

ENGLISH ADVANCED: MODULE A

'The Great Gatsby': Despite having been written in different times, texts can reflect the enduring values which human beings share

The time in which an individual lives heavily and inevitably influences their values; however, there are certain values that can be considered enduring. Values can be defined as what an individual deems useful or important, and the texts 'The Great Gatsby' and 'Sonnets from the Portuguese' provide evidence for changing values, as well as those that are everlasting. Values are reflected in both texts through the pervasiveness and nature of the basic human emotion, love. The novel, *The Great Gatsby*, written by F. Scott Fitzgerald, was set during a post World War I America, referred to as 'The Jazz Age'. It was a time of great social reformation characterised by a constant search for pleasure and the 'corruption' of the American dream. Women's roles underwent a remarkable transformation, from conservative to flamboyant with the 'flapper' style emerging. Elizabeth Barrett Browning's work 'Sonnets from the Portuguese' was created in an almost antithetical, circumscribed society being written during mid 19th century England, the 'Victorian Era', a period in which women were expected to be passive, angel like creatures, or else considered whores. The enduring values explored in the texts include ideal and reciprocal love. Changing values include relationships based on lasting versus ephemeral qualities and material wealth.

The two texts clearly reflect that an ideal lover that offers reciprocal admiration is to be highly valued.

The protagonist of Fitzgerald's novel, *Gatsby*, illustrates the desire of a perfect lover through his admiration, bordering on obsession of Daisy. Gatsby had created an 'illusion' of Daisy so close to perfection that, as Nick described, 'There must have been moments... when Daisy tumbled short of his dreams'. Nick describes this dream as having a 'colossal vitality' personifying it, as though it were large, alive and growing. This value is also reflected in Barrett Browning's Sonnet XXII when the persona uses religious allusions to imply their love is more perfect than the divine 'In mounting higher, the angels would press on us and aspire to drop some golden orb of perfect song into our deep, dear silence'. Choice of words such as 'press on us' and 'drop some golden orb' suggest that these transient beings would be nothing more than a nuisance upon what she begins to joyfully realise throughout the sonnets is a relationship with her ideal partner.

In both circumstances, the protagonist craves reciprocal love, highlighting the permanent nature of this value. He strives to reform his identity and become wealthy to gain Daisy's love, as 'rich girls don't marry poor boys'. The voice in the Sonnet XXI uses repetition to plead for declaration of reciprocal love, 'say thou dost love me, love me, love me...'. Simile is also used to compare these repeated words of love to a 'Cuckoo-Song', a strain often associated with spring and symbolising the vitality his love brings to her life. Gatsby also craves the reassurance that Daisy had always reciprocated his love, strongly demanding her to 'Just tell the truth. That you never loved him...'

While these values reflected in the texts are clearly enduring, other values are purely reflective of the context in which they are presented.

Love based on transient qualities was evidently valued in American societies such as East Egg during the 1920's. Women were expected to be beautiful and of a high social rank in order to be desired and everlasting qualities were unconsidered. If a person became unsatisfied with their partner, they would just move on to the next love object. Women such as Daisy and Jordan generally accepted this hedonistic outlook of the Jazz Age, even if their self worth was compromised. Jordan exemplifies this when she casually informs Nick that 'Tom's got some woman in New York'. While Daisy is clearly possessed by 'tense gaiety' at this notion, she doesn't seek to confront him.

Imagery and religious allusion are used to describe what Gatsby views as the pinnacle of his relationship with Daisy, 'At his lips touch she blossomed for him like a flower and the incarnation was complete'. This shows his focus on the physical, rather than whether the relationship will endure. The use of flowers as a simile is reiterated throughout the novel – Fitzgerald could be alluding to the ephemeral qualities of flowers – their beauty fades with time.

However, the distinctly female voice in Barrett Browning's sonnet, while at first unsure of her emotions as personified by the unknown 'mystic shape' in Sonnet I, gradually articulates a yearning for everlasting and genuine love 'for loves sake only' throughout Sonnet XIV. She rejects the notion that ephemeral qualities have any value whatsoever in her idea of love and emphasises this through listing, in the imagined voice of her lover, passing qualities he may admire in her, 'her smile..her look.. her way of speaking gently'. Through strong verbs such as 'wrought', the voice explains that this is not the love she wants 'for these things in themselves..may be changed..and love so wrought may be unwrought so'.

This stance is reflective of her context, where she needs to be assured that her lover's feelings will not fade. In marrying him she would be shunned by her family and she would need her lovers support in such a patriarchal society. The sonnets are unlike those written by men at the time as they do not strictly adhere to conventional structure, including ellipses and a strong female voice. This may reflect that while women in the Victorian Era may have generally taken on a passive role, they were confident in expressing their expectation of an enduring relationship. This is no doubt related to the way women were viewed in the Victoria era if their relationships were casual.

The love of material objects was highly valued in certain circles during the 1920's. This is exemplified by Daisy's hyperbolised emotional reaction to Gatsby's wealth 'Daisy bent her head into the shirts and began to cry stormily. 'They're such beautiful shirts''. The value of materialism is also highlighted when Gatsby declared to Tom, 'she only married you because I was poor and she was tired of waiting for me', demonstrating the importance of wealth in sustaining love for people like the Buchanan's during this time. The sonnets however, express an appreciation of simple, 'no frills' love, as the voice asks her lover in Sonnet XXI, to 'love me also in silence, with thy soul'. The use of the word soul implies a deeper love, one that is not centred on or influenced by possessions.

It is clear that there are many values that humans have and will experience, and these are often reflected in basic human emotions, such as love. Common values such as the 'ideal' lover and reciprocal love are enduring as exemplified by Fitzgerald's protagonist, Gatsby and Barret Browning's persona. Therefore, it can be concluded that texts are definitely able to reflect enduring values humans share. However, they are also able to depict values that are subject to change as made clear in *The Great Gatsby*, set in the Jazz Age society, where ephemeral qualities, such as beauty were valued. Material wealth was also of high importance and women were expected to be light hearted in terms of what they wanted from love. The sonnets by Elizabeth Barrett Browning demonstrate almost opposing values in these areas, as the strong, female persona dismisses the appreciation of transient qualities. Instead she clearly expresses the value of a deeper, more sincere love.