
The Hegemonic White Masculinity in Fitzgerald's Fiction

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Abstract

The sociologist Michael Kimmel's narrative concerning critical whiteness and masculinities studies as theoretical frameworks and methodologies have altered discourses around race and gender. The white supremacist thinking and practice essentially the manifested disease and paranoia of its creators concerning perceived threatening losses of masculine identity, power, and status. White skin matters the most; wealth and masculinity were necessary to maintain one's place along the hierarchy. 'The Great Gatsby' by Fitzgerald propagates ideas of a supreme white male existence where money is at the core, and those who are not representatives of this supreme status are otherwise in pursuit of what lies at its center; they are outside of but complicit to the hegemonic ordering. Fitzgerald places the text within an Anglophone literary tradition, European exploration, and imperialism culture.

Keywords: White Masculinity, Hegemony, America, Fitzgerald, Imperialism, Gender.

Introduction

Michael Kimmel's narrative concerning both critical whiteness and masculinities studies as theoretical frameworks and methodologies have altered discourses around race and gender in such a manner that it is now becoming more common in academia and popular spaces for whites and men to perceive, articulate, and deal with their whiteness and manliness individually and in community with other whites and men. In more recent years, the visible crisis of white men has significantly intensified, marked by the rise in political prominence of President H. Obama. It is not that Barack Hussein Obama's personhood has triggered disruption for white men and the status associated with this collective identity. However, the disorder rests in the occupying space that was once the exclusive epitomized representation of white masculinity in the United States. The president's office is no longer characteristically imagined as a white male. James Baldwin later articulates this crisis movement of European ethnics into the imagined body of whiteness as the price of the ticket, paid for by a loss of identity at the helm of Black subjugation. Racial ideology, entirely specifically white supremacist

thinking, and practice, then essentially the manifested disease and paranoia of its creators concerning perceived threatening losses of identity, power, and status.

The Burdened White Men

In 1899, the United States of America was urged to shed its last shroud of adolescence and enter into "manhood" by accepting the international imperialists' charge to take up "The White Man's Burden." Rudyard Kipling's so entitled poem became one of the most circulated refrains in the discussion of U.S. imperialism. At the turn of the twentieth century, U.S. expansionism sat at the heart of the nation's political agenda couched in a metalanguage of race and dominance. Reformulations of white ideology via Social Darwinism and Eugenics at the turn of the twentieth century proliferated U.S. intellectual, social, and political thought more so than at the time of the first publication of 'On the Origins of Species' in 1859. Operating in conjunction with evolving race ideologies was the "incorporation" and urbanization of the United States through shifts in technology and industry; coupled with racial anxieties, urbanization influenced interpretations of Manhood throughout the nation. As the nation grew more industrial and urban, self-employed agrarians and artisans dwindled in the rising tide of industry and factory labor.

Michael Kimmel assesses, "Manhood had meant autonomy and

self-control, but now fewer American men owned their shop, controlled their labor, and owned their farms. More and more men were economically dependent, subject to the regime of the time clock." In the larger social order, while white skin mattered most, wealth and masculinity were necessary to maintaining one's place along the hierarchy. Men like James J. Hill, a business tycoon of St. Paul, whom F. Scoot lived amongst and admired, confirmed "a man's worth, or, if one prefers, God's election of man is determined and demonstrated by his material success. The man was not a man until he had proven himself by owning the world. In terms of identity, one was no longer born of women. Instead, one symbolically gave birth to himself by becoming worth his weight in gold." Jay Gatsby embodies this notion by being his Platonic creation, not of a woman, but of his desire for the material world. Overall, through 'The Great Gatsby' Fitzgerald propagates ideas of a supreme white male existence where money is at the core, and those who are not representatives of this supreme status are otherwise in pursuit of what lies at its center; they are outside of but complicit to, the hegemonic ordering.

Fitzgerald's White Masculine World

The material, unnatural core at the heart of privileged, white male culture is symbolized in Daisy Fay, Tom's wife and Gatsby's love interest, who represents the quintessence of white femininity and the epitome of

hegemonic white masculine desire, which white patriarchy advocates most to protect. It is not Daisy in her humanness that is most desired; it is what she objectifiably represents that is most in demand of possession. In her characterization, Daisy is stripped of her humanness and made into an object, experienced by others and experiencing others for her only about material objects throughout the text. For instance, Gatsby can only intimately desire and interact with Daisy as a mission of conquest and infiltration from his youth to the narrative's time proper. He is well aware that poor boys should not think of loving rich girls; therefore, her interest in him and his being with her is an act of impropriety, knowing his initial encounter is purely accidental and outside of the acceptable social mores.

