**Sabrina ZERAR,**
**Department of English**
**Faculty of Letters and Languages, University Mouloud Mammeri, Tizi-Ouzou**

# Title of the research:

### The Potlatch and its Shaping Influence on Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*

## Introduction

None of F. Scott Fitzgerald's other works whether in poetry or prose has received as much critical attention as his *The Great Gatsby*. If it is true as it is sometimes claimed in critical circles that authors really produce only a single book that they keep re-writing in different forms, *The Great Gatsby* is certainly the one book in Fitzgerald's writing career that earned him the title of novelist. To date, it has been read from diverse and multiple perspectives that makes it very difficult for new readers to carve a niche in the huge amount of scholarship that it has amassed. However, I would argue that little attention has been devoted by critics to the issue of the potlatch and the way it shapes the content and form of the novel. The "potlatch" as it is conceptualized and theorized by scholars such as Marcel Mauss in *The Gift* and George Bataille in *The Accursed Share* will be deployed in this research to account for the generic/mythic displacements that have led many critics to quarrel over the category of fiction to which *The Great Gatsby* belongs. The potlatch perspective will also be employed to shed light into the complexity of the love-war relationships between characters and the types of society they stand for, and the way Fitzgerald conceived and circulated the book itself as a "gift" or "potlatch" in the capitalist economy of the 1920s America.

## Results and discussion

Much has already been said about the evening parties organized by Gatsby in his newly acquired mansion in West Village. I would contend that the idea that these parties are part and parcel of a decoy for attracting Daisy living across the other side of Long Island. Whilst I stick to this idea, I wish to add that technically or symbolically speaking these parties constitute a form of Potlatch, the function of which is not only to delay the climactic battle

between the two characters Gatsby/Faust and Tom/Menelaus for the love of Daisy/Helen, but to produce a carnivalistic text. The Potlatch represents a form of gift exchange, which has received ever-increasing attention from anthropologists, sociologists, and now literary critics since Mauss produced his now famous scholarly work on the topic entitled *The Gift*. According to Mauss, the gift is the predominant form of exchange in archaic societies such the Melanesian societies and the American North West, wherein he identified "four forms of the potlatch … comparatively identical" (Mauss Marcel, 2007: 50). This gift exchange operates on the basis of three obligations, to give, to receive, and to reciprocate. Its function is to preserve authority over one's tribe and to reach a respectable rank among one's peers especially when gift exchange involves the chiefs of the tribe.

Mauss's idea of the potlatch has been revisited and deepened by eminent scholars like Georges Bataille in his seminal work *The Accursed Share* published in two volumes. Bataille sees another function in the potlatch as practiced in the Mexican Society as described by the Spanish scholars who accompanied the Conquistadors during the conquest of that part of Latin America now known as Mexico. In his defense of what he calls the General Economy, in contrast to classical economy. Bataille argues exchange in the archaic society did not start with barter as the theorists of classical economy like Adam Smith claims but with gift exchange, or the potlatch. This what he claims is revealed by the Spanish archives about the Aztec merchants who at their return from their expeditions are not interested in accumulating or hoarding their wealth, but distribute in the form of gifts. As he tells us, "the merchant" is the man-who-gives, so much so that his first concern from an expedition was with offering a banquet to which he invited his confreres, who went home laden with presents. (Bataille Georges, 1991: 65)" Bataille observes a similar practice of ritual prodigality or what he calls the wasteful expenditure in the archives pertaining to the Indians of the American Northwest. Thorstein Veblen in his *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, arguably influenced by Marcel

Mauss, establishes a parallel between the Potlatch and the phenomenon of conspicuous consumption of commodities that could not have escaped the attention of Scott Fitzgerald, his contemporary. I have already quote Veblen in the first chapter when I compared Dan Cody to the "gentleman of pleasure". On the whole, Veblen has detected the function of potlatch of the Indians of the American North West and the conspicuous consumption of commodities by the newly rich in the America of the last decade of the nineteenth century. What he says about conspicuous consumption and the potlatch deserves to be quoted at length for the insight it sheds into the function of the parties that Gatsby organizes in Fitzgerald's novel:

> Conspicuous consumption of valuable goods is a means of reputability to the gentleman of leisure. As wealth accumulates on his hands, his own unaided effort will not avail to sufficiently put his opulence in evidence by this method. The aid of friends and competitors is therefore brought in by resorting to the giving of valuable presents and expensive feasts and entertainments. Presents and feasts had probably another origin than that of naïve ostentation, but they acquired their utility for this purpose very early, and they have retained that character to the present; so that their utility in this respect has now long been the substantial ground on which these usages rest. Costly entertainments, such as the potlatch or the ball, are peculiarly adapted to serve to this end. The competitor with whom the entertainer wishes to institute a comparison is, by this method, made to serve as a means to the end. (Veblen Theodore, 1993: 455)

