Summary

The narrator, a young man by the name of Nick Carraway, returns from World War I in a state of restless excitement, invigorated by the battles and disappointed with life in the little Midwest town where he grew up. His family owns a successful wholesale hardware business, but Nick, longing for the grandeur and tumult of city life, moves to New York to become a bond man. He rents a cheap little house in West Egg, the less fashionable version of East Egg, Long Island, and lives there among the nouveau riche or new money. Shortly after arriving in New York, he visits his cousin Daisy Buchanan, who lives in East Egg with her husband Tom, a Yale alum with old money. Their first dinner together upon Nick’s arrival in New York is interrupted by a phone call from Tom’s mistress, Myrtle, which embarrasses Daisy and heightens tensions in their already strained marriage. It’s clear by the end of the first chapter that Daisy is a flighty, unhappy, and insincere person, and that her failing marriage will supply much of the drama in the novel.

Following this first dinner, Nick attends a series of parties with the Buchanans and their close friend, Jordan Baker, whom Nick casually dates throughout the summer. Their first stop is to a small party in the City where Nick meets Mrs. Myrtle Wilson and realizes that she’s a vain and superficial person (just before the party, Tom took her to Fifth Avenue and bought her a bunch of gifts, including a little dog; Daisy, of course, stayed home). This party seems both quick and interminable and sets the stage for the other parties in the novel, which grow bigger, grander, and more absurd with time. This is the Jazz Age, a period characterized by jazz music, sexual freedom, and excessive alcohol consumption, and a nationwide ban on liquor instituted during the Prohibition Era has made serving and bootlegging liquor all the more thrilling. Nick quickly gets swept up in the revelry and becomes fascinated with his neighbor, the titular Jay Gatsby, who hosts lavish parties at his estate in West Egg.

Over time, Nick learns that Gatsby isn’t who he claims to be and that his newfound wealth and status are a result of his dealings with the shady Mr. Wolfsheim, an underworld figure who has gotten Gatsby involved in the bootlegging business (and, it’s implied, in other illegal activities). What’s more, Gatsby is in love with Daisy and wants Nick to arrange a meeting between them at his little summer house. It’s Jordan Baker who fills Nick in on the affair, telling him about the young military officer (Jay Gatsby) who charmed Daisy with his good looks and white uniform when she was eighteen and still living at home with her parents. If not for the fact that he was poor and had no connections and no future that Daisy could see, the two of them might have gotten married. Instead, Daisy married Tom, and Gatsby went about amassing a fortune to try to win her back. His lavish parties are all part of an elaborate plan to seduce Daisy away from her husband and reignite their relationship. In the end, his plan almost succeeds.

Tom confronts Daisy and Gatsby about the affair on a broiling hot day when the five of them (Nick and Jordan included) drive into the City and spend the afternoon drinking in a hotel. In his characteristic fashion, Tom berates Daisy into admitting that she loved him, and then calls Gatsby a bootlegger and a fool, all the
while laughing at his flashy pink suit. Daisy, shaken by this encounter and unsure what to do, accidentally hits Myrtle while driving home in Gatsby’s gorgeous yellow car (Myrtle, who had seen Tom driving Gatsby’s car on the way into the City, assumed that it was him driving and ran out to stop him as the car sped past her husband’s garage). Myrtle is killed on impact, and Gatsby, who was in the passenger’s seat at the time, takes the fall. That night, he stands under Daisy’s window, waiting for her to give him a sign, not realizing that while he’s waiting she’s sitting at her kitchen table, working through all her differences with Tom. Nick sees this through the window, but doesn’t tell Gatsby about it, and isn’t surprised when Gatsby is shot at his home by George Wilson, Myrtle’s husband, who got Gatsby’s name from Tom the day after the accident. It’s a tragic end to a long love story.

Nick stays in West Egg just long enough to arrange Gatsby’s funeral and invite his supposed “friends” to attend it. None of them come, but Nick does get to meet Gatsby’s father, Mr. Gatz, whom Nick describes as “a solemn old man” who thinks the world of his son. Mr. Gatz shows Nick a book where a young Gatsby (then called “Jimmy”) wrote out his daily schedule and his “resolves”: drink less, save money, and be nicer to his parents. Seeing this, Nick understands how a young Jimmy Gatz could be taken in by a dream of wealth and status. It was this desire that led him in his youth to row up beside a yacht and convince its owner, a man by the name of Dan Cody, to give him a job. Jay Gatsby was born then, well before he met Daisy, and was driven by his ambition until the day of his death. In the novel’s final passages, Nick ruminates on Gatsby’s life and his inability to shape his future, concluding, “So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.”

Estimated reading time: 4-5 hours

Timeline

- 1907: Jimmy Gatz meets Dan Cody and assumes the name Jay Gatsby.
- October 1917: Gatsby meets Daisy; she’s eighteen.
- 1918: Gatsby and Daisy almost marry, then break up.
- June 1919: Daisy marries Tom Buchanan.
- August 1919: Tom starts cheating on Daisy.
- April 1920: Daisy’s daughter Pammy is born.
- Autumn 1921: Nick comes back from the war.
- Spring 1922: Nick moves to West Egg, Long Island to become a bond man.
- Summer 1922: the main action of the novel takes place.
- Autumn 1922: Nick returns to the Midwest.

