

Trimalchio and Gatsby: The Age of Nero in Jazz-Age America

F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby* is an era-defining criticism of average people hoping to join or appease a higher class by mimicking their rituals. This was not a completely new critique in 1925, when *The Great Gatsby* was originally published. Fitzgerald's first manuscript for the book was titled *Trimalchio*, referencing the nouveau-riche character of Petronius' *Satyricon*, which was written in the late First Century A.D. The second working of the title was *Trimalchio on the East Egg*, referencing the novels' setting and drawing a direct parallel between *Gatsby* and Petronius' character. Publishers decided the name *Trimalchio* rolled off neither the tongue nor the pen, and were uncharmed by the reference to a dirty, fragmentary, and relatively unpopular Ancient Roman novel. So Fitzgerald published his book as *The Great Gatsby*, and its direct reference to *Trimalchio* was confined to a single sentence: "It was when curiosity about *Gatsby* was at its highest that the lights in his house failed to go on one Saturday night— and, as obscurely as it had begun, his career as *Trimalchio* was over"¹.

Yet parallels between the two novels are apparent in plot and expressions of major themes. *Trimalchio* and *Gatsby* both come from humble backgrounds, and, having become unimaginably wealthy in their lifetimes, are eager to throw parties that broadcast their success. In doing so, they also mimic the leisure class of their eras, with *Trimalchio* copying behaviors of Nero himself, such as putting his first beard clippings in a golden casket; and *Gatsby* attempting to make himself worthy of his old-moneyed neighbor, Daisy Buchanan. *Trimalchio* and *Gatsby* evidence the influence of their societies' elite classes on the lives of everyday people. When presented, the leisure class is unwelcoming, and defends their position on top with carelessness

¹ Fitzgerald, 120.

at best, and cruelty at worst. This is true for Nero, who was meant to find the story of someone trying to equal his greatness comical; and for the Buchannans, who selfishly allow Gatsby to be murdered.

The more pointed themes between the novels that this essay seeks to highlight are as follows: the performances of wealth, which are culturally characteristic of both Neronian Rome and the Roaring 20s; the fetishization of commodities under Marx's definition, in which objects "take on a mystical life of their own as they are converted from 'mere products of men's hands' into 'independent beings endowed with life'"²; and the vacuity that pervades in both characters' performances.

Although extensive criticism exists on both works individually— often covering similar themes— very little work has analyzed the books in relation to one another. Yet understanding Fitzgeralds' familiarity and interest with Trimalchio while writing *The Great Gatsby* shows an intention to characterize Jazz-Age America in relation to Neronian Rome. Reading the texts through this lens adds to knowledge of socio-political life in both cultures, and ultimately characterizes both 1920s America and Neros' Rome as societies declining at the orchestrating hand of a careless, callous ruling class.

Bibliography

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² Donaldson, 2004.