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English 3P; Per.5

7 May 2008

The American Colorless Dreams

Hans Hofmannconstantly reminds us through his paintings that “it is not the form that dictates the color, but the color that brings out the form” because color is everywhere. It is expressed in every form imaginable, used in countless ways to describe, reflect or simply there, but every color has a purpose and a meaning. But above all, F. Scott Fitzgerald uses colors in The Great Gatsby to symbolize people and asserts his message of the American dream. Fitzgerald employs a variety of colors in this novel, but the three most significant are white, cream, and gray because they convey the theme that most people spend their whole entire life struggling day-by-day to get the American dream, only to find that maybe the dreams are not exactly what they wanted in the first place.

Often associated with purity and divinity alike, the symbolic color white plays no less a role in the novel The Great Gatsby. Daisy who is one of the main characters, often wears white. She embodies the idea of the heavenly perfection of the American dream, one of the themes of the novel. The first impression of Daisy is that she is a persona of an angel, wearing a beautiful billowing white dress, just coming back from a “short flight around the house” (12). She is also from the highest social class, a place that is impossible to get in for a common American. And yet Gatsby, born into the bottom ladder of society, dream to be with her at the base of the royal pedestal. But like any dream, any American dream, Gatsby finds Daisy irresistible, close enough to reach out and touch but insubstantial. Because even though white is divinity and purity, another aspect of life that white symbolizes is also emptiness—devoid of all human emotions. As Nick reflects at the end of the novel, “they were careless people, Tom and Daisy—they smashes up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money” (187). Which illustrates that Daisy is depleted of compassion and responsibility, a careless person who is not concerned in the very least with what agony she causes others. Likewise, the American dream that she so well symbolizes is also indifference to the millions of people that toil their lives away in order to achieve that dream. Daisy is Gatsby’s version of the perfect dream, of heaven but she is only that, an empty illusion, only there to keep Gatsby hoping and dreaming. And perhaps the point that Fitzgerald is trying to manifest is that maybe our dreams are only illusions, there to taunt us with the image of a utopia.

There are many people of this world who could never really obtain the pureness that white has, thus lingering themselves in a limbo of white and gray, the cream color. Two of the characters in The Great Gatsby who most define cream are Gatsby and Myrtle. They both want to fit into a society that they can never be in, trying to incorporate their chaotic lives into the rigid society of the high class. Gatsby is born a common American, inevitably, he feels in love with a girl of a much higher status. With this misstep, he dooms the rest of his life, trying in vain to erase his own background and family, to be good enough for the angelic Daisy. Unfortunately for Gatsby, cream can never be pass as white, just like all the glitters of the world is not gold, and thus he is looked down upon by the “old-money” society. In the same manner, Myrtle tries to be one with the higher class by pretending to a person of higher status on her spree with Tom. On occasion, Tom lets Myrtle has her way and buys her things such as a puppy and magazines, but in the end, he only uses her in his boredom. Which reveals that no matter what new outfit they change into, how far they move away from their family, their background still set them apart of the society that they try so hard to fit in.

When men have come to the point where their lifelong efforts have gone array, they become grey and ash-like, withering as time blows away whatever life they still have left. There is a place in the novel, often refers to as the valley of ashes, an island in its own right in the solitude of poverty among the big manors and high-rise cities. As the name suggests, the valley is submerged in ashes, veiled by “an impenetrable cloud” of darkness that obscures all the goodness of the world and left its people barren and void of all hopes. Indeed, George Wilson, the residues of a life thrown away is a great character to portray the dismal color of gray. He pretended to be someone else to marry Myrtle when he “borrowed somebody’s best suit to get married in”, and one can concludes that he did get his dream, but only to find that perhaps Myrtle is not exactly what he wants in the first place (39). And thus his passion in life burns out, leaving him the ashen remains of what a man he used to be. But as the ashes shroud the lonely streets and time-worn dwellings of the valley of ashes, the “grey sun-strained eyes” of Jordan Baker also lock up a soul behind a wall of deceptions. Jordan Baker seems cool and aloft on the outside, but she is “incurably dishonest”, always twisting and shadowing the truth to get her way and “satisfy the demands of her hard jaunty body” (63). Hence, the ash-gray color in The Great Gatsby not only masked the lives of ones who are already broken but also the truth about life.

The American dream is a chance, a rare chance that most usually finds themselves too unfortunate to grasp, and spend the rest of their lives, pursuing a constantly fleeing dream. In a sense, the American dream is not so set and stone, it is not the money and fame that most perceive, but rather the freedom that one may use to lead his own path, to leave his own legacy, and be happy that one has the opportunity to do so. But dreams are not everything, and one should stop and verify that it is not fantasy, but tangible before one risk everything to chase after it, because to fail is to become just another broken shell.