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# The Burden of the Past: A Comparative Study of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*

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## Abstract

This paper contrasts *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald with *The Sound and the Fury* by William Faulkner, examining the burden of the past. The two novels explore how past experiences and events influence individuals and societies in distinct ways. By evaluating the critical responses, historical and cultural contexts, and literary techniques employed by the authors, this paper delivers a deeper understanding of how literature can reflect and remark upon the complexities of human experience and history. It demonstrates this through an analysis of the critical responses, historical and cultural contexts, and literary techniques employed by the authors, observing that while both novels deal with the burden of the past, they do so in different ways reflecting the historical and cultural contexts in which they were written. Fitzgerald's novel critiques the American fixation with the past and the perils of nostalgia, whereas Faulkner's novel reflects on the decline of the Southern aristocracy and the legacy of slavery and bigotry in the Southern United States. Literary devices, such as symbolism, imagery, characterization, and stream-of-consciousness narration emphasize the psychological effects of the weight of the past on both individuals and societies. This comparative analysis highlights the capacity of the literature to reflect and commentate on the complexities of human experience and history, exploring the significance of understanding the historical and cultural contexts in which it is produced and consumed.

**Keywords:** Burden of the Past, Comparative Study, *The Great Gatsby*, *The Sound and The Fury*, Critical Responses, Literary Techniques

## 1. Introduction

The burden of the past is a recurring motif in many literary works, one that has been examined by numerous authors throughout history. The past can have a significant impact on both individuals and societies, shaping identities, influencing actions, and affecting the present and the future. The weight of one's history is a key topic that has been widely investigated in American literature, not only by F. Scott Fitzgerald and William Faulkner. In American literature, the burden of the past is a fundamental theme explored by many writers, including Fitzgerald and Faulkner. Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* are two of their most famous novels, both of which are renowned for their depiction of the burden of the past (Kobayashi, 13; Faulkner, 1973).

Fitzgerald and Faulkner are two of the most celebrated and studied American authors of the 20th century, and they are known for their study of memory, nostalgia, and the burden of the past (Gandal, 5). Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* are among the authors' best-known works. These books are celebrated for their representation of the weight of history.

*The Great Gatsby* was first released in 1925 and is considered by many to be the pinnacle of literary achievement in the United States. The narrative depicts Jay Gatsby, a rich man who fell in love with Daisy Buchanan before the war, attempting to win her back years later by throwing extravagant parties. The story takes place in the 1920s, a decade that is often referred to as the Roaring Twenties, and which was characterized by significant social, economic, and cultural transformation (Gross, 162). *The Great Gatsby* explores the themes of love, riches, and the American Dream. It also serves as a critique of the excesses and moral decrepitude of the age (Bloom, 7; Fathoni and Thoyibi, 2).

Faulkner's novel, *The Sound and the Fury*, was first released in 1929, and is widely regarded as one of the author's most significant works. The book's narrative complex and multi-layered, it follows the lives of the Compson family over the course of many decades, witnessing the downfall of the family and the dissolution of their relationships. It is noteworthy for its experimental approach to storytelling, as it has numerous narrators and a non-linear framework. The themes of family, race, and identity are explored throughout *The Sound and the Fury*, which critics characterize as a meditation on time, memory, and the weight of the past (Sabo, 15).

Despite their disparate plots and writing styles, *The Great Gatsby* and *The Sound and the Fury* are underpinned by a common theme: the weight of the past. The past haunts the characters of *The Great Gatsby*, specifically their memories of World War I and the pre-war period. Indeed, Gatsby is propelled by his desire to recapture the past and win back Daisy, the woman he had adored before the war (Korkut and Elbir, 2006). In *The Sound and the Fury*, the past is a source of anguish and regret for the Compson family, who are attempting to navigate the repercussions of their actions and consequent decline in their social standing (Rațiu, 36).

The burden of the past is a multifaceted topic that can be approached from multiple angles, including psychological, sociological, and historical. This study employs a literary methodology to examine how Fitzgerald and Faulkner depict the weight of the past in the selected novels. We will investigate the similarities and differences with regard to this theme, the techniques employed by the authors to convey it, and the potential causes of these similarities and differences.

### 1.1. Research Problem

Both *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald and *The Sound and the Fury* by William Faulkner probe the experience of being burdened by one's past as a prevalent theme. However, each work approaches the topic differently. To date, there is a dearth of comparative studies exploring how these two books convey the weight of the past and the respective authors' motivations for doing so. Thus, the aim of this research is to carry out a comparative examination of the two texts to fill this void in the literature.