Additional Summary: Summary

In a sense, The Great Gatsby is a novel about identities, as each of its major characters struggles to find or create himself or herself as an independent figure in twentieth century American life. In these efforts the characters reveal themselves either as fully rounded, authentic individuals, or as hollow shells, devoid of personality and reality. Taken together, the group portrait Fitzgerald paints in his novel is a fitting representation of the false prosperity of post-World War I America and, more important, is perhaps the most perfectly constructed fiction of its time.

Nick Carraway, the narrator, comes from the Midwest to New York to work as a stockbroker. Taking a home in the Long Island community of West Egg, he makes the acquaintance of his rich neighbor Jay Gatsby, who is the subject of myriad rumors. Gatsby is reputed to have dubious connections, to have been a German spy during the war, and perhaps to have killed a man. While some of this is true (Gatsby has connections with the criminal world, and he served in the war, but was a hero for the Allies), the most salient fact is that Gatsby
remains, after many years, in love with Daisy Buchanan, Nick’s cousin, who lives across the bay. Through
Nick, Gatsby reestablishes a relationship with her and seeks to rekindle the long-dead flame. The attempt fails
and, in the end, Gatsby is dead, Daisy left in her loveless marriage, and Nick wiser and less hopeful.

Much hope is lost as identity is gained or revealed, and Nick is honest in his chronicle of those events. Daisy
and Tom Buchanan are like the Bourbons of French history, for they forget nothing and learn nothing. They
enter the novel as self-centered, essentially uncaring persons, obsessed with their own concerns and
indifferent to the feelings and the existence of other people. Tom is having an affair with Myrtle Wilson, wife
of a garage owner on Long Island. Daisy rather easily decides to renew her connection with Gatsby, begun
years ago while he was in army training on a military base in her home town in the South. When Myrtle
Wilson’s death places their world in jeopardy, husband and wife quickly abandon their “loves” and retreat
into the safety of money and privilege. The identities of the Buchanans are shaped, Fitzgerald clearly
indicates, by social status, not personal worth.

Nick is a more difficult identity to define, and, much as the seed his name implies, he is constantly changing
and emerging. Throughout the novel he is a figure in transition. During one critical passage—as he, Gatsby,
and the Buchanans motor into town on the drive that will lead to Myrtle Wilson’s death—Nick suddenly
realizes that it is his birthday, and that he has just turned thirty. “Before me stretched the portentous, menacing
road of a new decade.” In a sense, there is no single narrator for this novel, for the Nick who begins the book
is clearly not the same man who ends it after a summer of carnivals and carnage.

Yet Nick’s change is more than one of experience; it is one of understanding. At the novel’s beginning, fresh
from the experience of the war, he says he is ready for the world to stand “at moral attention.” Clearly, this is
not the sort of person who would accept, much less become a friend with, a questionable character such as
Gatsby. However, by the end of the novel, Nick is able to tell Gatsby: “You’re worth the whole damn bunch
put together.” Gatsby’s romanticism is, in the end, innocent, despite his criminal connections. Compared to
the hypocrisy that the Buchanans and the various partygoers represent, Gatsby is admirable.

Gatsby is not Gatsby but Jimmy Gatz, a poor boy from the Midwest—like Nick Carraway—who happened
upon a chance that took him away from his life and gave him the opportunity to move into a different world.
That world included Daisy, whom Gatsby romanced while he was a military officer in training. Later, on
Long Island, after he has re-created himself, Gatsby tries to win her, and all she represents, again. Gatsby
fails, and Nick is the sole honest witness to Gatsby’s heroic effort.

In the end, identity is the central message of The Great Gatsby. Is Gatsby a war hero or a gangster? Is he
Jimmy Gatz or Jay Gatsby? Is Daisy Buchanan a happily married woman or one enamored with a love from
her past? Is Nick Carraway really the honest narrator or a special advocate for his friend, who might be either
a romantic hero or a successful, but common, thug? The answer, Fitzgerald implies, lies in human memory.
People are not what they are but what they think they used to be.

Additional Summary: Summary

Young Nick Carraway decides to forsake the hardware business of his family in the Midwest in order to sell
bonds in New York City. He takes a small house in West Egg on Long Island and there becomes involved in
the lives of his neighbors. At a dinner party at the home of Tom Buchanan, he renews his acquaintance with
Tom’s wife, Daisy, a distant cousin, and he meets an attractive young woman, Jordan Baker. Almost at once
he learns that Tom and Daisy are not happily married. It appears that Daisy knows her husband is unfaithful.

Nick soon learns to despise the drive to the city through unkempt slums; particularly, he hates the ash heaps
and the huge commercial signs. He is far more interested in the activities of his wealthy neighbors. Near his
A mysterious man of great wealth. Gatsby entertains lavishly, but his past is unknown to his neighbors.

One day, Tom takes Nick to call on his mistress, a dowdy, plump, married woman named Myrtle Wilson, whose husband, George Wilson, operates a second-rate automobile repair shop. Myrtle, Tom, and Nick go to the apartment that Tom keeps, and there the three are joined by Myrtle’s sister Catherine and Mr. and Mrs. McKee. The party settles down to an afternoon of drinking, Nick unsuccessfully doing his best to escape.

A few days later, Nick attends another party, one given by Gatsby for a large number of people famous in speakeasy society. Food and liquor are dispensed lavishly. Most of the guests have never seen their host before. At the party, Nick meets Gatsby for the first time. Gatsby, in his early thirties, looks like a healthy young roughneck. He is offhand, casual, and eager to entertain his guests as extravagantly as possible. Frequently he is called away by long-distance telephone calls. Some of the guests laugh and say that he is trying to impress them with his importance.

