

## THE LOST STEPS OF THE GREAT GATSBY

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### ABSTRACT

This article presents a comparative analysis of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Alejo Carpentier's *Los pasos perdidos*. By comparing and contrasting characters, scenarios, images and archetypes, it is possible to see that the bases for the failure the myth called "the American dream", a classical topic in U.S. literature, are also found in the work by the Cuban novelist. Dualism, individualism, the search for identity, as well as ambition, indifference and hope are essential elements in both works which lead to the failure of the myth. That is how two different regions, two writers with different background, culture and setting, and two novels written twenty five years apart show the same distorted, corrupted and lost dream: an inaccessible and unreachable dream implicit in the ironic and melancholic title of the article.

In spite of its negative criticism during the twenties, *The Great Gatsby* (1925), F. Scott Fitzgerald's third novel, is now considered his masterpiece as well as a classic in American literature. Regardless of having earlier been run as an "experimental" novel, Alejo Carpentier's *Los pasos perdidos* (1953), (*The Lost Steps*), curiously, also his third novel, is today recognized as an essential element in the gestations of contemporary Spanish-American fiction.

Within the historical frame of the prohibition era, Fitzgerald depicts the story of Jay Gatsby, an idealistic individual who gets involved in the materialism and corruption of such a society. Gatsby has a goal and tries to achieve it but does not succeed in regaining a lost past. On the other hand, Carpentier presents an anonymous Spanish-American composer who escapes from New York to the Venezuelan jungle, where he finds love, authenticity, and creativity. But after a return to civilization, he cannot return to paradise.

Even though these two works were written a quarter of a century apart and by authors from different cultural backgrounds, both protagonists present the same mythical reverse: the failure of the "American dream".

Fitzgerald's novel, as many critics have pointed out, embodies the spirit, glamour, and corruption of the American twenties. Thus, one of its essential elements is materialism, as John Henry Raleigh qualifies, "a materialism so heavy that it was inhuman."<sup>1</sup> In the narrative, then, we face artificial creatures "who retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was, that kept them together."<sup>2</sup> No feelings, no human concern, just a remarkable search for money; in other words, they are, as Nick Carraway presents, just "a rotten crowd" (*G G*, 154). But even Nick, the only sensitive character in the novel, "decided to go East and learn the 'bond business'" (*G G*, 3). It is not only thirst for knowledge but ambition, as Nick "bought a dozen volumes on banking credit and investment securities... to unfold the shining secrets that only Midas and Morgan and Maccenas knew." (*G G*, 4) Money is, then the ultimate word in the East. Long Island, New York, is the place described in Fitzgerald's work; similarly, New York City is the one first chosen by Carpentier.

Carpentier's novel portrays a society where people "had fallen upon the era of the Wasp-Man, the No-Man when souls were no longer

sold to the Devil, but to the Bookkeeper."<sup>5</sup> The same materialism found in Fitzgerald re-emerges in Carpentier, as well as the dehumanized condition of "that city of perennial anonymity amid the crowd, that place of relentless haste where eyes met only by accident" (*LS*, 29-30). Even in social gatherings, there is no friendship, no interest, no communication. In Gatsby's parties, for instance, "People were not invited -they [just] went there" (*G G*, 41). They never care about their host as they never care about the rest. There, "the cocktail table [is] the only place in the garden where a single man could linger without looking purposeless and alone." (*G G*, 42). Fitzgerald's guests are a crowd of solitary individuals who drink, dance, and talk, trying to hide their frustrations. The same traits are shared by the friends of Carpentier's hero who "drank every day as a defense against despair, fear of failure, self-contempt" (*LS*, 29).

If we individualize some of the characters of both novels, we will find more similarities. Daisy Buchanan, for instance, with her childish attitudes, her empty expressions such as "How gorgeous" (*G G*, 10), "I'm paralyzed with happiness" (*G G*, 9), and her "bright eyes and bright passionate mouth" (*G G*, 9), obviously illuminated by make-up, personifies the superficiality and artificiality of her society. Daisy's brightness is a fake. "Her romantic façade..." as A.E. Dyson says, "is without reality."<sup>6</sup> And her main concern is to be "sophisticated." (*G G*, 18) Mouche, the lover of Carpentier's musician, is Daisy's counterpart. Mouche is the astrologist, fond of yoga and drugs who loves to introduce artificial, pseudo-intellectual comments. Alexis Márquez defines her as the embodiment of snobbism and frivolity.<sup>7</sup> Besides, during the jungle trip, Mouche's beautiful blonde hair turns "greenish," her skin "reddish" and her previously well cared for nails, broken and chipped. Like the "two girls in twin yellow dresses" (*G G*, 42) of Gatsby's party, Daisy and Mouche are as fake and frivolous as their environments.

