

# Ruminating the dilemma between aesthetic pleasure and moral instruction in F. Scott's *The Great Gatsby*

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## Abstract

A piece of literature either focuses on aesthetic qualities or emphasizes didactic elements. The aesthetics of a piece are discernible through its vivid imagery and symbolism. Conversely, if a work imparts specific information or moral lessons to readers, it falls into the category of didactic literature. This article centres on the conflict between aesthetic and didactic elements employed in the novel *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald. The novel examines the deterioration of the American dream during the roaring twenties through the lens of Jay Gatsby the protagonist of the novel. F. Scott Fitzgerald portrays the societal dynamics of 1920s America, known as the Jazz Age, where individuals strive for the American Dream, seeking wealth at the expense of complicating their peaceful lives and forsaking ethical principles. In the midst of extravagant gatherings and luxurious living, the book delves into the subjects of love, affluence, and the quest for the elusive American Dream, ultimately uncovering the vulnerability of illusions and the repercussions of unattainable aspirations. The study grubs about the tension between the ideology of culture and moral consequences which impacts the readers perception.

## Keywords

Fitzgerald, Aestheticism, Jazz Age, American Dream, Didacticism.

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A literary piece encompasses either aesthetic or/and didactic elements and the conflict between these two is a never-ending series. The conflict between these two centres on the question of whether literature should be read for sensory pleasure or to convey important lessons. Both the writers' work and the readers' interpretations were permanently shaped in the literary history by this Aestheticism and Didacticism. The movement Aestheticism in literature was developed in the late 19th century which advocates the idea of emotional experience, where the primary motive of art and literature is to arouse poignant episode over the moral issues and instruction. The Aesthetic movement is often associated with the French term *fin de siècle* meaning end of the century, refers to the closing of an existing era and entails a new one. Victorian ideals and morality were overtaken by the aesthetic culture which embraces beauty in art. In the beginning of the 19th century the phrase *l'art pour l'art* meaning art for art's sake was more popular, but the French poet Theophile Gautier was the first to completely express this term in his poetry volume *Alberus* (1832) and the novel *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835). Not only does Gautier used the phrase but other writers like Benjamin Constant. The aesthetes' belief is that art must be praised for its own history and progress, it should not address any political or worldly issues but independent in its own way.

The Irish poet and dramatist Oscar Wilde, is said to be the father of Aestheticism. His novel, *The portrait of Dorian Grey* (1890) is the finest example for aestheticism. Wilde was deeply influenced by the teachings of art of the pioneer aesthetic writers like Walter Pater and John Ruskin. Walter

Pater's *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* written in the year 1873 examines the works of Renaissance artists and argues for the importance of living through the aesthetic experiences, deeply impacting many aesthetes. The Aesthetic movement having romanticism as its foundation, had a big influence on literary history. Aestheticism commemorates innate value of beauty, uplifting the aesthetic qualities of the writer in their works. The enhanced and perceptive elements highlight the qualities of aestheticism.

This movement refused the notion that literature should only have didactic purpose allowing the readers to experience the world of beauty, imagination to escape from the moral or societal issues. Writers embraced intrinsic narratives to create sensory experience for the reader. Aestheticism celebrates the innate value of beauty encouraging the writers to encompass the beauty in their works rather than the ethical issues. Aesthetic enthusiasts employed symbols and motifs in their narratives to transmit the ideas and emotions indirectly, which permits the readers to experience and interpret the work subjectively. The impact of aestheticism can be traced throughout the literary history reminding us of the enduring enchantment of art for its own sake and the aesthetic principles consistently resonates on the contemporary literature.

On the contrary, Didacticism in literature focuses on the involvement of moral and educational elements within a narrative. In didactic literature the main aim is to educate or guide the readers on ethical values or principles. The term Didactics is derived from the Greek word *didaktikós* meaning skilled in teaching. The didactic literature has its roots in oral traditions,

where parables, fables, and myths proffered a source of entertainment to the listeners in parallel to moral lessons. These myths, fables and parables are great examples for didactic literature which has been passed on from one generation to another. For example, Aesop's fables involve animal characters and concise stories to impart righteous verity. Religious texts such as the Bible are prominent examples of didactic literature. Fairy tales, on the other hand, can be included in didactic literature as they were originated as oral tradition.

Allegories are also included in didactic literature, *The Pilgrims Progress* (1678) by John Bunyan with its allegorical narratives and characters represents moral virtues and vices. The storyline develops as an intrinsic journey revealing the challenges of life which can be tackled by practicing moral values. Didactic poetry presenting biblical narrative and saints' lives was popular during the 13th century. Didacticism found an outlet in educational

literature during the Enlightenment era (17th and 18th centuries) and writers like John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau employed their creations to elaborate educational principles and theories. This literature has faced many criticisms for being excessively moralistic and educational forfeiting the artistic expression. This literature entertains the readers as well as aims to leave a lasting influence on their minds and values.

