

In Conversations between Keats and Fitzgerald

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Abstract: This paper analyses the scope of the English poet John Keats's influence on American author F. Scott Fitzgerald in order to establish the connections between the literary works of both authors. Two novels of Fitzgerald will be thoroughly examined, namely *The Great Gatsby* (1925) and *Tender Is the Night* (1934). First, we will see how Keats's vision of poetry can be found in Fitzgerald's writings, for various fragments of Fitzgerald's prose evoke Keats's words, imagery and even his sensuousness. He was a true romantic in his time and his admiration for Keats led him to have a lyrical prose. Second, we will examine *The Great Gatsby* to find examples of Fitzgerald's prose that will illustrate his endeavour to capture the beauty and aesthetic language that Keats so valued. Third, an analysis of *Tender Is the Night* exclusively will follow. Not only the title and epigraph in this novel are taken from Keats's poem "Ode to a Nightingale", but these verses also prove to be essential in understanding the complexity of Fitzgerald's fourth novel, as they are key concepts both in the form and content of the book.

Keywords: Keats, Fitzgerald, intertextuality, romanticism

1. Introduction and Methodology

Some authors have previously studied the influence of English Romantic poet John Keats (1795-1821) on American writer Francis Scott Fitzgerald (1896-1940), although, there is still much to be investigated at the present time. This paper has been carried out through a research process based on a thorough examination of two novels by Scott Fitzgerald alongside a meticulous reading of some of Keats's verses. Furthermore, it is always essential to take into account the state of the art for a research; in this case, some of the most valuable secondary sources haven been Grube (1965), Doherty (1966), McCall (1971) and McGowan (2007).

In brief, there is a strong intertextuality between both authors, for Fitzgerald relished Keats's poetry and strived to learn from him. We cannot deny the lyricism of the American writer in his works, especially in *The Great Gatsby*. His prose appeals to the senses in a way very similar to Keats's verses. However, this influence is not evident only in Fitzgerald's style, but also in the choice of his themes and the imagery that he portrays in his novels.

2. Keatsian Fitzgerald

He had one of the rarest qualities in all literature... the word is charm – charm as Keats would have used it. Who has it today? [1].

In his essence, F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896-1940) was a romantic in his era. He admired John Keats and strived to show his sensibility and style in his works. He manifested his admiration for Keats many times, including in a letter to her daughter Scottie, where he wrote about the "Ode on a Grecian Urn" being "unbearable beautiful", about the "Ode to a Nightingale" which he could "never read through without tears in my eyes" or about "The Eve of St. Agnes" having "the richest, most sensuous imagery in English, not excepting Shakespeare", and calling Keats "a genius", since "[f]or awhile after you quit Keats all other poetry seems to be only whistling or humming [2].

Fitzgerald's prose was thoroughly lyrical, unlike some of his contemporaries. His style has, in fact, been compared to the English canon, especially for his smoothness and sensual excess [3]; this comparison is clear if we take into account the style of other of his contemporaries, such as Ernest Hemingway, for instance. In reality, Brucoli states that "Fitzgerald endeavored to become a prose Keats, imitating the poet's rhythms and enriching his own style with lush Keatsian imagery" [4]. Fitzgerald was also very concerned, as was Keats, with the mutability of things and the brevity of life. This will be explored in the section concerning *The Great Gatsby*.

It has been noted, too, that Fitzgerald wanted to become a poet, as well as a writer. As a matter of fact, the epigraph that appears at the beginning of *The Great Gatsby* reads:

Then wear the gold hat, if that will move her;
If you can bounce high, bounce for her too,
Till she cry 'Lover, gold-hatted, high-bouncing lover,
I must have you!' [5]

It is a poem written by Thomas Parke D'Invilliers, who is none other than Fitzgerald himself, for it is both a pen name and a character in *This Side of Paradise*. In this paper we will examine in detail only two of his novels, namely, *The Great Gatsby* and *Tender Is the Night*, where Keats's influence is plainly manifest. Nevertheless, they are not the only works of Fitzgerald where his impact can be found. For instance, Castaño Lloris argues that the first title Fitzgerald thought for his novel *The Beautiful and Damned* was *The Beautiful Lady without Mercy*, based on the poem "La Belle Dame sans Merci" by John Keats [6].

Finally, on a personal level, it has been claimed by some critics (for example, Bruccoli in *Some Sort of Epic Grandeur*) that Fitzgerald's concern for the brevity of life and the loss of youth, together with Keats's premature demise □ he died at the age of 25 □, instilled in Fitzgerald the urge to demonstrate his talent at a the youngest age possible, to make a name for himself in the literary world.