That summer, Gatsby gives many parties. Nick goes to all of them, enjoying each time the society of people from all walks of life who appear to take advantage of Gatsby’s bounty. From time to time, Nick meets Jordan there and when he hears that she has cheated in an amateur golf match, his interest in her grows.

Gatsby takes Nick to lunch one day and introduces him to a man named Wolfshiem, who seems to be Gatsby’s business partner. Wolfshiem hints at some dubious business deals that betray Gatsby’s racketeering activities, and Nick begins to identify the sources of some of Gatsby’s wealth.

Later, Jordan tells Nick the strange story of Daisy’s wedding. Before the bridal dinner, Daisy, who seldom drank, became wildly intoxicated and kept reading a letter that she had just received and crying that she had changed her mind. After she became sober, however, she went through with her wedding to Tom without a murmur. The letter was from Jay Gatsby. At the time, Gatsby was poor and unknown; Tom was rich and influential. Gatsby is still in love with Daisy, however, and he wants Jordan and Nick to bring Daisy and him together again. It is arranged that Nick will invite Daisy to tea the same day he invites Gatsby. Gatsby awaits the invitation nervously.

On the eventful day, it rains. Determined that Nick’s house should be presentable, Gatsby sends a man to mow the wet grass; he also sends flowers for decoration. The tea is a strained affair at first, and both Gatsby and Daisy are shy and awkward in their reunion. Afterward, they go to Gatsby’s mansion, where he shows them his furniture, clothes, swimming pool, and gardens. Daisy promises to attend his next party. When Daisy disapproves of his guests, Gatsby stops entertaining. The house is shut up and the usual crowd turned away.

Gatsby eventually informs Nick of his origin. His true name is Gatz, and he was born in the Midwest. His parents were poor. When he was a boy, he became the protégé of a wealthy old gold miner and accompanied him on his travels until the old man died. He changed his name to Gatsby and daydreamed of acquiring wealth and position. In the war, he distinguished himself. After the war, he returned penniless to the States, too poor to marry Daisy, whom he had met during the war. Later, he became a partner in a drug business. He was lucky and accumulated money rapidly. He tells Nick that he acquired the money for his Long Island residence after three years of hard work.

The Buchanans give a quiet party for Jordan, Gatsby, and Nick. The group drives into the city and takes a room in a hotel. The day is hot, and the guests are uncomfortable. On the way, Tom, driving Gatsby’s new yellow car, stops at Wilson’s garage. Wilson complains because Tom did not help him in a projected car deal. He says he needs money because he is selling out and taking his wife, whom he knows to be unfaithful, away from the city.
At the hotel, Tom accuses Gatsby of trying to steal his wife and also of being dishonest. He seems to regard Gatsby’s low origin with more disfavor than his interest in Daisy. During the argument, Daisy sides with both men by turns. On the ride back to the suburbs, Gatsby drives his own car, accompanied by Daisy, who temporarily will not speak to her husband.

Following them, Nick, Jordan, and Tom stop to investigate an accident in front of Wilson’s garage. They discover an ambulance picking up the dead body of Myrtle, struck by a hit-and-run driver in a yellow car. They try in vain to help Wilson and then go on to Tom’s house, convinced that Gatsby had struck Myrtle.

Nick learns that night from Gatsby that Daisy was driving when the woman was hit. Gatsby, however, is willing to take the blame if the death should be traced to his car. He explains that a woman rushed out as though she wanted to speak to someone in the yellow car, and Daisy, an inexpert driver, ran her down and then collapsed. Gatsby drove on.

In the meantime, Wilson, having traced the yellow car to Gatsby, appears on the Gatsby estate. A few hours later, both he and Gatsby are discovered dead. He shot Gatsby and then killed himself. Nick tries to make Gatsby’s funeral respectable, but only one among all of Gatsby’s former guests attends along with Gatsby’s father, who thought his son had been a great man. None of Gatsby’s racketeering associates appear.

Shortly afterward, Nick learns of Tom’s part in Gatsby’s death. Wilson had visited Tom and, with the help of a revolver, forced him to reveal the name of the owner of the hit-and-run car. Nick vows that his friendship with Tom and Daisy is ended. He decides to return to his people in the Midwest.

**Additional Summary: Summary**

*The Great Gatsby* is Fitzgerald’s finest novel, an almost perfect artistic creation which is perhaps the single most American novel of its time. It should be seen as the ultimate vehicle for the themes that form the central concerns of Fitzgerald’s career, and indeed of so much of the United States’ national life: lost hope, the corruption of innocence by money, and the impossibility of recapturing the past. These elements are fused together by Fitzgerald’s eloquent yet careful prose in a novel that transcends its period and has become a touchstone of American literature.

Nick Carraway, the first-person narrator of the novel, lives on Long Island, New York, next door to the enormous mansion of a mysterious man named Gatsby, who throws gaudy, glittering parties. Wild, improbable rumors circulate about Gatsby, but when Nick meets him, he finds himself charmed and intrigued. He learns that Gatsby is in love with Nick’s cousin, Daisy Buchanan, whom Gatsby met while stationed in her hometown in the South during World War I. Gatsby seeks to rekindle that earlier love in Daisy, now married to a coarse, brutal husband, Tom. The effort fails, and Gatsby becomes entangled in the lives of the Buchanans and is killed, shot by the confused and grieving husband of Tom’s mistress. Gatsby’s glowing dream ends in sordid confusion.