### 1.2. Research Aims

The aims of this research are to:

- examine how the weight of the past is portrayed in both *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald and *The Sound and the Fury* by William Faulkner through the lens of comparative analysis; and
- investigate explanations for the ways in which these representations are similar and different.

### 1.3. Research Question

- How do F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* depict the burden of the past?
- What are the similarities and differences in their portrayal of this theme?

#### 1.4. Research Significance

The study of the burden of the past is a universal theme that is relevant to numerous individuals and societies. By analyzing how this theme is depicted in two classic novels, *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald and *The Sound and the Fury* by William Faulkner, this research will advance understanding of how the weight of the past affects individuals and societies, and in particular, how literature can be used to explore this theme. In addition, a comparison of the two novels can shed light on the differences and similarities in the literary techniques employed by the two authors as they convey the theme of the burden of the past.

## 2. Methods

This comparative literary analysis will be both descriptive and qualitative in nature. It will investigate how Fitzgerald and Faulkner depict the weight of the past in *The Great Gatsby* and *The Sound and the Fury*. To analyze the similarities and differences between the two novels' depictions of the burden of the past a close reading of the two novels will be presented, focusing on the characters, narrative, and setting, and analyzing the literary techniques (e.g., symbolism, imagery, and narrative structure) used by the authors to convey the theme of the weight of the past. We will first identify the similarities and differences between the two novels' depictions of the burden of the past, detailing how the past is portrayed in the novels, how it affects the characters, and how they carry its weight. In addition, we will analyze the roles of memory, melancholy, and regret as they manifest in the novels, underlining how these emotions contribute to the depiction of the burden of the past.

To support our analysis, we will refer to secondary sources, including literary criticism, historical and cultural studies, and the author's biographies. We will also examine how critics and readers received the novels when they were published, as well as how scholars have interpreted and analyzed them in the years since. We will also consider how the historical and cultural contexts in which the novels were written may have influenced their depiction of the burden of the past.

## 3. Literature Review

Both novels include motifs associated with the burden of the past, but formulate and convey them in different ways. The past is idealized in F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby*, especially when depicting Gatsby's fixation with Daisy, his ex-lover. The story is driven by Gatsby's desire to reignite his connection with Daisy, as he is unable to let go of his memories of the times he had shared with her. The attendees at Gatsby's parties are likewise fixated on the past, clinging to the remains of the old world and the associated rituals.

In contrast, *The Sound and the Fury* presents a more negative reflection on past events. The Compson family is weighed down by their past, rendered unable to move on with their lives. The story is broken down into four parts, each narrated by a different character. These characters' recollections and viewpoints are used to explain what happened in the past. The history of the family triggers both shame and remorse, and is the primary factor contributing to their demise. The concept of the "American Dream" is addressed in both the books. The ambition Gatsby expresses throughout *The Great Gatsby*, focusing on improving his social standing, amassing a fortune, and regaining Daisy's affection is a metaphor for the American Dream. Nonetheless, towards the conclusion of the book, the reader is presented with evidence of the rotteness and hollowness of the American Dream. The money Gatsby has obtained unethically, and the result is that his obsession with Daisy has a tragic outcome.

Similarly, the concept of the American Dream is depicted as challenging in the novel *The Sound and the Fury*, apparent in the Compson family's desire to maintain their standing in Southern society. Despite their best efforts, they are unable to cling to the splendor of their past, and ultimately, their own history will be their undoing.

*The Great Gatsby* and *The Sound and the Fury* have both been the focus of a multitude of critical analyses, many of which interrogated the significance of being burdened by one's history. *The Great Gatsby* has been

interpreted by some commentators as a critique of the United States' preoccupation with the past, focusing on the role that memory and nostalgia play in the novel. For example, in his essay *The American Dream Distorted: The Tragic Implications of Gatsby's Illusion*, James Callahan argues that Gatsby's quest to reclaim the past is ultimately doomed to failure because it is predicated on a distorted and idealized version of reality (Callahan, 4). Likewise, Wagner-Martin argues that the novel is a commentary on the destructive effects of nostalgia and the dangers of trying to recapture the past (Wagner-Martin, 149).