3. The Great Gatsby

This novel is considered to be Fitzgerald's masterwork and is, undoubtedly, his most famous piece of work. It is a great example of what has been stated above about Fitzgerald's lyricism in his storytelling. Here it is evident the Keatsian influence and how Fitzgerald's admiration for him shaped not only the content, but also the form. Many passages in *The Great Gatsby* can remind us of Keats. Moreover, it has been argued that this novel strives to "creatively reconstructs Romanticism in a different cultural space" [7]. The use of language is one of the main reasons for which this novel is considered such a classic in American literature: it is figurative, full of images and "concrete verbal pictures appealing to the senses, by the employment of adjectives" [8].

Bloom states that "Jay Gatsby himself is a splendidly improbable and yet persuasive amalgam of John Keats and an American 'front-man' gangster of the Roaring Twenties. Daisy is a pathetic substitute for Keats's muse, Fanny Brawne, but for different reasons both women are unattainable" [9]. It is highly probable that Gatsby shares some resemblance with Keats; both are idealists, both are romantics. Gatsby has on his mind an idealised image of the Daisy from the past, an illusion he is striving to gain back; he is in love with a dream. This can remind us of Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and how the poet praises those immovable images on the piece, forever beautiful and happy in their eternity, although restrained by their immobility. Gatsby, too, admires an image of Daisy frozen in time and beauty, that of his past. But life is not an urn, and Daisy has changed. Moreover, the urn described by Keats shows a lover chasing his beloved, but, since they are frozen in time, he will never be able to catch her; in the same way, Gatsby, by being frozen in time himself in his illusion, will never be able to get Daisy back.

The character of Daisy, too, is likely to remind us more of Keats's nightingale or his "Belle Dame sans Merci" than of Fanny Brawne. On the one hand, the most salient feature in Daisy is her voice; there are plenty of passages referring to her voice and the effect it provokes on other people: it was a "thrilling voice", "a singing compulsion" [10]. In this way, it is her main source of sexual attraction. For example, when at the end of chapter five Nick Carraway is talking about Daisy's voice, he says the following words (note the repetition of the "P" sound): "I think that voice held him most, with its fluctuating feverish warmth, because it couldn't be over-dreamed – that voice was a deathless song." [11]. This fragment has been compared to "Ode to a Nightingale", specifically to the seventh stanza that deals with the effect of the nightingale on the poet ("Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!"). Here, then, we have two passages about the effect of a voice, a beautiful one for that matter, on man; both voices, for their beauty, considered to be immortal to the one who hears it. Therefore, both writers find pleasure in beautiful voices or sounds, which are not marred by the fickleness of this world and which exemplify the importance of the senses and the sensations. Parkinson concludes that "[i]n this way Gatsby's romantic vision of Daisy is given universal validity as an act of the creative imagination" [12].

On the other hand, Daisy is portrayed, among other things, precisely through her voice as a seductress: "there was an excitement in her voice that men who had cared for her found difficult to forget" [13]. In this sense, she can remind us of the Romantic femme fatale such as Keats's "Lamia" (1820) or "La Belle Dame sans Merci" (1819), particularly the latter. Keats's ballad tells the story of an enchantress who seduces a knight to his ruin, condemning him to wander forever. It is an "early example of the 19th century fascination with the femme fatale" [14]. Just as Keats's "Belle Dame", Daisy is described as a beautiful woman whose allure relies on her voice, as said above, that held "a promise that she had done gay, exciting things just a while since and that there were gay, exciting things hovering in the next hour" [15]. A voice that "held [Gatsby] most" and that will lead him, just as Keats's ballad, to his ruin [16].

Furthermore, as it has been previously pointed, both Keats and Fitzgerald were deeply concerned about the brevity of our lives and how it limits us. Keats himself warns us in "Sleep and Poetry" that "life is but a day; A fragile dewdrop on its perilous way [...]" [17]. According to the poet in , the beauty of the world goes untouched ("The voice I hear this passing night was heard/In ancient days by emperor and clown") [18], but our bodies decay. He expresses this in his poem "Ode to a Nightingale":

The weariness, the fever, and the fret
Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last grey hairs,
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies; [19]

Following this theme, we must ask ourselves a question: how do these authors confront the crude fact that our lives are so fickle? Both writers have different ways to escape this reality. For Keats, it was beauty, beauty in art, beauty in nature. He looks to the past, an idealised past as in his "Ode on a Grecian Urn". And this is something that has a strong allure for Gatsby too. He lives obsessed with reviving the past. The famous line uttered to Nick Carraway comes inevitably to mind: "Can't repeat the past? [...] Why of course you can!" [20]. The final lines also seal the novel while carrying on the same theme: "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past" [21]. Thus, we see how decay and the inevitable passing of time are among the topics that shape Fitzgerald's novel.