In this novel Fitzgerald relies on a narrative technique that he clearly learned from the works of the English writer Joseph Conrad: He gradually unveils Gatsby’s story as Nick pieces it together a bit at a time. Each chapter allows Nick, and the reader, more insight into Gatsby’s past and his true character. The facts are sifted from rumors and speculation until Jay Gatsby (born Gatz) is revealed as a flawed, but still great, hero.

Like so many of Fitzgerald’s heroes, Gatsby is a romantic, a man who began with a high, even exalted, vision of himself and his destiny. He aspires to greatness, which he associates with Daisy. If he can win her, then he will have somehow achieved his goal. Gatsby’s wealth, his mansion, his parties, his possessions, even his heroism in battle are but means to achieve his ultimate end. Gatsby is mistaken, however, in his belief that
money can buy happiness or that he can recapture his past. His story is clearly a version of the traditional American myth, poor boy makes good, but is it a distorted version or an accurate one? Fitzgerald leaves this ambiguity unresolved, which adds to the power of his novel.

As a romantic, Jay Gatsby does not understand how money actually works in American life. He believes that if he is rich, then Daisy can be his. This is displayed most powerfully and poignantly in the scene where Gatsby shows Daisy and Nick the shirts he has tailored for him in London: He hauls them out in a rainbow of color and fabric, almost filling the room with the tangible yet useless symbols of his wealth. The shirts cause Daisy to cry, but they do not win her; they cannot let Gatsby realize his dream.

Gatsby has amassed his money by dealings with gangsters, yet he remains an innocent figure—he is a romantic, in other words. Ironically, Daisy Buchanan, his great love, is a much more realistic, hard-headed character. She understands money and what it means in American society, because it is her nature; she was born into it. Gatsby intuitively recognizes this, although he cannot fully accept it, when he remarks to Nick that Daisy’s voice “is full of money.” Even so, Gatsby will not admit this essential fact because it would destroy his conception of Daisy. In the end, this willful blindness helps lead to his destruction.

Actually, both Gatsby and Daisy are incapable of seeing the whole of reality, as he is a romantic and she, a cynic. This conflict is found in the other characters of the novel as well and is a key to *The Great Gatsby*. Fitzgerald uses a variety of symbolic scenes and images to express the blindness that the characters impose upon themselves. Gatsby’s ostentatious material possessions are aspects of illusion. So is the green light at the end of Daisy’s dock, the light that Gatsby gazes upon but cannot reach.

Other symbolic touches illuminate the book: the ash heaps which litter the landscape between Long Island and New York, for example, or the eyes of Doctor Ecleberg, found on a billboard dominating the valley of the ash heaps. The ash heaps are a reference to the vanity of life (and a nod at T. S. Eliot’s poem *The Waste Land*, published in 1922), and the eyes a comment on the blindness of the book’s characters, who do not fully understand what they behold.

While such devices add to the depth of *The Great Gatsby*, its true power derives from it being a quintessentially American novel, full of American characters and American themes. Nick Carraway, the midwestern narrator, encounters the sophistication of the East: New York, gangsters, the promise and hollowness of wealth. Tom and Daisy Buchanan, insulated by their money, do what they want without consequence, showing no remorse for their actions and no concern for those they have harmed. Jay Gatsby, like the hero in a story by Horatio Alger, rises from being a penniless youth through ambition and good fortune, only to discover that his wealth cannot buy what he most desires—and is, in fact, the very agent of his destruction. They are all American characters in an American setting.

Fitzgerald’s skill as a novelist was at its peak with *The Great Gatsby*, and this is shown best in his command of the book’s structure. By using Nick Carraway as the first-person narrator, Fitzgerald establishes a central focus for the novel, a character who is partly involved with the plot but partly a commentator upon it. Nick is presented as an honest, reliable person, and his perceptions and judgments are accepted by the reader. Nick ties the novel together, and through him it makes sense. Most important, Nick’s solid, midwestern common sense validates Gatsby as a character despite Gatsby’s outrageous background and fabulous adventures. In the end, if Nick Carraway accepts Gatsby and approves of him—and he does—so does the reader.

Nick’s approval is what allows Gatsby to be called “great,” but his greatness has a curious, puzzling quality to it, as it cannot be easily or completely defined. Gatsby certainly lacks many of the qualities and fails many of the tests normally associated with greatness, but he redeems this by his exalted conception of himself. It is to this romantic image of Gatsby that both Nick and the reader respond.
Additional Summary: Summary

In accordance with Fitzgerald's epic ambitions to write a novel that expressed the vital spirit of his country, The Great Gatsby attempts to explain and evoke the essence of the fundamental myth at the heart of the American experience. Even in the high times of the wild 1920s, Fitzgerald perceptively sensed that the original energy of the American dream was irrevocably vanishing, and he wanted to record its power before it faded into memory and fable.

Fitzgerald explores the American dream through two characters: Nick Carraway, the narrator, and Gatsby himself, both young men born in the heartland of the Midwest at the dawn of the twentieth century. Like Fitzgerald, they arrive in New York with some of the innocence characteristic of middle America, lured to the great wicked city by its promise of glamour and success, vulnerable to its dangers and its corruptions.

They bring some of the classic virtues of the heartland with them—simplicity, determination, loyalty, and perhaps most of all an innate sense of honesty and decency. For Gatsby, beguiled and practically enslaved by love, these virtues have been driven into the deeper recesses of his character. For Nick, the temptations of city life are also quite strong, but he is able to turn back before he is consumed. A sense of the American dream's possibilities animates both men, but Gatsby has allowed the realities of contemporary American life to distort the parameters of his romantic vision.