Other researchers have evaluated how Faulkner used a stream-of-consciousness narrative in *The Sound and the Fury* as a device to investigate the intricate psychological ramifications of trauma and memory in the novel. For example, Richard Gray argues in his book *The Sound and the Fury: A Reader's Guide to the Novel by William Faulkner*, that the novel employs a stream of consciousness narrative to explore the fragmented and unreliable nature of memory, as well as the ways in which language shapes our perceptions of the past (Gray, 450).

### 3.1. Historical and Cultural Contexts

In addition to literary analyses, a considerable amount of scholarly work has been conducted concerning the historical and cultural contexts in which these novels were written. The 1920s was a time of rapid social and cultural change in the United States, and many critics argued that *The Great Gatsby* reflects the cultural angst common to that time period. For example, Kirk Curnutt argues that the novel reflects the tensions that existed between the old and new worlds, between tradition and modernity, and between individualism and collectivism in the 1920s (Curnutt, 268). Similarly, Tavernier-Courbin argues in her book, entitled "Art as Woman's Response and Search: Zelda Fitzgerald's 'Save Me the Waltz'" that the novel reflects the cultural and social changes of that time period. Some of these changes included the rise of consumerism, the emergence of new forms of entertainment, and the changing roles that women played (Tavernier-Courbin, 29).

On the other hand, the novel *The Sound and the Fury* has been read as a commentary on the decline of the Southern aristocracy and the enduring legacy of slavery and racism in the American South. For example, David Minter argues that the novel reflects Faulkner's critique of the Southern myth of the lost cause and is an attempt to come to terms with the legacy of slavery and racism in the South (Minter, 269). Minter's argument is that the novel reflects Faulkner's attempt to come to terms with the legacy of slavery and racism in the South. In support of this view, Richard Godden argues that Faulkner's novel reflects the fall of the Southern aristocracy and the ongoing difficulties embracing modernity in the South (Godden, 573).

### 3.2. Literary Techniques

Both *The Great Gatsby* and *The Sound and the Fury* investigate the concept of being burdened by one's history, and each employs a variety of literary devices to do so. Through the use of symbolism, imagery, and characterization in *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald conveys the idea that the past is both a source of longing and nostalgia, as well as a burden that hinders progress and change in the present and the future. For example, the green light at the end of Daisy's dock symbolizes Gatsby's yearning for the past, as well as his desire to regain his lost love (Bloom, 52). In contrast, the valley of ashes represents the corruption and decay of American society. Additionally, the character of Jay Gatsby is presented as a tragic person, whose preoccupation with the past eventually leads to his demise, suggesting the weight of the past may be a harmful force preventing people from forging ahead in their lives.

The fragmented and unreliable nature of memory, as well as the ways in which language shapes our perceptions of the past, are both topics investigated by Faulkner in *The Sound and the Fury* through stream of consciousness narrative. According to Godden (442), the book is divided into four parts, each narrated by a different character. These parts each show the character's own viewpoint, relating the events of the past and the struggle to come to terms with tragic events. In addition, the book makes use of a non-linear narrative and a fractured structure, both of which reflect characters' fragmented and disconnected memories. This serves to both emphasize the psychological repercussions of trauma and the ways in which the past may haunt the present.

## 4. Analysis and Discussion

### 4.1. *The Burden of the Past in The Great Gatsby*

*The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald also examines the excesses and decadence associated with what is also known as the Jazz Age. This period was a time of significant social and economic transformation in the United States. It is Jay Gatsby, a mysterious and affluent man obsessed with regaining his lost love, Daisy Buchanan, who is the eponymous “Great Gatsby.” The story concentrates on Gatsby’s preoccupation with his own past, as Fitzgerald examines its weight through the lens of Gatsby’s character.

The characterization of Daisy Buchanan is one way in which the weight of the past is portrayed in “*The Great Gatsby*.” Daisy is presented as a woman held captive by her own past, notably her former love for Gatsby. Due to her inability to go beyond the memories of their past connection, she is eventually unable to give Gatsby her whole commitment in the here and now. This is shown by Daisy’s statement to Gatsby, “I did love him once – but I loved you too” (Fitzgerald, 132). The reluctance of Daisy to let go of the past eventually leads to tragedy, as she faces her uncertainty and unwillingness regarding the choice between Gatsby and her husband, Tom Buchanan. Daisy’s inability to choose between the two men also contributes to Gatsby’s downfall.

