

ENGLISH: *THE GREAT GATSBY/BROWNING SONNET*

The significant historical timeframe that divides Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 1846 Victorian sonnet sequence *Sonnets From The Portuguese* and F. Scott Fitzgerald's 1926 American modernist novel *The Great Gatsby*, dictates an inevitable division in the contexts and values inherent within the texts. The thematic concerns of both texts, and the perspectives through which these concerns are articulated are, nonetheless, quite synonymous. Both explore the notions of love and hope, and posit that the correlation between the two, coupled with the social, cultural and religious components of a historical context, ultimately shapes the identity of individuals isolated from their respective contexts.

The thematic concern of hope features predominantly in both texts. In *Sonnets From The Portuguese*, hope provides meaning and purpose to a life hallmarked by tragedy and confinement. An infirmed woman, Barrett Browning was devoid of all hope until the sestet of Sonnet I, provided resolution to the melancholy of her life; 'a mystic Shape did move/ Behind me and drew me backward by the hair.' Through pathetic fallacy, the composer reveals the unexpected nature of the love that violently intruded upon her life, and its impact on her psyche. Furthermore, the capitalisation of 'Shape' alludes to a God-like figure, conveying her hope that a love so omnipotent will be eternal. Whilst *The Great Gatsby* presents Myrtle and Gatsby's death as brutal, they are profoundly insignificant due to the diminished value of human dignity in the apathetic post-war age. However, throughout the sonnets, aspiration is bound to the heavily religious context of the Victorian era and Barrett Browning therefore views death as insignificant only in that it will not destroy the perpetual relationship that she and her 'beloved' have developed.

The Great Gatsby evokes a pervading sense of hopelessness, demonstrating that aspiration is invariably destroyed by the constraints of a morally decrepit society. The green light on Daisy's dock is described by Nick as; 'nothing except a single green light, minute and far away.' The narrative voice creates contrast between the perspectives of Nick, who views the light as a meaningless material object, and Gatsby, for whom it is symbolic of his profound desire to obtain Daisy, which becomes the basis of his illusion and his constructed identity. In a society devoid of religious direction, Fitzgerald indicates that the idolisation of the light is the closest Gatsby comes to undying faith; 'Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future.'

Throughout the novel, the glasses of Doctor T.J. Eckleberg; 'above the grey land...[looking out] from a pair of yellow spectacles,' symbolise the way in which increased commerciality, coupled with a post-war disillusionment, had replaced any sense of faith, causing a shift in values as advertising and materialism had come to be idolised as gods. Additionally, the connotations of colour presented are indicative of the context; the grey associated with the Valley of Ashes indicates the failure of society, whilst the gold spectacles suggest that, throughout the Roaring Twenties, every aspect of society was tainted by the corrupt power of wealth. Unlike the sonnets, presented from an intimate and personal perspective and intended for Barrett Browning's 'beloved', Fitzgerald purposefully presents Nick as the narrator, and indeed, the author of *The Great Gatsby* in an attempt to distance the reader from the protagonist and comment on his failed dream, and the failure of the corrupt society of the Jazz Age.

Love, both idealised and commodified dictates the outcome of both texts for the protagonists, Barrett Browning and Gatsby, respectively. Throughout the sonnets, love evolves from an overwhelming notion casting fear and uncertainty upon the protagonist, to a sublime and ideal state which involves the profound fusion of souls. In Sonnet XXII, the composer describes a transcendent love, intimately linked to spirituality and yet physical. She states; 'When our two souls stand up erect and strong...drawing nigh and nigher.' The high modality language in this passage affirms that, as the relationship progresses, Barrett Browning is becoming increasingly capable of articulating her desires and challenging the patriarchal paradigms of her context. The imagery in this passage is

reminiscent of Plato's Ladder of Love, indicating the attainment of a state of eternal and mutual love. Conversely, Fitzgerald presents love as an ideal that can never be realised due to the hedonistic and vulgar nature of a materialistic society. The novel is centred upon Gatsby's construct of love for Daisy, a 'romantic readiness' which transcends the realms of a hopeless reality grounded in the opulence and decadence of a corrupt age. Gatsby's illusion dominates his life and when he finally obtains Daisy, the ideal irrevocably falls short of reality; 'There must have been moments...when Daisy tumbled short of his dreams...because of the colossal vitality of his illusion.' Fitzgerald's utilises the diction of 'tumbled' to present the notion of Plato's ladder, as in Sonnet XXII. However, unlike in the sonnets, Gatsby's is so submerged in the ideal of love that a material state of sublime equality with Daisy can never truly be obtained. Gatsby's illusive nature is presented as a simulacrum, and, accordingly, Daisy describes him as resembling; 'the advertisement of a man...' In a society wrought with prosperity and consumerism indicative of the post-war age, the prominent motif of advertising highlights the inherent corruption of society.

In Sonnet XIV, the composer refuses to quantify her love, demanding that; 'If thou must love me, let it be for nought/ Except for love's sake only.' In contrast with Gatsby's view of love as a possession, the sonnets present the motif of measurement, articulating that true love cannot be commodified. Barrett Browning subverts the traditional male Petrarchan sonnet form by placing the volta within the final tercet; 'thereby-/ But love me...' demonstrating her 'woman-love', her urgency to convey the true nature of her emotions. Image one reflects, through the positioning of the male figure over the female, that in the patriarchal Victorian era, women were subservient to men. Throughout Sonnet XXI, however, she demands that her 'beloved' repeatedly articulate his love; 'Cry..speak once more..thou lovest!' which indicates, through caesura in the form of ellipsis, that she is caught between her self-imposed empowerment and her residual doubts.

Image three portrays the decadence and hedonism indicative of the Jazz Age, and Fitzgerald comments that love is commodified as a mere object to be obtained in order to meet the expectations of society, an indispensable component of the American Dream. The love between Tom and Daisy is so transitory that it can be erased in a moment; 'Just tell him...that you never loved him- and it's all wiped out forever.' When Daisy admits she once loved Tom, Gatsby is relieved that, 'it was only personal,' indicating that his love for her is principally for the fulfilment of his dream and constructed identity.

Within Gatsby's psyche, there is a deep correlation between wealth and love, highlighted when he informs Nick that; "'Her voice is full of money"...that was the inexhaustible charm...in it, the jingle of it, the cymbals' song of it.' Nick's use of asyndeton throughout his metaphorical epiphany highlights the reverence with which wealth was regarded throughout the Jazz Age. When finally Gatsby comes to obtain her love, the completion of his illusion seems insignificant, 'it was again a green light on a dock. His count of enchanted objects had diminished by one.' Fitzgerald's use of factual tone indicates the finality of the collapse of Gatsby's dream, and reduces his aspiration to a mere object.

Ultimately, both Sonnets From The Portuguese and The Great Gatsby depict individuals isolated from their respective contexts due to their subversion of traditional values; Barrett Browning in her assertion of her power and Gatsby in his undying faith in his dream, despite the corruption of his society, which rendered such illusions impossible. Both explore the themes of love; both idealised and commodified, and hope, and indicate the correlation between the two formulates individuals' identities, despite their disparate historical contexts.