Obviously, as I have argued above, Veblen in his *Theory of Leisure Class* is appropriating the argument that Mauss developed about the potlatch, and through him this idea of "potlatch as rivalry," the phrase is borrowed from Bataille because of its explicitness, percolates down to Scott Fitzgerald in his description of the parties arranged by his hero in his mansion. In this aspect of appropriating "archaic ideas" such as the Potlach from the findings of anthropology, Scott Fitzgerald is not alone in modernist fiction since we find the same idea of gift exchange in Joseph Conrad's *Karain: A Memory*. This dimension of Conrad's novel is researched by Antony Fothergill in his "Conrad's guilt-edged securities: *Karain: a Memory* via Simmel and Benjamin. (Fothergill Antony, 2002)" It follows that Scott Fitzgerald has used what we can call the potlatch ritual to combat his rival by establish himself as a more worthy gentleman of

leisure in the eyes of Daisy, his Helen. The reader who does not understand this symbolic battle that Gatsby/Faust wages against Tom/Menelaus stands in this case like the female guest Lucille who has received a "Croirier's" new evening gown that costs Gatsby hundreds of dollars a gift in exchange for the one that she has torn out during one of his parties. Asked by her friend whether she has accepted the gift, Lucille responds positively, and for her friend to add a comment showing her ignorance as to the ritual game or battle that Gatsby is waging by offering gifts to his guests: "There's something funny about a fellow that'll do a thing like that," said the other girl eagerly. He doesn't want any trouble with anybody. (p. 49)" This may be true as far as Gatsby is regarded as someone who wants to hide his underground activities, but in the context of the novel, this is a subtle variation on the military battle between Faust and Menelaus featured in the romance part of Goethe's *Dr Faust*. Fitzgerald remains true to his elliptical, or suggestive narrative method called the mythic method by T.S. Eliot.

It has to be noted that Gatsby steals the show from his rival during the second party at which the latter attended. I have already amply demonstrated how Tom is ridiculed by Gatsby who keeps introducing him to the other famous guests as the "polo player" knowing well he was not really a sports hero. Tom also shows that he is not the match to Gatsby as far as the emerging society of the time is concerned. As Gatsby moves very easily among the guests, socializing with everybody, Tom remains aloof and bored whilst his wife is dallying with her former lover Gatsby. At the end of the second party, we see ladies married to wealthy males of the old generation refusing to quit the party as soon as their husbands wished them to do. They were ultimately forced to leave by being practically lifted from the celebration ground. The same is the case with Tom and Daisy. Daisy wants to stay further in the party enchanted by all the celebrities around her. When Tom criticizes the kind of people attending the party, she lashes at him saying that they are far better than the people that they usually frequent.

However, the first rounds of the battle for the love of Daisy are first won by Gatsby, who not only managed to draw his love to his abode through the complicity of Jordan Baker and Nick Carraway, but to be involved in what seems a long adulterous affair with Daisy. The description of the renewal of contact between Gatsby with Daisy arranged in Carraway's home in a rainy day in the evening makes of Gatsby look like a Gothic figure such as Heathcliff in Emile Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*. The way that Gatsby goes out just at the moment Daisy arrives at Carraway's home only to come back a few moments later drenched in the rain reminds us of the behavior of Heathcliff with Catherine in Bronte's romance. His tilting of the clock backward on the chimney breast whilst looking with enchantment at his love sitting on a coach in front of him echoes a similar encounter between the two lovers before their separation, and at the same expresses Gatsby's feeling that he had at last managed to rewind the time backward making his restorative nostalgia a reality.

To come back to the war between Tom and Gatsby that the latter wages through the organization of potlatch celebrations, one has also to point to the "derogatory" but highly symbolical description that Carraway gives of Gatsby's mansion. The latter is called "a colossal affair by any standard – it was a factual imitation of some Hôtel de Ville in Normandy, with a tower one side, spanking new under a thin beard of ivy, and a marble swimming pool, and more than forty acres of lawn and garden. (p.11)" It is to this mansion that Gatsby takes Daisy for a visit once they have renewed contact in Carraway's home. Carraway's description at this early stage of the narrative before he comes to know the relation between Gatsby and Daisy sounds as a sneer at the pretentions of its wealthy owner, who feels the need for such a grandiose house for a home. But in the eyes of Gatsby no house is grandiose or luxurious enough for Daisy, his lost love. If Gatsby has Daisy vicariously invited to Carraway's home, it is in order to maximize Daisy's surprise at the discovery that it belongs to his former love and thus enchant her heart again. Once seen from the outside,

Gatsby makes her visit the interior of the mansion, which is even more luxuriously furnished with antiquities of all sorts. His own room has a fabulous, fitted wardrobe full of designer clothes bought from England, which Gatsby proceeds to lay out on the bed for Daisy to see. The association of Gatsby's mansion with "Hotel de Ville in Normandy," though made with a sneering tone, symbolically links the name of its proprietor with the famous Duke of Normandy, William the Conqueror, and of course Tom with the vanquished Anglo-Saxons with which he identifies himself.

