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A Bakhtinian Reading of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*

Introduction

The works of Mikhail M. Bakhtin have been tremendously engaging and influential ever since the Western literary scholarship discovered them. By many critical assessments, he is considered to have been one of the greatest thinkers and theorists of the twentieth century. The scope of literary terms he introduced is enormous, encompassing such concepts as *chronotope, heteroglossia, polyphony, dialogism, carnivalesque and double-voicedness,* all highly applicable to the analyses of various literary texts.

Applying a Bakhtinian reading on a literary text implies primarily focusing on the language of the text. Language thus functions as a system coloured by specific syntactic markers that differentiate one character's speech from another's and furthermore helps distinguish the voice of the narrator from the voice of the author. In his theory, "Bakhtin drew attention to the way literature weaves discourses together from disparate social sources" (Rivkin and Ryan 674). Language is thus assigned a more important role of representing the ideology that lies beneath the surface of the utterances of characters belonging to different professions, social classes and worldviews.

This paper will analyse one of the most famous American novels, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, through a Bakhtinian lens, providing definitions of the notions of heteroglossia, polyphony, dialogism, double-voicedness and chronotope, finally pointing to the general interconnectedness of all the aspects of Bakhtin's theory. Furthermore, the examples of heteroglossia and chronotope will be provided, showing how these concepts function within the selected text.

On Multiplicity of Voices in the "Jazz Age"

The diversity and multiplicity of voices in a novel form the basis for its richness. In other words, "[t]he novel can be defined as a diversity of social speech types, sometimes even diversity of languages and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized" ("Discourse" 674). It is exactly this diversity that makes the novel a "super-genre," a heteroglossic genre, capable of incorporating other genres and their languages, so that "the novelistic and the heteroglossic become in effect synonymous" (Dentith 51). Heteroglossia in the novel thus reflects the essential stratification of the language

> into social dialects, characteristic group behaviors, professional jargons, generic languages, languages of generations and age groups, tendentious languages, languages of the authorities, of various circles and of passing fashions, languages that serve the specific sociopolitical purposes of the day, even of the hour (each day has its own slogan, its own vocabulary, its own emphases) ("Discourse" 674).

Language is then not unified and homogenous, but it is a subject of constant change, under the influence of these forces of stratification, the push and pull factors—also called centrifugal and centripetal forces—which affect the standardised language,

enriching it with a diversity of new terms and making it heteroglossic. The novel, according to Mikhail Bakhtin, perfectly embodies this centrifugal principle (*Dialogic Imagination* 425).

Additionally, the notion of heteroglossia is closely connected with dialogism, polyphony and double-voicedness of a text, the terms which enable the existence of the heteroglossic discourse. Being polyphonic implies incorporating multiple voices and pointing towards pluralism (Dentith 98). Dialogism implies an interaction between different voices, languages and discourses (*Dialogic Imagination* 426-27). Double-voicedness is achieved through simultaneous appearance of "two voices, two meanings and two expressions" (324), representing at the same time the intention of the character and the intention of the author (often quite dissimilar) and producing ironic or comic effects (324).

Achieving heteroglossic discourse in a novel thus depends on the authorial speech, the choice of the narrator and the narrator's speech, diversity of characters and occasional appearances of other genres. *The Great Gatsby* features a faithful rendition of everyday speech of the 1920s in New York City, including the language of the American elite, the upper echelons of the society and introducing, though on a smaller scale, the languages of the less fortunate, even shady characters. While writing the novel, Fitzgerald lived on Long Island and mingled with the "aristocracy" of his age and that enabled his incorporating their particular lifestyles, belief systems and languages into the text.

Authorial Voice vs. Narrator's Voice

Francis Scott Fitzgerald designed Nick Carraway as a first-person narrator to guide the readers through the events described in the novel. Through his point of view the readers are introduced to the title character of Jay Gatsby, shown into his lavish mansion and finally given a glimpse into the life of jazz, liquor and parties of the Roaring Twenties. Reading the book, one gets to share his mixed feelings, being both infatuated with and appalled at such a lifestyle.