*The Great Gatsby* makes extensive use of symbolism to convey the weight of one’s history in a number of different ways throughout the novel. The story is filled with symbolism conveying the significance of the past and its influence on the present. For example, Gatsby’s yearning for days gone by, and his desire to win back his ex-lover are represented by the green light at the end of Daisy’s dock in *The Great Gatsby*. Ruin and immorality from the past continue to plague the present, and the valley of ashes, which is a dismal wasteland located between West Egg and New York City, is a metaphor for this phenomenon.

### 4.2. *Critical Responses to the Burden of the Past in The Great Gatsby*

The portrayal of the “burden of the past” in *The Great Gatsby*, has been the focus of much critical examination. Some researchers suggest that Fitzgerald’s depiction of the past is too idealized, such that he does not sufficiently investigate the more negative aspects of sentimental longing. For instance, Harold Bloom argues in an essay entitled *F. Scott Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby* that Fitzgerald’s idealization of the past is a form of escapism that eventually leads to the demise of his characters (142).

However, some reviewers maintain that Fitzgerald’s depiction of the weight of the past is subtle and multifaceted throughout. For instance, Susan Resneck Parr argues in her essay titled *Individual Responsibility in The Great Gatsby*, that Fitzgerald’s picture of the past is not nostalgic, but rather a criticism of a society that is mired in its own history (7). According to Parr’s interpretation, symbols in the book, i.e., the green light and the valley of ashes, indicate ways in which the past continues to significantly impact the present.

### 4.3. *The Burden of the Past in The Sound and the Fury*

William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* examines the deterioration of a once-respected Southern family, the Compson family. It is broken into four segments, each narrated by a different character. Each section investigates the central issue of the novel, which is the weight of one’s history, introduced in a unique manner. The character of Quentin Compson represents one of the ways in which the weight of the past is portrayed in the novel *The Sound and the Fury*. Another approach is the use of flashbacks.

Quentin is unhappy and unable to break away from his troubled background and is ultimately finally pushed to take his own life. He gives a famous monologue that illustrates his preoccupation with the past; he says, “I offer you the mausoleum of all hope and desire... I give it to you not that you may remember the time, but that you could forget it” (Faulkner, 104). He continues, “I give it to you not that you may remember the time, but that you might forget it” (Faulkner, 104). Failing to reconcile the harsh reality of the present with his idealized recollections of the past, Quentin is eventually doomed to fail by his reluctance to let go of that past.

The use of stream-of-consciousness narrative in *The Sound and the Fury* is another method by which the weight of the past is conveyed. The reader can enter the consciousnesses of the characters and experience their memories and thoughts in a nonlinear manner through Faulkner's use of this literary device. It brings to light the ways in which the past continues to have a significant impact on the present, as the characters are continually being tormented by their memories, unable to free themselves.

#### 4.4. Critical Responses to the Burden of the Past in *The Sound and the Fury*

The portrayal of the weight of the past, as shown in *The Sound and the Fury*, has also been the focus of a great deal of critical examination. The stream-of-consciousness narrative that Faulkner uses in the work, as well as the author's unnecessarily complicated depiction of the past, are two criticisms levelled by readers against Faulkner. For instance, Michael Millgate claims in his article *The Achievement of William Faulkner*, that Faulkner's representation of the past serves as a kind of nostalgia that eventually undermines the novel's critique of Southern culture (53)

Other critics, meanwhile, contend that Faulkner's use of stream-of-consciousness narration is an effective method by which to investigate the weight of the author's own history. For instance, Cleanth Brooks argues in *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country*, that the author's use of this approach allows the reader to feel the characters' recollections in a manner that genuinely mirrors the complexity and subjectivity of human experience (251). Brooks further argues that the book's depiction of the past is a criticism of how Southern culture has failed to leave behind its own history, and that Faulkner's use of stream-of-consciousness narration is a potent instrument for exploring this issue in the novel. Brooks's interpretation is further supported by the fact that Faulkner used stream-of-consciousness narration.