If we search for other examples of the significance of the sensations in Fitzgerald, we will observe how he borrowed from Keats that poetical language that luxuriates in the senses, full of sensuousness. For instance, let us focus on the mesmerising language used by Fitzgerald at the end of chapter 8 to describe the moment in which Nick Carraway finds Gatsby's body:

There was a faint, barely perceptible movement of the water as the fresh flow from one end urged its way towards the drain at the other. With little ripples that were hardly the shadows of waves, the laden mattress moved irregularly down the pool. A small gust of wind that scarcely corrugated the surface was enough to disturb its accidental course with its accidental burden. The touch of a cluster of leaves revolved it slowly, tracing, like the leg of transit, a thin red circle in the water [22].

Fitzgerald's prose in this novel is replete with images that resonate in our senses and with a poetic language that reminds us of Keats's poetry. Moreover, this scene, as Parkinson states, "is given solemnity by the use of the image in place of direct reference to Gatsby's body" [23]. Poetry is an essential part of the novel itself, which also uses poetic devices such as metaphors, similes, or alliterations; the use of figurative language is also significant. As seen above, the imagery of some of the passages is outstanding:

He must have looked up at an unfamiliar sky through frightening leaves and shivered as he found what a grotesque thing a rose is and how raw the sunlight was upon the scarcely created grass. A new world, material without being real, where poor ghosts, breathing dreams like air, drifted fortuitously about... like that ashen, fantastic figure gliding towards him through the amorphous trees [24].

This moment is crucial for Gatsby's fatal downfall. This is when he is confronted with the harsh reality, with "a new world" which is not as beautiful as the old one, for this one is "grotesque" and unfamiliar. Moreover, it is impossible, in this sense, not to think about the final paragraphs of the book, which have already been quoted above and which are probably the most poetic in the novel. With a poetic language and a beautiful metaphor (people as boats "borne back ceaselessly into the past" [25]), Fitzgerald, through the voice of Carraway, closes the novel with an alliteration reviewing again one of the main themes of the book: moving on to the future but with a fixation with the past.

The American writer even borrowed some lines from Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" [26], the same lines that years later would become the epigraph to another of his novels, *Tender Is the Night*:

But here there is no light,
Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown
Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways [27].

These he transformed into: "He lit Daisy's cigarette from a trembling match, sat down with her on a couch far across the room, where there was no light save what the gleaming floor bounced in from the hall" [28]. But he also echoes them in the very first chapter of the novel, while describing the Buchanan mansion: "A breeze blew through the room, blew curtains in at one end and out the other [...]" [29]. Furthermore, just as

Keats delights in fantasies (let us bear in mind his poem "Fancy", among others), so does Gatsby, as a true romantic, for whom the reveries "provided an outlet for his imagination; they were a satisfactory hint of the unreality of reality, a promise that the rock of the world was founded securely on a fairy's wing" [30]. These words evoke those of Keats's in "When I Have Fears That I May Cease to Be" (1818):

And when I feel, fair creature of an hour,
That I shall never look upon thee more,
Never have relish in the feary power... [30]

4. Tender Is the Night

This was Fitzgerald's most ambitious novel. The title is taken from "Ode to a Nightingale", Fitzgerald's favourite poem. This title also serves as a preface about the structure and themes that will be worked throughout the novel. Thus, the book presents itself as a re-working of Keats's topics in the poem [32]. Albeit some consider the title as irrelevant or do not see the connection to the theme of the novel, it proves to fit "the mood of disenchantment that pervades Fitzgerald's romance" [33], for the title is not descriptive, but evocative: it "refers the reader back to the whole poem" [34]. Furthermore, the poem is also used by Fitzgerald as the epigraph of the novel:

Already with thee! tender is the night
...But here there is no light,
Save what from heaven is with breezes blown
Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways [35].