Nick is an interesting character in his own right; a member of a prominent, rich American family, arriving East from a Midwestern town to enter the bond business and earn money, he serves as a direct connection between all the important characters in the novel. His self-proclaimed tolerance and the inclination to "reserve all judgments" (Fitzgerald 7), along with the odd tendency of others to confide in him—whether invited to do so or not, but usually the latter case—are useful traits for a character-narrator who is supposed to transmit the speech of other characters. Fitzgerald skilfully crafted a character capable of remaining in the shadow and yet participating in all important events.

Using a character-narrator, according to Bakhtin, marks a unique form of heteroglossia, as "they recommend themselves as specific and limited verbal ideological points of view, belief systems, opposed to the literary expectations and points of view that constitute the background needed to perceive them, but these narrators are productive precisely *because* of this very limitedness and specificity" (*Dialogic Imagination* 313). Analysing and (ab)using unreliable narrators like Carraway would flourish in later years, with the advent of Poststructuralism and Postmodernism, but Bakhtinian theory offers some insight into the linguistic characteristics of such a narrator. The productivity of the character-narrator, in the context of heteroglossia, is

evident in the interaction, the *dialogue* between the narrator and the author. The two levels of each utterance exist simultaneously, reflecting the *double-voicedness* of the discourse: "[b]ehind the narrator's story we read a second story, the author's story; he is the one who tells us how the narrator tells stories, and also tells us about the narrator himself" (*Dialogic Imagination* 314). Such a discrepancy between the author's and the narrator's intentions produces effects of irony and occasional comedy.

The irony is evident in the occasions when Nick offers erroneous assessments of his own character, appearing overly confident or establishing his position as that of moral or intellectual superiority to the other characters. The intention of the authorial voice is to subtly challenge the narrator's statement through the language used or through such unfolding of events which undermines the statement. When he first appears, Nick Carraway states:

> I'm inclined to reserve all judgments, a habit that has opened up many curious natures to me and also made me the victim of not a few veteran bores. The abnormal mind is quick to detect and attach itself to this quality when it appears in a normal person, and so it came about that in college I was unjustly accused of being a politician, because I was privy to the secret griefs of wild, unknown men . . . Reserving judgements is a matter of infinite hope. (Fitzgerald 7)

The very first statement about his inclination to reserve all judgements is directly challenged by the following one, where the narrator openly passes judgements, classifying the people who confided in him as "abnormal" and firmly establishing his own position as the "normal" one, in juxtaposition with them. Moreover, this emphasis on the contrast between normality and abnormality results in yet another

observation that abnormal equals wild and that he, Nick, is a victim of the tedious stories of such wild, abnormal men. Interestingly enough, he is compared with (or rather accused of being) a politician and the very word has come to carry implications of dishonesty and deception. The self-victimisation and self-deception appear as two dominant characteristics of the narrator, cleverly and indirectly introduced by the authorial voice. The two levels, the authorial and the narrator's thus appear in interaction, or rather in opposition.

Throughout the novel, Nick's emphasis on his honesty appears as a recurring motif. His self-deception continues and the virtue of honesty is brought out in comparison with the lying and cheating Tom and Daisy, Gatsby who fabricated his entire life story and finally "incurably dishonest" (Fitzgerald 64) Jordan Baker. The irony culminates in this statement, bordering on absurdity: "[e]very one suspects himself of at least one of the cardinal virtues, and this is mine: I am one of the few honest people that I have ever known" (66). Reaching this point in the novel, the authorial intention of casting a shadow of doubt on the reliability of each character's statements has become clear. Defining Nick Carraway's cardinal virtue, though, even for the solely ironic purposes is by far easier task than listing the cardinal sins of the other characters.

Structuring the Language of Character Zones

Entering the structure of the novel, the language of each character represents a part of the picture, a thread on a loom, interwoven with the others to create a shape and colour. As Bakhtin observes, "[t]he language used by characters in the novel, how they speak, is verbally and semantically autonomous; each character's speech possesses its own belief system, since each is the speech of another in

another's language" (*Dialogic Imagination* 315). This variety of languages, belief systems and speech patterns enters Fitzgerald's novel through direct speeches of the characters and the dialogues between them.

