

ENGLISH ADVANCED: *THE GREAT GATSBY*/ *ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING SONNETS*

In Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (*Gatsby*) and EBB's *Sonnets of the Portuguese*, it is the challenging of contextual values that creates greater meaning within the texts. The juxtaposition of "Roaring Twenties" to the highly conservative and patriarchal Victorian era allows a greater understanding of the importance composer's contexts to their evaluation of similar values, such as genuine love and valuing the individual for their quintessential self over superficialities such as wealth or beauty, yet it is Fitzgerald's criticisms of the greed and superficiality of those living the "American Dream" and EBB's defying the conventional sheltered life of a Victorian woman in favour of a love both physical and spiritual result in texts that transcend merely reflecting their contexts and instead become valued throughout time.

Within *Gatsby*, Fitzgerald criticises the values of his age – most prominently the lack of genuine love within the Roaring Twenties. The use of a biased narrator in Nick Carraway originally allows Fitzgerald to portray *Gatsby's* love as one that defies the superficial values of his society, yet the use of the motif of time serves to counteract this perception upon our eventual realisation that *Gatsby's* love was no more than a desperate hope to achieve the dream-life his society idolised. This is most prominent upon his catching a clock he accidentally knocked when he is first reunited with Daisy, reminding us as an audience that no matter how great his hope you "can't repeat the past." The clock symbolises this, with its continuing to tick undeterred by the events around it highlighting the impossible nature of *Gatsby's* dream. Fitzgerald's personal context is also reflected in *Gatsby*, through his cynical world view that results in the criticism of not just love but hope itself. This can be seen in the final lines of the novel, when Nick Carraway's biased perspective of events ultimately reflects the contextual values Fitzgerald criticises: "*Gatsby* believed in the orgiastic future...next year we will run faster, stretch our arms out further, and one fine morning--" The deliberate omission of the end of the sentence symbolises Nick's inability to perceive the true evil of his society, the greed that we as an audience can see killed the innocent Jay *Gatsby* for a crime no greater than having a great hope – a hope to achieve a dream thrust upon him by the American society itself.

In stark contrast to *Gatsby*, EBB's *Sonnet 14* expresses a love and hope that is genuine and true, reflecting the Victorian era's valuing the expression of emotion. "If thou must love me, let it be for nought/ Except love's sake only" exemplifies the composer's desire to be loved for her quintessential self rather than any non-genuine reasons, such as *Gatsby's* desire to achieve his dream-life with Daisy. "Neither love me for/ thine own dear pity's wiping my cheeks dry" demonstrates the use of the personification of pity in order to express EBB's fear that the love she feels for Robert Browning is not truly reciprocated, subsequently demonstrating a more innocent hope than that within *Gatsby*. The use of second-person perspective that *Sonnet 14* is spoken in also creates a more personal feeling and connection to its audience, with the importance of its target audience reinforcing the genuineness of the love within it: *Sonnets of the Portuguese* were not written for publication but rather specifically for Robert Browning, allowing EBB to express a more open and genuine emotion than that in *Gatsby* hence reflecting the contextual belief in the value of open emotion in comparison to the Roaring Twenties, when clear expression of emotion was considered clichéd.

Gatsby further criticises its time period through its exploration of the valuing of individuals for their true selves and within this the society's views on religion and gender. Daisy's admiration for *Gatsby's* property rather than for the man himself highlights this: "It makes me sad because I've never seen such...such beautiful shirts before." Daisy's inability to express love for *Gatsby*, instead admiring his shirts rather than the person, symbolises the lack of genuine valuing of individuals within the Roaring Twenties that Fitzgerald implies was replaced by a desire to satisfy materialistic wants over emotional needs. The superficial nature of this society can also be seen in its treatment

of religion, specifically through Fitzgerald's use of symbolism in the eyes of T.J.Eckleburg on a billboard. Their constant presence watching over the society like God contrasts greatly to the Victorian era's highly religious beliefs, implying that within the American society God has been replaced by materialism: "you may fool me, but you can't fool God" states Wilson after Daisy's death, to which a man states "it's just a billboard," further exemplifying the minor role religion played in the lives of Gatsby's characters and hence the society it portrayed. The society's failure to value individuals is most prominent within its treatment of women as expressed by Daisy: "I hope she'll be a fool – that's the best thing a girl can be in this world, a little fool..." This idea sums up Fitzgerald's criticism of the Roaring Twenties, highlighting how materialistic views driven by greed resulted in a lack of morality within the society as a whole that replaced real values such as gender equality or religion.

EBB's Sonnet 22 also conflicts with the values of its society, in its case not to criticise but instead to reinforce the power of her love for Robert Browning. "Erect and strong/ face to face, silent, growing nigh and nigher;" the use of sexual imagery and connotations within this statement portray a physical love conflicting with the beliefs of Victorian society – that sexuality should be private and not be spoken of. Yet EBB's defying these expectations allows the genuineness of her love to be portrayed further, as can also be seen through her defying the value of religion in her time period. "what bitter wrong/ Can this earth do us, that we should not long/ Be here contented? Think." The use of a rhetorical question expresses EBB's belief that her love with Robert Browning is greater than even the forces of heaven, and the emphasis on the word "think" reinforces this. EBB's use of the sonnet form further reflects this idea, with her expression of ideas conflicting with these Victorian values in the highly structured and limited Sonnet form drawing a parallel to the strict patriarchal society she lived in and subsequently reinforcing the strength of her love that defied the conservatism inherent to the Victorian era.

While both Gatsby and Sonnets of the Portuguese reflect contextual values, it is the texts' challenging of their time periods' beliefs that add to the merit of their exploration of values such as love and the value of the individual. This, in addition to the influence of the personal contexts of their writers, allows for greater insights into the values of the vastly different Roaring Twenties and Victorian time periods due to the texts' simultaneous reflection and challenging of the values that define the ages they were composed within.