A dinner party
Nick Carraway, the narrator, announces that he is writing his account two years after the events described. Aged twenty-nine, in the spring of 1922 he travels East from his midwestern home to work as a bond salesman in New York. He has rented a house on West Egg, sandwiched between the mansions along the shore of Long Island Sound. He knows nobody except his distant cousin Daisy Buchanan, who lives with her wealthy husband Tom on East Egg, across the bay. Nick drives over to dinner with the couple, whom he has not seen in years, and their guest Jordan Baker. Tom, an athletic polo player, betrays his boorish arrogance as he expounds a racist theory he has read. Daisy's magical voice compels Nick forward to listen to her, but he suspects her sincerity when she says she is unhappy. In contrast, dark-haired Jordan strikes Nick with her jaunty self-assurance. At one point, Nick's neighbor “Gatsby” is mentioned and Daisy catches the name in surprise. Dinner is tense; Jordan reveals that it is Tom's mistress telephoning him, and Daisy appears to know. Returning to West Egg, Nick first sees Gatsby. As Nick is about to call to him, Gatsby stretches out both arms towards the water or the green dock light opposite; Nick is mystified.

Myrtle's party
Commuting across the “valley of ashes” to the city, Tom suddenly pulls Nick from their train to meet his mistress, Myrtle. She is a blowsy, vital woman, the wife of servile garage-owner George Wilson. Myrtle catches the next train with them, and impulsively buys a puppy while she and Tom insist that Nick accompany them to their city apartment. Nick reads discreetly while the couple are in the bedroom. Myrtle decides to throw a party, and the apartment fills with people and social chatter. The puppy blinks in the smoky air, the party gets progressively drunker, and Nick wonders what the scene would look like to an observer outside. Myrtle starts chanting Daisy's name, and Tom brutally breaks her nose; the sound of wailing accompanies Nick as he leaves.

Gatsby's party
Nick describes the lavish parties that nightly transform Gatsby's garden. One afternoon a butler brings Nick a formal invitation, and at the party Nick is relieved to spot Jordan in the swirling crowd. Nick hears many extravagant and contradictory rumors from the guests. He and Jordan come across comical “Owl Eyes,” a bespectacled man trying to sober up in the library. Later, an elegant young man invites Nick for a hydroplane excursion next morning, and as Nick confesses he has never met their host, the man reveals himself to be
Gatsby. Later still, Jordan is called to speak with Gatsby in the house, and then hints at his amazing story but won't tell more. Leaving the party, Nick sees a car in a ditch with its wheel off; the drunken culprit cannot understand the car's predicament. Nick interrupts the story here to reflect that he was actually very busy in the weeks between these three parties described, enjoying the adventure of New York. He catches up with Jordan again and learns more of her character; unlike Nick, she is incurably dishonest, and a careless driver.

Lunch in New York
Gatsby drives Nick to lunch in the city and tells him more about his past. Nick is unsure whether to believe it all but decides to trust Gatsby when he produces an authentic-looking medal as proof. Gatsby then hints of a favor he will ask Nick that day. They have lunch with a sinister friend of Gatsby's, Meyer Wolfsheim, who was apparently responsible for fixing the 1919 World Series. When Tom Buchanan appears, Gatsby looks embarrassed and disappears before Nick can introduce the men.

Tea with Jordan
That afternoon, Jordan tells Nick the story and makes Gatsby's request. Jordan met Daisy in 1917 and in the company of a young soldier. For a time after, Jordan heard only rumors of her before Daisy became engaged to Tom. As bridesmaid, Jordan witnessed Daisy's distress the eve of the wedding, as she held a mysterious letter until it dissolved. Yet the couple married and traveled, although Tom got in the papers after a car accident with another girl, and Daisy had a little girl. When “Gatsby” was mentioned at their recent dinner party, Jordan realized that this is Daisy's young soldier. Gatsby bought his house to be opposite Daisy, hoping she would appear at a party. As she hasn't, he now wants Nick to ask Daisy to tea so that he might meet her again. This afternoon, Nick first kisses Jordan, whose real presence contrasts to Gatsby's ghostly devotion to Daisy.

Reunion
Nick invites Daisy to tea and the day arrives, pouring rain. Despite Gatsby's nervousness, Daisy does arrive. The reunion is difficult, but after Nick leaves the couple alone, they are “radiant” together on his return. They take Nick over to Gatsby's house so that Gatsby can show it off, and Gatsby is clearly overwrought by the significance of the occasion after such a long wait.

Almost five years! There must have been moments even that afternoon when Daisy tumbled short of his dreams—not through her own fault, but because of the colossal vitality of his illusion. It had gone beyond her, beyond everything. He had thrown himself into it with a creative passion, adding to it all the time, decking it out with every bright feather that drifted his way. No amount of fire or freshness can challenge what a man will store up in his ghostly heart.

Another party
Nick reflects on Gatsby's “notoriety,” and to clear up misconceptions, he provides a brief biography of “James Gatz” who, at seventeen, invented and transformed himself into Jay Gatsby. Nick is over at his neighbor's one afternoon as Tom Buchanan drops by with another couple. The three are rude guests, and leave before Gatsby can join them, as he had planned to. The following Saturday, Tom escorts Daisy there, dismissing the extravaganza as a “menagerie.” Gatsby and Daisy dance, then sit on Nick's porch together as Nick keeps a lookout for Tom. Afterwards, Gatsby says that Daisy doesn't understand. Gatsby obviously expects to repeat the past—when Daisy renounces Tom, she and Gatsby can begin where they left off five years before.