Achieving heteroglossic dialogues assumes the usage of *character zones*, "formed from the fragments of character speech" (*Dialogic Imagination* 316). The authorial language ought to be altered in order to reflect the consciousness of a character. Thus a character zone is created when the authorial voice becomes completely subsumed in the voices of the characters.

The title character, Jay Gatsby, in attempt to reinvent himself started by reinventing his language, trying to adjust it to presumably appropriate language for the member of the American upper class. The initial mystery shrouding his character lies in the fact that all the information about him and his past come from second- or third-hand sources. Gatsby's own character zone is dominated by the characteristic exclamation "old sport," which perfectly reflects his awkward ambition to belong to the upper echelons of the society. The peculiarity of his speech is made obvious when two character zones overlap and Nick lists his observations about Gatsby, that his "elaborate formality of speech just missed being absurd. Some time before he introduced himself I'd got a strong impression that he was picking his words with care" (Fitzgerald 54-55). Although Gatsby's syntax is flawless and his long, complex sentences flow with ease, Nick correctly assumes that it is due to practice rather than elite background.

Gatsby underwent a change in his behaviour and language alike, with the sole intention of impressing Daisy. Consequently, Daisy has similar desires of impressing Gatsby when they finally meet again and her language reflects this intention. Her syntax follows the high standards he has set and her exclamations in Gatsby's

proximity reflect her petty fascination with material objects: "I adore it! The pompadour! You never told me you had a pompadour—or a yacht" (Fitzgerald 100). However, under intoxication, while she is experiencing a severe emotional crisis, Daisy's language alters and takes the form of a dialect characteristic of her native Kentucky: "[t]ake 'em downstairs and give 'em back to whoever they belong to. Tell 'em all Daisy's change' her mine. Say 'Daisy's change' her mine!" (83). In different states of mind, Daisy thus embodies two varieties of language, one belonging to the upper class of New York and the other coloured by Kentuckian dialect.

This scene has an additional significance of being the only part of the novel narrated by a character other than Nick Carraway, for it is Jordan Baker "controlling the narrative" (Will 140) in this scene. Her narration is not mired by the ironic authorial interferences to the same extent that Nick's is. The double-voicedness within her narrative is significantly less pronounced than in the rest of the novel, reflecting the authorial intention to have the back-story told rather than ironising or parodying the narrator.

The representation of a shady mobster, Gatsby's business partner Meyer Wolfshiem, relies on the expressions characteristic of the uneducated Jewish gangster stemming from the slums of New York. The gloomy theme of the conversation is in direct juxtaposition with the light tone of the conversation, reflecting the authorial intention to achieve irony:

> 'The old Metropole,' brooded Mr. Wolfshiem gloomily. 'Filled with faces dead and gone. Filled with friends gone now forever. I can't forget so long as I live the night they shot Rosy Rosenthal there. It was six of us at the table and Rosy had eat and drunk a lot all evening. When it was almost morning the waiter came up to him with a funny look and says somebody wants to speak to him

> outside. 'All right,' says Rosy and begins to get up and I pulled him down in his chair. 'Let the bastards come in here if they want you, Rosy, but don't you, so help me, move outside this room.' It was four o'clock in the morning then, and if we'd of raised the blinds we'd of seen daylight.'
>
> 'Did he go?' I asked innocently.
>
> 'Sure he went,' Mr. Wolfshiem's nose flashed at me indignantly 'He turned around in the door and says, 'Don't let that waiter take away my coffee!' Then he went out on the sidewalk and they shot him three times in his full belly and drove away.'
>
> 'Four of them were electrocuted,' I said, remembering.
>
> 'Five with Becker.' His nostrils turned to me in an interested way. 'I understand you're looking for a business gonnegtion.'
>
> The juxtaposition of these two remarks was startling. (Fitzgerald 76-77)

The flawed syntax visible in the confusion of verb tenses, informal constructions, colloquial choice of words culminating with the "business gonnegtion [sic]" contributes to the ironic haracterisation of Gatsby's friend. Incorporation of his "low language" (*Dialogic Imagination* 273) implies incorporation of a language belonging to lower social classes, as opposed to predominant discourse of the upper classes present in the novel in the previous scenes and also a language belonging to a particular "profession," the gangsters of New York. The final sentence in the paragraph can be interpreted as an example of *pseudo-objective motivation,* "one of the forms for concealing another's speech" (*Dialogic Imagination* 305). The logic motivating this sentence may equally be attributed to the authorial voice, stating the objective truth or to Nick Carraway, the narrator.