The novel *The Great Gatsby* (1925) by F. Scott Fitzgerald explores the theme of American dream combining the elements of aesthetics and didactics. Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald (1896-1940) was an American novelist and essayist. His works are popular for the descriptions of Jazz Age, the 1920s and the term was employed in his short story collection *Tales of the Jazz Age* (1922). His notable works are *The Beautiful and Damned* (1922), *Tender is the Night* (1934). Fitzgerald depicts the moral decline of the Jazz Age through his intrinsic narratives in the view of Nick Carraway the narrator of the novel. The Jazz Age in 1920s and 1930s was a period in which jazz music and dance styles were popular all over the world. The involvement of the Jazz Age in the novel gives an aesthetic appeal to the novel with its flapper fashion and glamorous jazz music. The extravagant parties organised by Jay Gatsby, fashion and style of the characters in which the women wear flappers in their shift dresses, finger-wave hairstyles and pillbox hats and men had a lot of additions like wide lapels and wide-legged pants called oxford pants are the aesthetic elements depicted in the novel. The vivid imagery, symbols and the intrinsic narrative of Gatsby's mansion, his parties is a visual treat for the readers. The symbols green light, the eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg and the valley of ashes conveys deeper meaning. The story unfolds through the character Nick Carraway with the flashbacks adds the aesthetic appeal to the novel and the non-linear storytelling creates a sense of mystery to the readers.

The colour symbolism evokes emotions and themes, where each colour represents different meaning in the novel. The green colour represents the hope and desire of Gatsby to win

back Daisy Buchanan. It also symbolizes the jealousy of Gatsby for Tom Buchanan who has Daisy's heart and not him. The gold, wealth and money, for example, the house of Tom and Daisy Buchanan is described as "a line of French windows, glowing now with reflected gold (Fitzgerald, 9)." yellow, the corruption of Gatsby's new money and white the purity and innocence of that daisy portrays to the outside world. These symbols add an aesthetic resonance making the readers to interpret the themes of the novel which is the element of didacticism. The characters prioritize wealth and social status over genuine human conditions. Daisy Buchanan the unrequited love of Jay Gatsby married Tom Buchanan for money even though she had feelings for Gatsby. Jay's unsatisfied yearning and deeper emptiness were masked by his extravagant parties.

The protagonist Jay Gatsby himself is a didactic figure in the novel representing the consequences of an unrealistic pursuit of dream. His unattainable love for Daisy and the extremes to which he goes to woo her showcases the perils of fixating on an idealized version of success or happiness. Beneath the beauty and extravagance of Jazz Age there lies a tragedy which employs the societal values to the reader. The hollowness of wealth is depicted through the characters like Daisy Buchanan and Tom Buchanan that in spite of their wealth they lack in morality. Their actions and choices expose a world of dishonesty and lack of connection to the readers making them realize that there should not be any compromise for the personal integrity while attaining success. The novel compares the extravagance decline of morality and wealth, creating a critical view on the American Dream during the roaring twenties. Fitzgerald depicts the inequalities of the social class between the characters with the juxtapositions of the "East egg" (Fitzgerald-7) old money, the elite people and "west egg" (Fitzgerald, 8) new money, the newly rich like Gatsby, highlights the societal differences and inequality. The allusion to the jazz and popular music makes the readers to encounter and gives an idea about the culture of the 1920s.

The references of both the aesthetic and didactic elements helps the readers to understand the idea of the writer more clearly as the aesthetics relieves the mind of the people from the vague principles and at the same time instructing the importance of societal values. The aesthetic elements at times helps the reader to escape from reality, free from the clutches of the materialistic world to live in their own realm of enchantment. Greek philosopher Plato in his book II of *The Republic* authored around 375BC attacks poetry for instilling the passion in the hearts instead of removing them. He says that a work must have morality that can influence the mind of the youth so that the country can flourish abundantly. German philosopher Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche in his *Twilight of the Idols* (1899) argued that there is no art for art's sake, and that art always expresses societal and human values. Even though critics argue about the involvement of aesthetics and didactics in literature, both are special in their own way. Readers learn a lot from the writers' work and the participation

of aesthetic elements makes them to enjoy the literary piece. Each person has their own way of understanding the piece of work and the writer's hands over their works to the readers to decipher the hidden meanings beneath those beauty they mentioned. F. Scott Fitzgerald, employed two of the most important entity of literature, Aestheticism and Didacticism in his novel.

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