Tom Buchanan presents another trait, besides corruption and hypocrisy, of that society: failure. Tom is the successful football player at New Haven, a kind of "national figure" who achieves "such an acute limited excellence at twenty-one that everything afterward savors of anti-climax" (*G G*, 6). In spite of his material

success and his complete adaptation to the East, for he is a Westerner, as are Nick and Gatsby, Tom is stagnant. The former national hero is 'paralyzed' in such a society. We have a similar case in Ruth, the musician's wife. She is an actress who has been repeating the same role for several years. As Carpentier says, "The success of the play was slowly effacing its interpreters" (*LS*, 5). Susan Poujol affirms that by means of Ruth, Carpentier introduces the conception of the world as a piece of drama where men and women repeat their actors' roles, where there is no communication but total solitude.<sup>8</sup> So Ruth and Tom's impotence in holding on to non-economic success is another characteristic of their decadent and materialistic society. "There," people are not individuals, but parts of a mass of stagnation and corruption, represented in the image of Fitzgerald's valley of arches, "the Wasteland" and spiritual desolation of modern society.

Due to their previously depicted milieu, Fitzgerald's Gatsby and Carpentier's composer exhibit a deep loneliness as well as a strong urge for communication. Gatsby, for example, prepares parties, but his guests usually "came and went without having met Gatsby at all" (*G G*, 41). For them, he could be a killer, a spy, or a bootlegger, but never a friend. The only one who cares about Gatsby is Nick, who explains, "I found myself on Gatsby's side and 'alone'" (*G G*, 165). An immense solitude is one of Gatsby's most essential traits. Gatsby is "afraid no one's there" (*G G*, 166), and he "can't go through [his life] alone" (*G G*, 166). But he is constantly lonely. In his relationship with Daisy, for instance, he is the only one who loves. To his funeral, with the exceptions of Nick and Gatsby's own father, "nobody came" (*G G*, 175). On the other hand, Carpentier's hero has the same problem. He cannot find communication in his marriage or in his love affair. There is always "a desolate sense of loneliness" (*LS*, 8). Unlike Gatsby, he finds real love and communication in Rosaris, the native of the Venezuelan primitive community, but he loses them. So, at the end of the novel, he is again alone trying to trace his own lost steps.

In addition to solitude, the two heroes' unclear identities prevent them from achieving the "American dream." Gatsby, for instance, appears as an enigmatic and mysterious man, a

myth within himself. He could be either an Oxford man or a killer, a German spy or a courageous American soldier in wartime, a bootlegger or a charitable soul. No one knows who Jay Gatsby is. It is not until the end of the novel that his father reveals his real name: James Gats. But even then, the "Jimmy" who used to "rise from bed [at] 6 a.m. ...work [from] 8:30 [to] 4:30 p.m. [and] practice elocution, poise... [and] how to attain it [from] 5:00 [to] 6:00 p.m." (*G G*, 174) is another person. The "Jimmy" who tried to "read one improving book or magazine per week" and to "be better to [his] parents" (*G G*, 174) had already died a long time ago. Gatsby is, then, the product of a society which has killed the innocent Jimmy to give way to an artificial Jay.

We have another undefined identity in Carpentier's hero. The composer does not invent a name, as Gatsby does, for he does not even have one. He dreams of being "Prometheus Unbound;" he calls himself "Sisyphus;" he is, as Zalma Palermo affirms, the individual alienated by an imposed culture and by a way of life without roots.<sup>7</sup> He is the composer, the filmmaker who could be either Noah or Ulyses in that marvelous world. He could be the "Wasp-man" as well as the first man. He, himself, reinforces his enigmatic nature telling us: "Between the I that I was and the I that I might have been the dark abyss of the lost years gaped." (*LS*, 22)