Furthermore, Gatsby's honest interest in Daisy was less about her personage and more because "it amazed him," the breaking of the rules, not her. Gatsby was also turned on and intrigued by the idea that other men had Daisy, making his acquisition of her much more valuable. Gatsby feels as if he is invading other great men's territories, stealing their most prized possessions, and taking her as a usurper of class boundaries, which makes him an even greater man according to this paradigm of white masculinity.

In a novel where symbols magnify layers of meanings, Daisy

Fay's characterization exudes considerations of whiteness. Fitzgerald consistently reinforces the whiteness Daisy represents in material form through color allocation. She is characterized as always wearing white throughout the novel, living in a white house, and even her roadster is white; yet, she is internal capital; even the sound of her voice exudes money. She is high in a white palace, the king's daughter, the golden girl. However, as a woman, she can never exemplify supreme whiteness, for she remains the object in the culture of hegemonic whiteness epitomized through masculinity. Daisy has even learned to treat her daughter in the same manner as the objects in Gatsby's vaulted house, presented and displayed, cloaked in white attire with her golden hair, only as a showpiece to reflect Daisy's materiality. Ultimately, for the men who are self-made or who are in the process of making themselves into better men, their feminine counterparts are turned into rare objects to be materialized, possessed, and plundered. John F. Callahan, author of *The Illusions of a Nation: Myth and History in the Novels of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, situates the concept of the self-made man within a lineage of nineteenth-century American literature that is essentially white and male-oriented. As he demonstrates, the self-made man is a trope of white, male, American literature, where the myth of the self-made man became a model for ideal individuals: Emerson's "plain old

Adam, the simple, genuine self against the whole world." Whitman's "I" in Song of Myself names all that lives in the American garden. From Cooper's Natty Bumppo, Melville's Ahab, that rare American father with authority, kingship, and mastery but who destroys the very humanity from which these things flow. Billy Budd: Adam is a hermaphrodite whose stutter suggests an intact, preconscious Adam. Huck Finn, who, to survive himself, must "light out for the territory ahead of the rest," away from women and society's continuities. Gatsby, within this lineage, is in a lineage of white exploration. The exploitation doctrine of the recreated self is essential to white immigrant/migrant history that colonial history initiates and frontier exploration perpetuates. If one can change his environment and manipulate its elements, then one can change himself instead of being the same self in a new environment or harmony with it. Gatsby even articulates that the self-made man can manipulate something as immaterial as time in the material world. James Gatz takes on the name Jay Gatsby as a whitewashing of language, culture, and nationality to be more uniform with the dominant Anglophone white community.

Fitzgerald's Great Gatsby provides instances that move audiences from simple disenchantment with the purity of whiteness made evident by Mark Twain to a conversation of internal alienation influenced by class

and culture that is destructive for graduated whites within this hegemonic culture of whiteness. It illuminates a shift in the collective consciousness of whites, with some seeking to be grafted into whiteness and others seeking to maintain exclusivity. Fitzgerald is keen to ensure that in the novel, Gatsby is not the only character to exist in conflict with or be destroyed by the established order of whiteness. Other secondary characters that attempt to disrupt the established order do not survive in this culture of whiteness. Both Myrtle Wilson, Tom's mistress, and George B. Wilson, Myrtle's husband, die for the preservation of the status quo. For instance, Myrtle Wilson hates that she has married a man she perceives to be a gentleman, but once she finds out he borrowed a suit to get married in, she finds, "he was not fit to lick her shoe" (34). Her demeaning of George is situated within a holistic system of white supremacy because his lack of wealth is couched in racist terms. She connects George to Jewish's kike even though he is not a Jew. She connects a racial slur to what is distinctively a class issue in George, symbolizing that within this system of whiteness, inferiority is racialized regardless of what distinctive nature it may have. F. Scott Fitzgerald demonstrates the significance of distinction and astute consciousness of racial ideology in his life, given the shifts and reservations in global perspectives. It is a consciousness that may predate the

coinage of "ethnicity" but is situated in the origins of a burgeoning ethnic-conscious America when maintaining distinctions among those who may have shared white skin yet did not share the same worldview or positions of power when global authority was vital. Each community may have viewed themselves as white regarding not being black. However, within the mass collective, beliefs of difference espoused ideas of superiority and inferiority amongst geo-political and cultural groups.