Confrontation
Nick is invited to the Buchanans' with Gatsby and Jordan on a sweltering day at the end of the summer, during which Daisy has spent much time with Gatsby. Daisy's daughter Pammy says hello, then the group casts about for something to do. Daisy suggests the city. When an innocent comment betrays her feeling for Gatsby in front of Tom, the tension worsens. Daisy gets into Tom's car with Gatsby, and Jordan and Nick ride with
Tom. Tom stops at Wilson's garage, and is dismayed to hear that Wilson plans to get away with Myrtle. Nick sees Myrtle intent at the window, plainly thinking that Jordan is Daisy. They take a suite at the Plaza Hotel for mint juleps. Finally, Gatsby tells Tom that Daisy doesn't love her husband, and they confront one another, as Daisy falters.

“Oh, you want too much!” she cried to Gatsby. “I love you now—isn't that enough? I can't help what's past.” She began to sob helplessly. “I did love him once—but I loved you too.”

Gatsby's eyes opened and closed.

“You loved me too?” he repeated.

Aftermath
The two men drive their own cars away, and Gatsby and Daisy go on ahead while Nick remembers that it is his thirtieth birthday. The story abruptly mentions a “witness” at the “inquest.”

Wilson, acting suspiciously, revealed to the coffee-store proprietor Michaelis that he had locked his wife up. Later, Myrtle runs in front of a car from the city, and is killed. Nick resumes his perspective as Tom's car pulls up to the commotion at the garage. It becomes clear that the “death car” was Gatsby's. Arriving back at the Buchanans', Nick finds Gatsby keeping a watch for Daisy, worried about Tom. Nick gathers that Daisy was driving the car that Myrtle ran in front of because she probably believed that Tom was in it.

Nick warns Gatsby his car will be traced, but he will not leave Daisy, his “grail.” Nick describes Gatsby's version of their courtship and Daisy's marriage. Gatsby plans to swim, and Nick leaves with a compliment of friendship and thanks for hospitality. Nick then pieces together the times and events that lead Wilson to find Gatsby in the pool, and shoot him and then himself.

Conclusion
Nick arranges the funeral at which only one former guest, Owl Eyes, appears, and meets with Gatsby's pathetically proud father. Nick reflects that the East is haunted for him, and he decides to go home. Nick has chance meetings with both Jordan and Tom, and is already distant from them. He looks at Gatsby's house before leaving, imagining past wonder at the sight of this new world, relating this with Gatsby's own belief and wonder.

Chapter Summaries: Chapter 1 Summary and Analysis

In the opening passages of the novel, the narrator, Nick Carraway, relates a piece of advice that his father gave him in his “younger and more vulnerable years”: to remember whenever he feels like criticizing someone that “all the people in this world haven’t had the advantages [he’s] had.” That his own father would tell him to be less critical of others suggests that Nick is an inherently critical person and that his privilege and his wealth (his family owns a successful wholesale hardware business) have together made him myopic, insensitive to the struggles of others and unwilling to admit that his own point of view might be irreparably biased. Fitzgerald inserts this bit of advice at the beginning to color Nick’s narration, making it less reliable but at the same time far more personal. He introduces Nick as a flawed, intelligent, and often poetic character, and the reader, finding truth and beauty in his narrative voice, is inclined to read on in his story.

Nick takes us back to his early years, relating how he grew up in the Midwest, went to college at Yale, and later fought in the trenches during World War I before moving to West Egg, Long Island in the spring of 1922, when the main action of the novel begins. Nick was disenchanted with the Midwest, having just returned from his time in Europe, and moved to New York City to escape that “ragged edge of the universe”
he used to call home. In his decision to move East and take up the bond business, one can see a certain stiffness and moral inflexibility, as if he has chosen to live his life according to certain standards and expects everyone else to do the same. His friends and neighbors can’t live up to this standard, and it’s with an evident distaste that he attends a dinner at his cousin Daisy’s estate in East Egg, which Nick describes as the more fashionable version of West Egg. Indeed, East Egg is the home of very storied families, and Tom Buchanan, Daisy’s husband, descends from one of these. Nick and Tom know each other from Yale, but Tom, with his money and his connections, was spared from going to war and stayed at home to drink and carouse while Nick was on the front lines. Nick disapproves of this, and their dinner quickly becomes uncomfortable.

Also in attendance at this dinner is Jordan Baker, a somewhat famous golfer, who is Daisy’s best friend and will soon be Nick’s casual love interest. Together, the three of them listen to a racist lecture from Tom, who praises the theories of race put forth in Lothrop Goddard’s *The Rising Tide of Color*, a work of pseudoscience arguing that those of Nordic or Aryan descent are inherently better or more deserving of their social status than people of color. Thankfully, this discussion is interrupted by an unexpected phone call from a woman who turns out to be Tom’s mistress, Myrtle Wilson, calling him to arrange a date. Jordan Baker, meanwhile, tells Nick all about the affair, rather indelicately suggesting that everybody already knows about it and that it’s an amusing but not altogether unusual wrinkle in the Buchanans’ marriage. Daisy, embarrassed by this sequence of events, confesses to Nick in private that her marriage has been a difficult one, full of ups and downs, and that Tom wasn’t even there for the birth of their daughter. Daisy expresses a general disaffection with life, laughing, “Sophisticated—God, I’m sophisticated!” with evident scorn. Immediately after this statement, Nick sees through her elegant façade and realizes that Daisy is, like Tom, an essentially privileged person, and that she has become flighty, insincere, and arrogant over time. Nick thinks Daisy should leave Tom and take the child, but she has no intention of doing so at the moment.