Dualism is a common feature shared by both heroes. In *Gatsby*, as many critics have seen, there is a mixture between materialism and idealism that has been considered "the corruption of the American dream."<sup>8</sup> Dyson, for instance, considers *Gatsby* "the apotheosis of his rootless society;"<sup>9</sup> while Marius Bewley sees him as "a romantic view of wealth."<sup>10</sup> In short, he is a platonian conception, as *Gatsby* defines himself, within a corrupted world. In addition, *Gatsby* stands for the West that manages to adapt to the East, something that Nick could not achieve. But, as Thomas J. Stavola says, "*Gatsby* suffers from a form of moral myopia. He does not recognize the spaciousness of the world of the very rich where he searched for fulfillment."<sup>11</sup> So he collapses, the victim of a dualistic and antagonistic nature. Although he "succeeds in creating a glittering new identity,"<sup>12</sup> he fails in

trying to preserve it, for Jay Gatsby does not know himself.

Carpentier's hero also presents a dualistic nature. According to Esther Mough-González, his duality is due to the conflict between the Spanish-American cultural values and a highly deunified American society. Mough-González states that the clash develops the conflict between the authentic I and the alienated one, in other words, the self and the other, the man from "here" and the one from "there."<sup>13</sup> According to Graciela Perosio, his duality comes from his origin since his father was German (Nordic and Protestant European) and his mother Spanish-American (Latin and Catholic European), and so he is the product of a reconciliation of opposites.<sup>14</sup> But unfortunately, we do not see this "reconciliation" in the hero. Carpentier's composer presents an agony-filled search for an identity that turns out to the dualistic and conflictive.

Although foreigners in an alien milieu (*Gatsby* from the West and Carpentier from Spanish America) become part of the New York society, they need to adapt to it and absorb it. *Gatsby* becomes materialistic to pursue his dreams. His naiveté gives over to corruption. Carpentier's hero leaves his art, music, to be part of the film industry in order to achieve the proper living standard that the expensive city demands. *Gatsby* never sees the environment as his own nemesis, while Carpentier's hero realizes it but still returns. Thus, the corruptive milieu, as well as the hero's conflictive nature, determine, in both works, the reverse of the American dream.

It would be inaccurate to continue with the comparative analysis of these two novels without mentioning some of the differences which lie in their conflicts and archetypal motifs. Beginning with Fitzgerald's work, we have the conflict of poverty versus wealth: to obtain his "grail", the girl of his dream, *Gatsby* makes a fortune by corrupt means. The conflict between the poor and the wealthy is clearly stated, as well as the one within wealthy circles. The East Eggers, the traditional rich families, oppose the newly rich represented by the West Eggers. In spite of the materialism embodied in New York City, Carpentier does not focus on the above mentioned conflict. In fact, the materialistic background, as well as the natural

background, develop another conflict: indifference versus human concern. We see how Rosario and the members of her primitive community exhibit traits and values already lost in the musician's civilized world. It is not only Rosario's beauty, but mainly her feelings, her suffering that attracts Carpentier's composer. "In deep mourning her gleaming hair combed tight to her head, her lips pale, she seemed to me breathtakingly beautiful. She looked all around her with eyes hollow with weeping... as though she had received a mortal wound." (LS, 129)

The Venezuelan jungle serves to develop another conflict that is not present in Fitzgerald's artificial setting, the one of civilization versus nature. An ambience where "the trees... looked taller that their roots would soon feel the warmth of the sun" (LS, 278) does not have a counterpart in *The Great Gatsby*. In Fitzgerald, even the moon, the symbol of motherhood and spirituality is compared to "a triangle of silver scales," (GG, 47) and the green light that Gatsby contemplates is as artificial as Daisy herself. There is no place to "fresh air," to scent life, as Shelley says. There is just "the valley of ashes" obviously filled with "powdery air" (GG, 23). Even God's image must be visualized in a commercial sign as the eyes of Doctor T.J. Eckleburg. Carpentier's hero, on the other hand, experiences such a conflict. We see the revival of Rousseau's ideas of the Noble Savage, of nature as a source of goodness and society as an entity of corruption. But in Fitzgerald, the conflict is limited to that of society versus man. So that when Tom Buchanan says, "Civilization's going to pieces" (GG, 13) he is already depicting the deteriorated condition of man himself.

