and collective fortune of the United States of America is recognized by her many years later. His comparison to “Emperor and the Old Guard”(289) bestows him with a larger than life status. The tycoon “was the hero” to his workers and friends “he was their man, the last of the princes” (289). Stahr is the artist, the “aesthetic frontiersman”,(xxviii) passionately restless with the assessment of the films he makes and their role in the community realm. Stahr is an overachiever, persistently arranging “a complex and intricate world of writers, scriptwriters, cameramen, editors, actors, secretaries, stock-holders, investors and bankers” (xxix). His work is an inherent part of his personality. He rushes from one activity to another with barely a pause for reflection or opinion. He maintains pretty late work hours, and his Sundays are sporadically spent to cultivate his love affair with Kathleen. This is one aspect of his life which leaves him “breathless”. Work is not something that he follows with assiduousness, it is his desire. “He was born sleepless, without a talent for rest or the desire for it” (279) This attention to his work lends Stahr a sense of doggedness, diligence and decisiveness that makes him an archetypal hero. It widens our understanding of the dominion of proficient work. His link with his profession is a compliment to his creative veracity, moral ability and his genuineness.

Stahr feels that his relationship with Kathleen is steady but at the end of the novel it appears condemned. Minna’s death had rushed him into a world of mourning and trauma and it is Kathleen who reestablishes some sort of diversity in his life. The first time he goes to meet another

woman i.e. Kathleen, after the death of Minna, he feels an elation. It is as if some hefty encumbrance has been raised off his shoulders. Nevertheless he feels embarrassed for seeking the company of another woman and proving himself untruthful to his dead wife. It is some form of irreverence and it is as if he has violated some pre-determined norms. Stahr feels a “good illusion that it was a different moon every evening, every year. Other lights shone in Hollywood since Minna’s death” (319) Stahr imagines Kathleen to be Minna “You look more like she actually looked than how she was on the screen” (343) They consummate their relationship and Stahr is all the more in love with her. They look at each other and it is a tangle of their eyes and feelings. “It was Minna’s face... For an instant they made love as no one ever dares to do after” (321) Stahr feels a dreamy blending with Kathleen. It appears throughout the novel that Stahr has been disturbed by the loss of his wife for a long time. Stahr’s psychological rejoinder divulges his repressed trauma which is established not only through his recollection of past events but also through his activities. Involving himself with a woman who looks similar to his dead wife cannot decide and cure his intimidated symptoms of trauma.

CONCLUSION:

After the accident in which Daisy was involved Gatsby takes the blame upon himself. Daisy was all nerves after the incident and Gatsby kept watch over her from a distance, his vigil continuing into the darkness of the night. He wanted to ensure that all was well with Daisy the way he had tried to do it all through his life in his own way. But that had come to nothing. Daisy would never be his again and the realization of this fact traumatizes him. “He put his hands in his coat pockets and turned back eagerly to his scrutiny of the house, as though my presence marred the sacredness of the vigil. So I walked away and left him standing there in the moonlight—watching over nothing.” (*The Great Gatsby*, 112). He dies an untimely death shot by Myrtle’s husband, the lady whom Daisy mowed down while driving her car. His life comes to nothing as Daisy doesn’t even bother to enquire about his death. Nick tries to reach her and inform her about Gatsby’s death but she has already left with her husband Tom on a vacation. Jay Gatsby thus lives a futile life pining away for Daisy and ultimately it comes to nothing as he is betrayed by Daisy for the second time. His trauma alters his personality and his identity and he falls back upon his past memory to lead a life filled with lost moments with his beloved. “So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past”. (*The Great Gatsby*, 140). Monroe Stahr suffers inexorably unable to extricate himself from his trauma leaving him alone and dissatisfied. He flounders in his personal as well as professional life. The romantic idealism of Jay Gatsby becomes a tragedy where we see the disintegration of an individual with potential into nothing. The loss corrupts him and his trauma makes him survive in an illusory world filled with images and the longing for Daisy. His defeat nevertheless in the hands of fate heightens his trauma and leaves him fixated on his past, alone and traumatized. Similarly Monroe

Stahr keeps on hankering for his dead wife but it frustrates him constantly and ultimately leads to his downfall and disintegration.

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