Integrating the Languages of Other Genres

Another way of achieving heteroglossia in the novel is through incorporating different genres, each with its own syntactic structure and language. All these genres bring their own languages into the novel and "therefore stratify the linguistic unity of the novel and further intensify its speech diversity in fresh ways" (*Dialogic Imagination* 321). Additionally, Bakhtin distinguishes between different uses of the inserted genres, varying from purely objective to those reflecting the authorial intention of creating irony or parody (322). Certain genres, however, similarly to Bakhtin's treatment of the novel as a super-genre, seem to be privileged over others. The diaries and confessions, due to their intimate nature, are classified as "genres fundamental to the novel's development" (323). Such genres thus hold a special position in shaping of the language within the novel, for they add both to the syntactic structure of the work in its entirety, but also allow the previously silenced points of view to come into prominence.

The Great Gatsby features several instances of inserting different genres, including a letter from Meyer Wolfshiem addressed to Nick Carraway, several love songs popular in the clubs and parlours of the 1920s and finally, most importantly, a makeshift diary of young Jay Gatsby, containing a plan for his future written on the cover of the dime novel *Hopalong Cassidy*:

> He opened it at the back cover and turned it around for me to see. On the last fly-leaf was printed the word SCHEDULE, and the date September 12th, 1906. And underneath:
>
> | | |
> |---|---|
> | Rise from bed | 6.00 A.M. |
> | Dumbbell exercise and wall-scaling | 6.15-6.30 A.M. |
> | Study electricity, etc | 7.15-8.15 A.M. |

Work	8.30-4.30 P.M.
Baseball and sports	4.30-5.00 P.M.
Practice elocution, poise and how to attain it	5.00-6.00 P.M.
Study needed inventions	7.00-9.00 P.M.

GENERAL RESOLVES

No wasting time at Shafters or [a name, indecipherable]

No more smokeing [sic] or chewing

Bath every other day

Read one improving book or magazine per week

Save $5.00 [crossed out] $3.00 per week

Be better to parents. (Fitzgerald 180)

The list of childish plans written with adult determination on the ragged cover of an adventure story is endearing in its intimacy. Additionally, it contributes to the novel's development and the development of its language, for it offers the first genuine insight into Gatsby's character, written in his own words, in his own language. Furthermore, it also adds all the linguistic features of a scrabbled schedule to the novel with traditional linguistic structure. The daily plan and the list of resolutions share a simplicity in structures, featuring simple verb phrases with the main verb in imperative, followed by a direct object. Occasional noun phrases are short, consisting of only one or two words; there are also the spelling mistakes and tiny scribbles on the margins present in the plan. In all their brevity and simplicity, these

chunks of language display "the capacity to broaden the horizon of language available to literature" (*Dialogic Imagination* 323).

On Voicing Without a Voice

All characters in a novel are carriers of certain ideologies, which is evident in their speech and the language they use. As Bakhtin states, "[t]he speaking person in the novel is always, to one degree or another an ideologue, and his words are always ideologemes" (*Dialogic Imagination* 333). Having been given a voice, the character will voice a certain belief system or ideology. However, the expression of one's ideas is not always restricted to speaking and sometimes characters need not speak, but act, because "[t]he activity of a character in a novel is always ideologically demarcated: he lives and acts in an ideological world of his own, he has his own perception of the world that is incarnated in his action and in his discourse" (335). Without speaking a single word, a character is able to clearly show his or her ideological standpoint[8], as exemplified in the following passage: "[a]s we crossed Blackwell's Island a limousine passed us, driven by a white chauffeur, in which sat three modish Negroes, two bucks and a girl. I laughed aloud as the yolks of their eyeballs rolled toward us in haughty rivalry" (Fitzgerald 75).