Some archetypal patterns expose differences between the two novels. In Fitzgerald's, we have the initiation pattern: the innocent Jimmy, who turns into the experienced Jay. But instead of a passage from innocence to maturity, we have one from innocence to corruption. With Carpentier's musician, there is no initiation pattern, since we do not have a glimpse of what he was. We just know what he is: a frustrated being who escapes from society. Besides, in Carpentier, we have the journey motif: a trip to the Amazonian jungle, a trip to the origin, a trip to the past. Although the trip

motif is not found in Fitzgerald's novel, we have the same wish to recapture the past.

The quest motif is present in both works, but it also exhibits differences. In Fitzgerald's, as Stavola says, there is a "quest for fulfillment within a materialistic society that denies the power of the spirit and offers instead the limitless material, and therefore exhaustible possibilities of success..."<sup>15</sup> There is a material quest that Edwin Fussell sees as "the search for wealth familiar within the Anglo-Saxon Protestant ideal of personal material success."<sup>16</sup> But, as we have seen, there is also a search for love and human concern, "a misdirected search for transcendence"<sup>17</sup> as well as "a quest for his [Gatsby's] identity."<sup>18</sup>

In Carpentier, we first have the search for the musical instruments, which is simply a pretext the hero uses to evade his world. Besides, he does not look for material richness to achieve idealistic dreams; he looks for the moral values now non-existent in the materialistic society. In addition, there is a quest for origin and truth. While Gatsby tries to efface his origin by creating a new self-image in line with that materialistic world, Carpentier's musician wants to rediscover his roots. However, both heroes are concerned with the idea of identity as well as searching for a past. It is at this point that their differences converge: James Gatsby could easily take the trip undergone by the musician. Gatsby contemplates the green light with the same hope that the composer looks for the signs to show the way. Jay Gatsby would have been saved if he had known that which Carpentier's hero discovered at the end: Gatsby's "Can't repeat the past?... Why of course you can!" (GG, 111) is finally denied by Carpentier's musician who realizes that it is an "unforgivable mistake of turning back, thinking that a miracle could be repeated" (IS, 271). This same "miracle" is embedded in the idea of the American dream, the desire for an ideal place where happiness and success could be achieved and preserved. Within the frame of the cluster of three myths that constitutes the "American dream", we can perceive some other differences in the two novels. The myth of Edenic possibilities, the one of finding a second paradise, is seen in Carpentier's novel. As Susana Poujol affirms, it is "there" where we find the first couple, the first man and the first-

woman who have recuperated the Paradise.<sup>19</sup> Such a paradise is never found in Fitzgerald's work. Instead, we have an embodiment of corruption and lack of moral values. Even the ideal world Gatsby has in mind, although romantic and idealistic, is nourished by elements from his polluted society.

The second myth, the one of the new Adam, is found in Carpentier's work, too. However, the life of the "first man" is ephemeral. In Fitzgerald, we have Adam after the fall. Although we have some information about his previously decent life, it is the image of the corrupted individual that dominates the narrative. Finally, we have the myth of success that could be the case of the self-made individual who rises from poverty to richness, in other words, Jay Gatsby. But Fitzgerald's hero is paradoxical, for he is naive yet corrupted, humble yet ambitious, rich yet unsuccessful. It is precisely this conflictive nature that prevents his success at the end. With Carpentier's hero, we do not see this material idea of success, but a spiritual one. He wants to rediscover himself, to purify himself in Nature, to be the first man. However, later he decides to return to civilization. He may be looking for artistic success, since he rediscovers the inspiration to write his music. In any case, his idea of success never implies a materialistic view.

A.E. Dyson affirms that "Gatsby's dreams belong... to the story of humanity itself; as also does the irony and judgement of his awakening".<sup>20</sup> In the case of Carpentier's hero, his awakening came too late, and that is why the paradise is denied to him in the end. Besides, the history of humanity itself, as Dyson mentions, marks the contextual tradition which evolved into the "American dream."

The Europeans see the Americas as lands of opportunity and improvement, a possibility to begin a new life. Then, the Americas are colonized, exploited, as well as peopled by the Old World. As a result, different races converge, giving birth to hybrid cultures. Later, the Americas demand independence, looking for a self-identity. Of course, there are differences in the Americas: the way they were colonized, the kind of people who colonized them, and their intentions, for instance, the great deal of ambition in Columbus and his followers and

the Pilgrims' need to liberate themselves from an oppressive society.

