

Religious Influences in The Great Gatsby

During the 1920s, sometimes referred to as the Progressive Era, political and social changes surfaced in society in efforts to progressively improve the nation. However, the 1920's can accurately be described as the decade of selfishness. Society was material oriented and, as a result, there was a decrease in religious practices. This is vividly displayed in *The Great Gatsby* by Fitzgerald's use of mortal characters as religious influences.

There are three significant occurrences in the novel which show the loss of spirituality of the time, beginning with Gatsby's watch over Daisy the night of the hit and run. Gatsby spends the entire night watching for Daisy's sign, just as knights risked their lives in pursuit of the Holy Grail. His desire for Daisy to come for his help and "live happily ever after" with him is misplaced because of the goal he hopes to attain: Daisy.

Next, there is underlying symbolism presented shortly before Gatsby's death as he struggles with the swimming equipment. When offered assistance from his butler, Gatsby refuses and must "bear the cross" alone. Finally, Gatsby's [murder](#) is portrayed as a process of purification, which is of great religious importance. Shot in his chlorinated pool, Gatsby overcomes his shortcomings and is "cleansed" of his sins.

The immoral efforts that were put against American pop culture in the 1920s are best summarized as Wilson stares into the eyes of Dr. T.J. Eckleburg of a vast wasteland, "You may fool me, but you can't fool God!" His neighbor must remind him, "That's an advertisement" (Parker 33). Another symbolic aspect of the Valley of Ashes is that it is the home of the Wilsons, a place where the average person has some type of religious practices. Myrtle's murder is a blatant example of the pointlessness of religion in the Twenties' society. Fitzgerald suggests that in Twentieth-Century America "God has become a thing of cardboard, ineffectual and passive, robbed of power by a short-sighted materialistic displacement of spiritual values" (Moyer 224). The religious efforts of individuals were no match for the selfish society.

Works Cited

Moyer, Kermit W. *The Great Gatsby: Fitzgerald's Meditation of American History*. Rpt. in *Critical Essays on The Great Gatsby* Ed. Scott Donaldson. N.p. n.p., 1984.

Parker, David. *Two Versions of the Hero*. Amsterdam: Swets & Zeitlinbger B. V., 1973.