That same night, Nick watches his neighbor, the titular Jay Gatsby, walk out on his lawn and stretch his arms toward a green light far over the water. He thinks of calling out to Gatsby, but in the end decides against it, not wanting to disturb him.

Allusions

"Midas and Morgan and Mæcenas." King Midas, J. P. Morgan, and Gaius Cilnius Mæcenas, three wealthy men, two from antiquity and one from the late 19th and early 20th Century. King Midas was said to possess the ability to transform anything he touched into gold. J. P. Morgan, wealthy financier and founder of his namesake company, was a major figure in the financial industry and helped resolve the Panic of 1907. Gaius Cilnius Mæcenas, political advisor and culture minister to the Roman Emperor Octavian, was well-known for being a patron of the arts. All three men have been associated with wealth, power, and prestige, and alluding to them here suggests that Nick, who wants to "unlock" their secrets, is swayed by money as often as the people he criticizes.

*The Rising Tide of Color* by Lathrop Stoddard. A sociological work that uses pseudoscience to suggest that white people, especially those of Nordic descent, are genetically superior to all other races, who, Stoddard believes, threaten to overthrow the white majority and subvert the natural order. In his book, Stoddard attempted to use science to support the theory from eugenics that the various races should be separated in order to maintain social order. Tom’s appreciation of Stoddard’s theories reflects poorly on him and makes the other characters uncomfortable.

Characterization

Several descriptive tags are repeated throughout the text in reference to the main characters. In this first chapter, for instance, Tom is continually described as being physically restless and somewhat aggressive. His body is described as large, fit, and imposing, with “a great pack of muscle” that shows off his physique.
Jordan, the sports star, is noted for her “jauntiness” and for the energy of her movements. In contrast, her expression often seems unhappy. Her face is described as both “wan” and “discontented,” a “bored haughty face” that appears arrogant and privileged, much like Tom’s does. Daisy is also described by her physical characteristics. Her voice is low and thrilling (as opposed to Tom’s “gruff, husky tenor” and its “paternal” tone), and her dresses are described as “rippling and fluttering,” emphasizing her flighty, indecisive nature. These subtle little characterizations prepare the reader for the more in-depth character development Fitzgerald does later in the novel.

**Personification**

When Fitzgerald uses personification, it’s most often in reference to buildings or decorations. Tom and Daisy’s house is “cheerful.” Their lawn “jumps” over sun-dials and brick walks. Nick’s bungalow, in contrast, has a “beard” of ivy and looks like an eyesore next to Gatsby’s perfectly manicured lawns. The personification makes the setting seem alive, as if it is itself a character in the novel.

**Symbols**

**Books.** Of all the recurring symbols in the novel, books prove to be one of the most important, second perhaps only to the green light Gatsby sees across the bay. Nick’s volumes about finance are the first to make their appearance and are a clear symbol of money and power. Tom’s allusion to *The Rising Tide of Color* complicates the symbol, suggesting that each book reflects on the character it belongs to, illuminating some of the most fundamental aspects of their personality (in Tom’s case, his racism and his self-aggrandizement).

**Colors.** Some colors recur throughout *The Great Gatsby*, in particular white, gray, and various shades of red. Traditionally, the color white symbolizes innocence and purity, as in the “beautiful white girlhood” Daisy and Jordan shared, but Fitzgerald subverts this idea, making white more often than not a symbol of impurity when it’s used to describe the superficial, hypocritical residents of East Egg. Daisy, for instance, lives in a red and white house whose “cheerful” appearance proves ironic when one considers that she’s unhappy with her marriage. Red, rose, and pink thus become symbols of fairy tales and of falsehoods, particularly when one wants to believe that someone or something is nicer than it really is. (Daisy, for instance, describes Nick as an “absolute rose,” which isn’t an accurate description of him at all.) Of the three most often seen colors in the novel, gray is the one that Fitzgerald uses in its most familiar sense, in reference to desolation or decay. Jordan, for instance, is described as having a wan, discontented face, with “gray sun-strained eyes” that make her seem bored and excessively critical. In this way, colors function as both symbols and tools for characterization. (We will discuss the green light from the end of the chapter when it reappears in Chapter V.)

**Important Themes**

**The American Dream.** The American Dream (specifically, the failure to realize it) is one of the most important themes in the novel. It’s established early in the first chapter when a stranger asks Nick for directions, making him “a guide, a pathfinder, an original settler,” like those brave pioneers who traveled West in hopes of building better lives for themselves. Immediately after this scene, Nick tells us that he read a series of finance books in the hopes of making his fortune. Fitzgerald uses the juxtaposition of these settlers and bankers to suggest that the American Dream of having land and making a home for yourself has been subsumed by the desire to make and amass money, and thereby to perpetuate a capitalist system.