The scene describes a brief encounter of Gatsby and Nick's with a small group of rich African Americans on their way to New York and it is the also the only scene in

8 Bakhtin argues that the ideological affiliation of a particular character cannot be revealed only through the character's acts , but that it requires spoken words (Dialogic Imagination 335). Taking the idea for granted, one may risk missing subtle differences in attitudes and acts which sometimes reflect far more than the spoken language. It would probably be safest to claim that the level of success in representing the character's ideological world, even without having the character speak, depends on the discretion and skill of the author.

the entire book where black characters are represented. Their limousine is merely an object of Nick's gaze and the two white men never exchange a single word with the trio. The scene, however, still speaks volumes about the ideologies on both sides.

Mentioning New York in the jazz era, one is immediately reminded of Harlem as a cultural centre of jazz music. Two black lounge lizards and a flapper, quite possibly inhabitants of Harlem, embody the spirit of the jazz age and represent the quintessentially American belief that *all* men are created equal and equal they ought to be. Their ideology seems to clash directly with Nick's worldviews, whose reaction expresses the racist beliefs that the black race is inferior to the white race. Furthermore, the very idea of a white driver working for blacks would have been unheard-of only a couple of decades earlier. However, the ideology of white supremacy and racism is most evident in the words of Tom Buchanan, who touches upon the subject on at least two different occasions, praising an overtly racist book and criticising intermarriage between black and white race.

It is important to emphasise that the ideology of a character need not always reflect the ideology of the author, but a character always "thinks and acts (and, of course, talks) in compliance with the author's wishes" (*Dialogic Imagination* 334), thus always fulfilling the authorial intentions.

Chronotopes And The Roaring Twenties

Chronotope is yet another term introduced into the literary theory by Mikhail Bakhtin. He attempts to explain the term by applying "the name chronotope (literally, "time space") to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature. . . . [I]t expresses the inseparability of space and time" (*Dialogic Imagination* 84). The chronotope thus has a more

profound and complex role than merely determining the temporal and spatial location of the novel, for it has a direct impact on the narrative, because "[t]he chronotope is the place where the knots of narrative are tied and untied" (250). Narrative event are thus clustered around a certain chronotope; chronotopes "are the organizing centers for the fundamental narrative events of the novel" (250).

Bakhtin lists several different types of chronotopes, some of them applicable only to a particular genre in a particular historical period, while the others possess a more universal character and can be applied to various types of writings. For example, the chronotope of the castle figures most prominently in Gothic novels and the parlours and salons present the new space where the events in the realist novels of the nineteenth century may unfold (*Dialogic Imagination* 245-46). Applying the Bakhtinian notion of chronotope on a text stemming from a different time period may require a slight modification of his theory.

The Mansion

In structuring the narrative of the novel, chronotopes "serve for the assimilation of actual temporal (including historical) reality, that permit the essential aspects of this reality to be reflected and incorporated into the artistic space of the novel" (252). Chronotopes thus function on two levels, firstly, by unifying the time and the space of the action in the novel and secondly, by connecting the time and space of the novel with the extratextual time and space, reflected in real-life locations within a certain historical period.

The Great Gatsby is a novel which reflects the spirit of the Roaring Twenties, the era of prohibition, jazz and flappers, the period which marked the reckless realisation of the American Dream of wealth and luxury. Until the Great Depression

struck, causing the dreams of opulence to collapse like a house of cards, New York was one of the most prominent centres of jazz culture in the United States. The home of the Harlem Renaissance, celebrities, prosperity and speakeasies New York thrived.

The mansion of Jay Gatsby's is located on West Egg, the fictional version of Long Island. The very image of the edifice embodies the spirit of lavishness and glamour of the jazz age. It is described as: "a colossal affair by any standard—it was a factual imitation of some Hôtel de Ville in Normandy, with a tower on one side, spanking new under a thin beard of raw ivy, and a marble swimming pool and more than forty acres of lawn and garden" (Fitzgerald 11). The enormous building thus dominates the surrounding area, with a high tower and vastness of lawns. Additionally, the comparison with the Hôtel de Ville of Normandy evokes the architectural tendencies in the United States in the Gilded Age from the late nineteenth century, a period which encompassed aspirations to grandeur and excessiveness, similarly to Gatsby's own age.