Faulkner's portrayal of the burden of the past in *The Sound and the Fury* has also been the subject of critical analysis. Some critics have argued that Faulkner's depiction of the South and its history has been overly romanticized, as he fails to fully explore the darker aspects of Southern history, such as slavery and racism. For example, Robert Penn Warren argues in his essay *Faulkner: Past and Future*, that Faulkner's portrayal of the South is a form of nostalgia that simply romanticizes a troubled past:

We can, in fact, think of the poles of Faulkner's work as history-as-action and history-asritual. We may also see this polarity as related to another which he was so fond of – and so indefinite in his formulation of – the polarity of fact and truth. We may see it, too, in the drama of his outraged Platonism – outraged by the world and the flesh. (246)

Other critics, have however, argued that Faulkner's portrayal of the burden of the past is complex and nuanced. For example, in her essay, *The Burden of the Past in The Sound and the Fury*, Judith Bryant Wittenberg explains Faulkner's depiction of the past is not nostalgic, but rather a critique of a society struggling to confront its own history (2). Wittenberg also suggests the novel's use of stream of consciousness narrative represents the characters' inability to escape the past, writing:

Faulkner's stream of consciousness narrative represents the characters' inability to escape the past. The past is always present in their minds and emotions, and they are unable to move beyond it. This is a critique of a society that is unable to confront its own history and move forward. (149)

#### 4.5. The Diversity and Complexity of the Critical Responses to Fitzgerald and Faulkner's Depictions of the Burden of the Past

The diversity and complexity of the critical responses to Fitzgerald and Faulkner's depictions of the burden of the past in *The Great Gatsby* and *The Sound and the Fury* reflect the resonance of the novels. Indeed, a number of reviewers have focused principally on the function memory plays in the two narratives. Memory is a potent force in *The Great Gatsby*, one with a significant impact on the identities and goals of the characters. Memory is also a major theme in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, as explained by Martín Bullón (4), "Gatsby's entire existence is predicated on his memories of Daisy and his desire to reclaim the past." Memory is portrayed

in a similar manner in *The Sound and the Fury*, in which it functions as a fractured and unreliable force shaping the characters' perceptions of the past and the present. According to Cleanth Brooks, "Memory is a central theme of *The Sound and the Fury*, but it is a fragmented and unreliable force that distorts the characters' perceptions of the past and the present" (98).

Other critics have highlighted the role played by the use of language to construct and manipulate reality in the novels. For example, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* revolves around a central theme centered on how Gatsby uses language to construct a false persona and thereby manipulate others. As critic James L. W. West III observes, "Language is a crucial element in *The Great Gatsby*. Gatsby's use of language to create a false persona and to manipulate others is a powerful commentary on the role that language plays in American culture" (159). In *The Sound and the Fury*, language is also presented as a medium through which the characters can simultaneously reveal and conceal their feelings and perceptions about the world around them.

By using the stream-of-consciousness narrative technique, Faulkner reveals the ways in which language shapes the thoughts and feelings that create the inner lives of the characters in the novel. According to Kherroubi and Benzoukh, "Language is a central element of *The Sound and the Fury*" (109). This is further explicated by Gray, who states, "Faulkner's use of stream of consciousness narrative enables readers to experience the inner lives of the characters and the ways in which language shapes those lives" (610).

Finally, a number of reviewers have concentrated their attention on the role gender plays in these books. Women are portrayed as both objects of desire and symbols of the past in *The Great Gatsby*. Daisy and Jordan, in particular, are included as representatives of the past. Daisy symbolizes Gatsby's lost love, while Jordan symbolizes the social and cultural changes that occurred during that time period. The critics Al-Badarneh and Amayreh write in their analysis of the novel, that "Women are central to *The Great Gatsby*, but they are depicted as objects of desire and as symbols of the past" (23). In Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* too, women are portrayed as helpless victims of the past and as symbols of the decline of the Southern aristocracy. As noted by the critic Ma, "Caddy is a victim of the history of her family as well as the restrictive gender roles of the time" (40).

## 5. Conclusion

As discussed in this paper, the burden of the past is a common theme in American modernist literature, and *The Great Gatsby* and *The Sound and the Fury* are two of the most prominent examples of works elucidating this theme. Both books investigate the notion that one's history may both haunt the present and create the future, with the result that people are frequently held captive by their own personal narratives. Some critics have also argued that Fitzgerald's depiction of the past in *The Great Gatsby* is romanticized, while others suggest it is a critique of a society unable to move beyond its own history. Certainly, Fitzgerald's depiction of the past in *The Great Gatsby* has been the subject of considerable critical analysis. Meanwhile, Faulkner's depiction of the burden of the past in *The Sound and the Fury* has been the subject of critical analysis, with some arguing Faulkner's portrayal of the South is overly romanticized, and others that it is a critique of a society unable to acknowledge its own history. The cultural and societal shifts taking place during the modernist period in America are reflected in the central motif of the burden of the past. At this time in history, people were struggling to come to terms with the rapidly changing world around them, while also bearing the burden of their own personal histories.

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