The White Hegemony and Imperialism

The Englishmen in their semi-state of wanting indicates the developing weakness in the past global empires in relationship to the emerging hegemonic white masculinity of "solid and prosperous Americans." It marks not just a sort of passing of the baton to the stable and flourishing United States of America but a new growing ideal for white masculinity. Ronald Berman argues in "America in Fitzgerald" that America, as a global entity, came to represent the burgeoning phase of civilization during the twenties. Upon writing, publishing, and reflecting on creating 'The Great Gatsby,' Fitzgerald explained that he had "learned a lot" and "consciously imitated" Heart of Darkness author Joseph Conrad in The Great Gatsby. In imitating Conrad, Fitzgerald places the text within an Anglophone literary tradition, European exploration, and imperialism culture. One of Conrad's most apparent

influences on The Great Gatsby is the concept of the compulsive pursuit of desires by man, specifically in the consideration of white civilization wanting to control and conquer others. Fitzgerald's text exhibits that such behavior is a continuous cultural process extending from East Europe in the Age of Exploration to the West in America in the Era of Imperialism. The broad Europeanness not restricted to English culture is magnified in Nick Carraway's well-known closing reflection, where he pastorally conjures up the Dutch embarking upon the shores of the new world for the first time. In this context with the new world, the Dutch are young participants in a continuum of white imperialist endeavors by a collective of European nations that may vary in language, culture, and tradition but share a consciousness that justifies Western imperialism. Nick signals the essence of hegemony as power is constantly negotiated, changing hands and positions based on the momentary historical reality. What has become of America the West is a consequence of the acts enacted by those colonizing nations of Europe and the East, seeking to conquer the globe as superpowers. Also, while Fitzgerald is writing the novel, the United States is moving up in the ranks of the processional, attempting to become the next superpower by taking up "the white man's burden."

One of the most recent and poignant analyses addressing the

reconstruction of white masculinity in *The Great Gatsby* is the essay "Gatsby's Pristine Dream: The Diminishment of the Self-Made Man in the Tribal Twenties," by Jeffrey Louis Decker, which acknowledges "Gatsby stages a national anxiety about the loss of white Anglo-Saxon supremacy in the Twenties." Decker asserts nativism as the focus of national consciousness during the twenties, which mirrored the passing of the 1924 Immigration Bill and President Coolidge's sentiments on issues of immigration that "America must be kept American." The anxiety of the loss of white superiority is heightened during this time by the myth of immigrant criminality and race-based politics, only magnified by the fascism in Europe. The threatened "American" Coolidge speaks of then is distinctly an Old World, Anglo-Saxon, and Nordic strand of white men, not the new Southern or Eastern European. "Americanism would now be understood as something more than and different from the American citizenship that so many aliens had so easily achieved."

It is the world of 1920s whiteness full of internal dissonance and collision. The lives and modes of operation of the Buchanans and Wolfsheim in Fitzgerald's creation are not as distinct as Decker suggests; they are interconnected. This is not to ignore nor overlook the prejudices and racism imposed upon Jews in America during the Twenties, but to cite that

even in the oppression of Jewish communities within whiteness, many Jewish Americans embraced and enacted the same tenants of white supremacy when the opportunity permitted, making those partakers of the same social practices. Meyer Wolfsheim is just as much a white supremacist and disregards Gatsby just as much as Tom Buchanan. Nick espouses the prevailing stereotypes of the times regarding Jewish people. Wolfsheim's Jewishness continues to represent the violation of space in the community of graduate whites, which esteems America as its own.

Conclusion

John Callahan concludes, "His novels trace the dream's origins to men's difficulty with history's paradox of finality and continuity, its objects to those sensual worlds promised in myth but denied by culture, its victims to idealists who could neither build upon nor change their history." Fitzgerald's essentialism of Tom Buchanan's group of whites positions him within a trans-continental, trans-historical discourse of the global domination of white men. Fitzgerald moves beyond Mark Twain's conversations of how whiteness and, ultimately, race are established in direct opposition to black and blackness to a discussion of whiteness and dominating identities within white communities. The stratification of whiteness compounded by class, gender, and burgeoning ethnic issues dismantles ideas of homogenous whiteness by presenting

multiple identities. Fitzgerald does not allow the discussion of racism and oppression in the context of whites dominating non-whites for economic, social, and political empowerment to govern the movement of his narrative; he redirects it to present and often-ignored aspect in critical race studies, the oppression, and domination of whites by other whites in their pursuits of supremacist agendas. Failure to critically address such concerns is part of the rationale for why those who are identifiably white and experience the oppression of white supremacy as they struggle to live out ideal whiteness, the hegemonic white masculinity, gravitate towards inflicting the same cultural practices onto others. Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* reveals the destructiveness of hegemonic white consciousness, even in whiteness studies, and helps fuel further explorations regarding the abolition of whiteness and race.

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