Gatsby's mansion as a chronotope, similarly to French salons, represents "the place where the major spatial and temporal sequences of the novel intersect, . . . the place where encounters occur" (*Dialogic Imagination* 246). It is indeed a place of interaction between various characters who attend Gatsby's elaborate parties. It is also the place of Gatsby's secret meetings with Daisy, the object of his desires, as well as the place where George Wilson murders Gatsby and takes his own life. A series of events important for the unfolding of the narrative thus takes place within the boundaries of the mansion. The definition of the chronotope as "the place where the knots of narrative are tied and untied" (250) comes to mind once again.

Describing the chronotope of the castle, Bakhtin classifies it as "saturated through and through with a time that is historical in the narrow sense of the word,

that is the time of the historical past" (*Dialogic Imagination* 245-46). In other words, inhabiting a Gothic castle implies an entrapment in a temporal limbo, reliving the times gone by. Gatsby's mansion seems to embody that quality, keeping his illusion that one can be frozen in time and virtually eradicate a couple of years. His intention to relive the past with Daisy, as though her marriage and the birth of her child had never happened, marks a bizarre obsession with and the fear of the passage of time, evident in the following example, the conversation between Nick and Gatsby:

> 'I wouldn't ask too much of her,' I ventured. 'You can't repeat the past.'
>
> 'Can't repeat the past?' he cried incredulously. 'Why of course you can!'
>
> He looked around him wildly, as if the past were lurking here in the shadow of his house, just out of reach of his hand.
>
> 'I'm going to fix everything just the way it was before,' he said, nodding determinedly. (Fitzgerald 117)

The Road

The chronotope of the road, associated and sometimes equated with the chronotope of encounter, appears not to be connected directly with a specific historical period. Moreover, the symbol of the road can generally be connected with the quintessential American sense of mobility and the cultural and social importance of owning a car in the American context. These features make this aspect of Bakhtinian theory particularly useful in the analysis of the chronotope in this typically American novel.

Defining and explaining the chronotope of the road, Bakhtin states that "[t]he road is especially (but not exclusively) appropriate for portraying events governed by chance" (*Dialogic Imagination* 244). While the encounters in closed spaces usually

imply a previous arrangement (disregarding the tendencies of the vast majority of Gatsby's guests to attend his parties uninvited), the encounters on the road appear less formal and more relaxed, without previous arrangements. Such encounters are abundant in the novel, yet one of the most important features of the road in the context of this particular novel is that the road enables "[p]eople who are normally kept separate by social and spatial distance [to] accidentally meet" (243). In the fateful encounter of Daisy and Myrtle, which of course takes place *on the road*, the social distance between the two is of tremendous importance. First, on a larger, less personal scale, their encounter represents the encounter between a rich woman of the upper class and a woman belonging to the lower class, whereby the former's recklessness ends the latter's life. The omnipresent irony is further emphasises by the personal relationship of the two: unbeknownst to either of them, Tom Buchanan is the connection between them; Daisy is his wife and Myrtle is his mistress (their respective roles in relation to Tom imply that both a spatial and social distance were kept). In an ironic twist of fate, the wife accidentally kills the mistress. The narrative knots once more tie and untie around the chronotope of the road and this encounter launches a string of events which eventually lead to Gatsby's death.

Conclusion

F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby* features a multitude of voices and characters, contributing to the richness and the heteroglossic character of the novel. Incorporated in the novel are various languages: the authorial language, carrying the peculiarly ironic, double-voiced tone, the language of the narrator, predominant in the text, yet combined with the character zones or languages of other characters, representatives of various social classes, professions and ideologies. Furthermore,

the language of the novel incorporates the languages of other genres, namely those of popular songs, letters and diaries.

The Bakhtinian concept of the chronotope as an inseparable unit of time and space reflects itself in the chronotope of the mansion, representing the glamour and luxury of the Roaring Twenties in a particular place in New York. The chronotope of the road, symbolically connected with the quintessential American notion of mobility plays an important role in the unfolding of the narrative. Fitzgerald's book and Bakhtin's theories alike have remained tremendously influential decades after their creation, propelling re-readings and re-interpretations and finally rekindling the belief in the green light.

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