But Carraway prefers to identify Gatsby with Trimachio another flamboyant character involved in similar potlatch parties as Gatsby in *The Satyricon*, the work of the Roman author Petronius. Trimalchio is a nickname meaning "the Greatest King," who became free and sole heir to his master's immense fortune that he fructifies by undertaking several entrepreneurial ventures. To display his fortune, he hosts extravagant parties to celebrate his success story. Carraway's association of Gatsby with Trimalchio in the quote below has some truth in it if we look only at the flamboyance of the parties hosted by the two characters, but here the comparison stops because the purpose of their ostentatious display of the potlatch is strikingly different. Contrary to Trimalchio's potlatch in Petronius' work, the potlatch in *The Great Gatsby* has the function not only of boasting a superior social rank but also to retrieve a lost Platonic ideal, that of love. "It was when curiosity about Gatsby was at its highest," Carraway tells us, "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. (p. 119)"For Gatsby/Faust there is no sense to go on with the flamboyant display of wealth in potlatch parties as Trimalchio does in Petronius' *Satyricon*, because he has, as I have contended above, won his symbolic battle for the love of Daisy/Helen at the expense of Tom/Menelaus. What he needs now is rather privacy not Trimalchio's self-exhibitionism in order to enjoy the capture or recuperation of his Platonic love. That is why he fires his old personnel to recruit the henchmen or the

protégés of Wolfshiem, the Mephistophelean figure to safeguard his conquest in the platonic romance.

So to summarize Gatsby's love romance up to this stage, I can say that Gatsby has scored a victory of sorts before the final or climatic showdown during Gatsby's visit at Tom's home and then in hired a parlor of suite in the Plaza Hotel on the south side of Central Park, New York at the request of Daisy. During Gatsby's visit, Tom of course has tried to reciprocate Gatsby's insulting display of power and wealth during the potlatch party that he has attended with his wife. It has to be observed that in the potlatch the receiver of gifts has the obligation to reciprocate with more costly gifts than the ones he has received if he wants to maintain his prestige in the eyes of the first donor. But during Gatsby's visit, Tom has nothing to show for maintaining his prestige except the ridiculous transformation of a garage into a stable, proudly announcing to Gatsby that he is the first man to do so. He turns the rivalry into innuendos about Gatsby's illegal activities in his chain drug-stores wherein alcoholic drinks are sold under the counter. "You can buy anything at a drug-store, (p.127)" Tom challenges Gatsby at one critical moment when the group is haggling about whom will drive with whom and in which car in an improvised excursion to down-town New York.

This excursion is preceded by a battle of the gaze. Jean Paul Satre has fully rewritten Hegel's master-slave dialectic with the concentration on the function of the gaze as another means of combat for life in the dialectic of lordship and bondage. It is at the moment that Daisy proposes the excursion to New York that the characters involved in the erotic triangle exchange gazes betraying the secret love that Daisy and Gatsby now share, and making Tom realize for the first time that his wife is cheating on him. As the following quote shows, Tom manages to gaze down his wife, but even with her eyes down, she renews compliments to her lover for his gallantry:

> Who wants to go to tow? demanded Daisy insistently. Gatsby's eyes floated toward her. Ah, "she cried, "you [Gatsby] look so cool." Their eyes met, and

> they stared at each other, alone in space. With an effort she glanced back at the table. 'You always look so cool,' she repeated. She had told him that she loved him, and Tom Buchanan saw. He was astounded. His mouth opened a little, and he looked at Gatsby, and back at Daisy as if he had just recognized her as someone he knew a long time ago. (p.125)

Tom has for a long time ignored the existence of his wife, but all of sudden resurges what René Girard calls "mimetic desire," a desire for an object love by two or many contenders, which otherwise would have passed unnoticed.

Tom finally is compelled to agree with the idea of excursion proposed by his wife seemingly to oblige his wife. But at the moment of the departure, Daisy openly prefers driving in her lover's car, a yellow Rolls Royce instead of her husband's old, blue coupé. To keep his wife with him, Tom proposes to switch cars, with him driving Gatsby's Rolls Royce, though he derides it as a "circus wagon," and Gatsby Tom's blue coupé. But even then, Daisy prefers to stay with her lover leaving the Rolls Royce for Tom, Carraway and Jordan Baker to drive in. This clearly shows that Gatsby has scored his first victory of the tournament, but the match has not yet revealed all its secret surprises.

## Conclusion

All in all, the *agon* or battle stage of the romance in *The Great Gatsby* is fleshed by the resort to the theories of gift exchange or Potlach propagated by anthropologists such as Edward Mauss, Emile Durkheim in France and Veblen in the United States of America at the turn of the nineteenth century. It is in this aspect of the romance that Fitzgerald's modernism shows itself at its best. It has to be noted that this characteristic is not peculiarly characteristic of *The Great Gatsby* because it constitutes a general trend of modernist arts comprising literature and the poetry such as T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, the symbolism of which owes a great James to Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. The originality of *The Great Gatsby* as a modernist novel is the way that he manipulates the anthropological findings about the Potlach to explore in a literary manner the cultural and socio-economic problems such as the strained

social bonds pertaining to the brand of capitalist economy that emerged in the America of the roaring twenties.

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