Leaving history aside for a while, let us return to literature. Richard Chase affirms that the American novel is charged with antagonisms. On the other hand, a lot of criticism on the Spanish-American novel has pointed out a presence of opposites and contradictions. The American novel, as such, leaving behind European models, presents the recurrent theme of a search for identity. This theme has also been characteristic in the Spanish-American novel. After this quick glance at history on the Americas and criticism of the novel, we have some ideas already mentioned: a desire for success, a hope of finding a paradise, hybrid cultures, ambition, liberation from society, conflictive nature, opposites, antagonisms, and search for identity. All these notions echo Fitzgerald's and Carpentier's work.

*The Great Gatsby* presents dualism and antagonism, as does *The Lost Steps*, which also shows conflicts of a hybrid culture. Besides, Fitzgerald's hero exhibits the same ambition that moved Columbus and his followers to the "New World." Carpentier's hero, on the other hand, needs the liberation from society seen with the Pilgrims. Thus, the two works reflect needs, desires, and dreams that the Americas have experienced. It is not necessary, then, to be American to sympathize with Jay Gatsby. It is not necessary to be Spanish-American to wish the paradise Carpentier's musician found in the Amazonian jungle. It is not surprising, then, that the so-called "American dream" is present in both works. As its adjective indicates, it does not belong exclusively to one country, but to the Americas as a whole.

Obviously, "the Americas" present differences, too, and one of them is the idea of success: the American conception is more individualistic while the Spanish-American one is embedded in society. It is precisely here where we find one more reason for the reverse of the American dream analyzed in the two novels. While Fitzgerald's hero is not described as an individual, but as a product of the American twenties, Carpentier's hero tries to detach himself from society. Thus, both try to achieve success contradicting the nature of their respective cultural backgrounds. The result, then, is the failure of the American dream that is implicit in

the amalgamative and ironic title: *The Lost Steps of The Great Gatsby*.

## Notes

1. John Henry Raleigh. "F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*," *F. Scott Fitzgerald: A Collection of Critical Essays*. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963) 101.
2. F. Scott Fitzgerald. *The Great Gatsby*. (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1986) 180-181. The following quotes from this source will be included in the text indicated as *GG* with its respective page number.
3. Alejo Carpentier. *The Lost Steps*, trans. Harriet de Onís ed. Alfred A. Knopf. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1967) 9. The following quotes from this source will be included in the text indicated as *LS* with its respective page number.
4. A. E. Dyson. "The Great Gatsby: Thirty-six Years After," *F. Scott Fitzgerald: A Collection of Critical Essays*. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963) 114.
5. Alexis Márquez Rodríguez. *La Obra Narrativa de Alejo Carpentier*. (Venezuela: Ediciones de la Biblioteca de la Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1970) 70.
6. Susana Poujol. "Palabra y Creación en *Los Pasos Perdidos*," *Historia y Mito en la obra de Alejo Carpentier*. (Buenos Aires: Fernando García Cambeiro, 1972) 142.
7. Zulma Palermo. "Aproximación a los pasos perdidos," *Historia y Mito en la obra de Alejo Carpentier*. (Buenos Aires: Fernando García Cambeiro, 1972) 99.
8. Raleigh, 99.
9. Dyson, 117.
10. Marius Bewley. "Scott Fitzgerald's Criticism of America," *F. Scott Fitzgerald: A Collection of Critical Essays*. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963) 127.
11. Thomas J. Stavola. *Scott Fitzgerald: Crisis in an American Identity*. (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1979) 131.
12. Stavola, 132.
13. Esther P. Morega-González. *Alejo Carpentier: estudios sobre su narrativa*. (Madrid: Editorial Playor, 1980) 40.
14. Graciela Perosio. "Palabra y Creación en *Los Pasos Perdidos*," *Historia y Mito en la obra de Alejo Carpentier*. (Buenos Aires: Fernando García Cambeiro, 1972) 135.
15. Stavola, 130.
16. Edwin Fussell. "Fitzgerald's Brave New World," *F. Scott Fitzgerald: A Collection of Critical Essays*. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963) 44.
17. Stavola, 131.
18. Stavola, 132.
19. Susana Poujol, 146.
20. Dyson, 113.

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