Brucoli [36] explains that, just as Keats wants to escape the harshness of reality, which is clearly expressed in this lines above, but at the end, reality calls him back, so does Dick Diver, the protagonist of Fitzgerald's novel. Dick tries to evade himself various times throughout the novel, by going on trips alone, by starting an affair with young Rosemary, by following an oblivious life, etc.; he attempts to leave behind his troubled life and his pains. Nevertheless, the poet at the end of the "Ode" wonders if the escape was a dream or real, which can be applied to Dick, who by the end of the novel keeps moving from town to town, with a feeling of loss and unhappiness [37].

Moving on, we cannot deny the fact the Fitzgerald had the "Ode" all the time on his mind while composing *Tender Is the Night*. We have more hints of these in some of the passage. For example, in chapter nine, after Rosemary has gone to the Divers' house for the first time and is already enchanted by them and by what she saw there, she lies awake at night in her hotel room "suspended in the moonshine" [38] with "secrets noises in the air, an insistent bird achieved an ill-natured triumph with regularity in the trees above the tennis court" [39]; later, Abe North will revealed what bird it is: "Plagued by the nightingale," Abe suggested, and repeated, "probably plagued by the nightingale" [40].

Doherty argues that "the novel deals with characters who are plagued by the nightingale, those enamored of the romantic illusion. Nicole seems to be the nightingale" [41]. He then explains how Nicole is associated in the novel with night, gardens and with songs; again we have an allusion to a woman's voice. While Nicole's father is confessing his incest, he says, "She used to sing to me." [42]. Later, Nicole herself says, "sometimes I sing" [43]. But, perhaps, the most evocative image is that of chapter five of the second book, where we get a glimpse of the first moments Dick and Nicole spent together in the clinic in Zurich. "[A]ll that week there had been singing in her ears, summer songs of ardent skies and wild shade, and with his arrival the singing had become so loud she could have joined in with it" [44]. She has a hidden phonograph and records sent by her sister from America and she plays them for Dick, thus, both escaping to another world through the music: "The thin tunes, holding lost times and future hopes in liaison, twisted upon the Valais night. [...] By and by Nicole stopped playing the machine and sang to him" [45]; and, while she did so, "the sweetness drained down into her out of the willow trees, out of the dark world" [46]. But she is a bird "with wings crushed" [47].

The party at the Divers' referred to before marks a turning point in the novel and is also overflowing with Keatsian imagery and atmosphere, specifically in the case of the garden, Nicole's garden for that matter. The garden provides a Romantic ambience and the perfect escapade in a genuine Keatsian style, oblivious to the rest of the world, as in his "Ode to a Nightingale", for instance. All the guests are impressed by the place, but no one more than Rosemary, who thought that "Villa Diana was the centre of the world. On such a stage some memorable thing was sure to happen." [48]. The setting and the imagery have their counterparts in Keats's "Ode": the "fireflies riding on the dark air" next to the "murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves", "the diffused magic of the hot sweet South" and the "breaker full of the warm South", "the soft-pawed night" and

“tender is the night”, “the ghostly wash of the Mediterranean far below” and “the blushful Hippocrene”; and just as Keats wanted to “leave the world unseen” and “fade way into the forest dim”, “dissolve and quite forget”, so do the guests at the party feel “alone with each other in the dark universe” and with “such a detachment from the world” [49].

Doherty also points to the sound that produces a rupture from the moment of enchantment; while in Keats's “Ode” is the sound of a bell, in the novel is the sound of a shot. We have three main shots throughout the story; chronologically, the first is heard when Dick falls completely in love with Nicole: both were alone in the rain sharing a romantic moment, kissing, away from the world until “there was a booming from the wine slopes across the lake” [50] that took them back to reality and Dick was aware of the dangerous step he has taken; the second, when Abe North is leaving Paris by train and they are all there to say goodbye, marking the end of the summer bliss for them (“[t]he shots had entered into all their lives”, [51]); and the third, when Nicole and Tommy become lovers and suddenly “a sound split the air” [52].

5. Conclusions

As we have seen, Keats's influence on Scott Fitzgerald should not be overlooked, for it gives background, it explains and it helps readers to fully enjoy his works. The intertextuality more evident in the two novels that are the corpus of this paper, *The Great Gatsby* and *Tender Is the Night*. “Like Keats, Fitzgerald loved the richness of sensation that the world affords us” [53]. Both writers found pleasure in beauty and in the sensations, as it is manifest in the passages that have served as examples. Therefore, the Keatsian echoes in Fitzgerald can be found in the style (the lyricism of the writer's prose), the themes, the beautiful imagery and aesthetic language. All this leads us to conclude that Fitzgerald in his time was a true Romantic and that Romanticism itself never truly died out.

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