

ENGLISH ADVANCED: MODULE A

“Sonnets from the Portuguese” and “The Great Gatsby”

Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Sonnets from the Portuguese (SFTP) and F. Scott Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby (TGG) both reveal their contextual values and concerns through an examination of love and hope. Written during the Victorian era, BB’s personalised responses manipulate the Petrarchan sonnet form to encapsulate her innocent ‘awakening’ from a sheltered existence. Analogously, in FSF’s novel, the presentation of ideal love, predominantly through the complex use of Nick Carraway’s narration is undermined by the frivolous nature of the Roaring Twenties. The text epitomises the consumerist doctrine of the time, reflecting social values in the displacement and fate of the romantic protagonist. Both texts are products of their contexts, where TGG reflects SFTP and SFTP resonates ideas of TGG. Both texts share notions of love and hope, but while BB directs her attention to an optimistic future, it is Fitzgerald’s pejorative societal attitudes that exemplify the perversion of Gatsby’s American Dream.

SFTP critiques the mores of the Victorian period, through BB’s endeavour to characterise ideal love. Her sonnets subvert highly religious and conservative ideologies, defining societal values of the time and manifesting the male dominated context of the Victorian era. In Sonnet 1 “I thought once how Theocritus had sung” the sibilance “the sweet sad years” creates a despondent tone where she reflects on her distressed youth. In sonnet 13 “And wilt thou have me fashion into speech”, her declaration of love is met with uncertainty, exemplified through the metaphor of the “torch”, and “drops it at thy feet” as the patriarchal structure of society denies her freedom of love. The “while the winds are rough” are symbolic of her father and the society she lived in that detain her from expressing her true feelings. In Sonnet 43 “How do I love thee, let me count the ways” she resolves her inability to fully express love through the employment of concrete imagery, referencing measurements of “depth and breadth and height” to characterise the vastness of her emotions. Her ability to transcend the patriarchal structures embedded within her culture is removed by the repetition of “I love thee”, with the opening rhetorical questions delineating the overwhelming nature of love and its transformative power seen in the exclamatory “How do I love thee? Let me count the ways!” Love is proven to be a transformative force that enables BB to reshape her life.

While BB insinuates hope, the superficiality of FSF’s society foreshadows an ominous fate for Gatsby’s love. Depicting the “Roaring Twenties”, societal values reflect a shocked era after WW1’s atrocities, outlining the decline in religious faith compared with the highly religious Victorian Era. FSF critiques this society through the unreliable narration of Nick, whom he uses as a vehicle for which FSF can explore the delinquencies of the infamous “Jazz Age”. The innovation of photography provides a recurrent motif in the novel, serving as a constant reminder that Gatsby’s life is dedicated in pursuit of a moment in the past. His love for Daisy is based on a relationship five years ago, partly projected on his own fantasies, and her commitment to him is not the least equal to his love for her. His aspirations for pure love are evidently contrasted with BB’s, as in this raucous society concern is publicised over whether this love can exist.

Despite living a repressed life as encouraged of females, love brings hope and inaugurates the rebirth of a new woman. Her voice is empowered and assertive as she subverts literary expectations by feminising the Petrarchan form, contrasting her meek tone in Sonnet 1 with declarations of love in Sonnet 21 “Beloved, say over again, and yet again”, exclaiming “beloved!” and references to “Spring in all her green, completed!” to symbolise new beginnings of passionate love and hope. In sonnet 28 “My letters! All dead paper, mute and white”, the transforming reference to spring is symbolic as it alludes to vitality and new life provided by Robert Browning and reversed her decline towards death “a day in spring/ to come and touch my hand.” In sonnet 32, the symbol of the sun in “the first time that the sun rose on thine oath” is symbolic of new life and a new seriousness in their relationship, and also highlights a new found sense of freedom as she used to be confined in her room all the time.

However in TGG, Gatsby's hopes and aspirations are deemed futile, due to the delinquencies and corruption of the Jazz Age and the women that define that society. Daisy is recreated as an expendable object of consumption, lacking moral integrity and depth. She rejects her maternal role, detailing society's view on women through the description of her child, "I hope she'll be a fool, that's the best thing a girl can be in this world. Furthermore, Daisy's supercilious nature can be demonstrated through her reaction of Gatsby's shirts and her materialistic perspective towards them. Similarly, Jordan Baker is also a likened object of consumerism, being named after two automobiles and described with a 'slender golden arm' to illustrate her materialistic value and soulless perspective. Her moral inadequacies and lack of sentiment and sincerity are hidden beneath a façade that is very attractive and deceptive. The motif of the green light personifies Gatsby's undying love, symbolising physically, the "colossal vitality" of his ideals but also spiritually, the American Dream. FSF draws on references again to the green light in the final chapter, however, while it initially alluded to hope, its final prevalence heightens the derailment of Gatsby's dream. Daisy's emphatic tone in " I love you now- isn't that enough manifests her true feelings for Gatsby and marks the conclusion of his dream. Often believed as a moral gauge of society, Daisy and Jordan's depiction as loveless and 'careless' ultimately reflect FSF's contempt of the 'New World women' and their role in sanctioning the futility of Gatsby's dream.

Both SFTP and TGG examine love and hope as a reflection of their own society, but while BB attains a spiritual and elevating perspective of love in prevalence of her time, FSF presents ideal love as elusive and corrupted by material and status needs. While the values and importance of love and hope transcends the scope of time, FSF's examination of love and hope reveals the foibles of humanity that ultimately taints the pure values observed in SFTP with corruption and immorality.