**Money.** Money and wealth are key themes in the novel and function as identifiers of each character’s social status. Tom, for instance, descends from “old money” and carries himself like someone who is accustomed to privilege and prestige. In contrast, the residents of West Egg, including Gatsby, are members of the nouveau riche, a class of people who have only recently earned their money without having to rely on their family’s old money. East and West Egg themselves embody the divide between the old money and the new and represent...
the social stratification already present in New York City (and the nation as a whole) in that time period.

Chapter Summaries: Chapter 2 Summary and Analysis

Nick begins this chapter with a long description of the landscape between West Egg and New York City, what Fitzgerald calls “a valley of ashes” because its desolate houses and prominent railroad tracks make it feel like a place people would only ever want to pass through, home to “ash-gray men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air.” This valley of ashes stands in stark contrast to the comfort and the glamour of East and West Egg, which in its description appears vibrant, luxurious, and clean. Fitzgerald uses the juxtaposition of these two locations to suggest that the American Dream, so deftly alluded to in the previous chapter, may be hollow and unrealistic, a kind of fantasy that misleads men and settles them unhappily in this lifeless place. Fitzgerald’s valley of ashes thus becomes a symbol of the failures of the American Dream, just as Doctor T. J. Eckleburg’s eyes, peering out from a decrepit billboard, symbolize God, or, rather, a god whose once bright eyes, dimmed with age, “brood” over this valley of ashes. If there is a God, Fitzgerald suggests, then he has abandoned humanity and turned his back on the desolation Nick describes.

Nick and Tom pass through the valley of ashes on their way to a party in the City. Tom drives, but stops part way there at the garage belonging to George Wilson, Myrtle’s cuckold husband. Tom pretends to be inquiring about his business, like a friend, but Nick knows that Tom wants to see Myrtle. Sure enough, when she comes down, she sends George away to fetch a chair, and Tom whispers instructions for where she should meet him. As soon as she sneaks away, her true personality comes out, and Myrtle reveals herself to be vain, vivacious, and shallow, not unlike Tom. Her dress is tight and revealing, and on the way to the party Tom stops to buy her a magazine, cold cream, a bottle of perfume, and even a little dog. This pleases her, and she becomes self-satisfied and near insufferable as she telephones her sister and invites her to the party. It takes place in a top-floor apartment, where Nick gets drunk for the second time in his life and where Tom and Myrtle enjoy a little alone time before their guests arrive. Once the party gets into full swing, it feels like the Jazz Age: interminable and absurd, over-familiar and superficial, and completely unperturbed by the fact of Prohibition, which should in theory make the liquor they drink impossible to obtain, but in practice drives them to bootleggers and speakeasies that sell them illegal alcohol. Nick is so soaked in booze by the end of this party that he can barely get himself home.

A couple important things come to light at this party: that Myrtle and Tom were once happy in their marriages, that they “can’t stand” their respective spouses now, and that Tom must have a possessive kind of affection for Daisy, because when Myrtle says Daisy’s name repeatedly, despite Tom’s warning, he brutally breaks her nose; and yet the couple stays together. We’ll see what becomes of that later in the novel.

Allusions

John D. Rockefeller. An American industrialist well-known for his wealth and his philanthropy. His namesake plaza in New York City (home of the building colloquially known as “30 Rock”) is a good example of his status in the New York City financial industry and his fame in early 20th Century America. His name quickly became synonymous with wealth and prestige, and Nick’s remark about the old man who sells Myrtle her dog looking like Rockefeller is meant as a satire of the New York City elite.

Kaiser Wilhelm. Kaiser Wilhelm II, the last of the German Emperors, who ruled from 1888 until 1918, when the monarchy was abolished. Kaiser Wilhelm was the eldest grandson of Queen Victoria and was related to many members of the European royalty, which makes his participation in World War I especially strange, considering that he chose to go to war against his own family. Fitzgerald alludes to Kaiser Wilhelm to enhance the mystery surrounding Gatsby’s character.
**Simon Called Peter by Robert Keable.** A bestselling novel published in 1921 about a priest who has an affair with a woman in France and almost renounces his faith. Fitzgerald alludes to the novel to make fun of “popular” fiction and distance his literary work from books like Keable’s.

**Town Tattle.** A cheap gossip magazine from the 1920s, not unlike the *National Enquirer* of today. Myrtle’s decision to buy it along with a magazine about movies suggests that she’s not as high class as she wants to appear. There’s also a pile of *Town Tattle* issues on a table at the apartment, which suggests that Tom and Myrtle have had many parties there already.

**Versailles.** The Palace of Versailles, the traditional home of the French monarchy, built by Louis XIV and designed by architect Louis Le Vau. Today, Versailles is a tourist attraction and a museum of fine art, but under Louis XIV’s reign and up to the years of the French Revolution, Versailles was the seat of political power in France. It’s also world-renowned for its elaborate gardens, which Fitzgerald alludes to here in order to suggest that the guests at the party are rich and self-involved, prone to an unnecessary level of ostentation.

**Character Development**

**Cars.** Fitzgerald uses cars to characterize two of the men in this chapter: Tom and George Wilson. George, a mechanic and garage owner, spends his entire life buying, fixing, and selling cars, most of them rundown and not worth much. Tom, on the other hand, drives a nice car, owns another one he’s thinking of selling, and wouldn’t be caught dead working in such an old and unprosperous-looking garage. Fitzgerald uses their cars to emphasize the difference in social status between these two men.

**Clothing.** Once again, clothing and physical descriptions play a big part in character development. This time the descriptions are mostly of Myrtle, whom we meet for the first time in this chapter. She appears in three different outfits over the course of the chapter: a spotted blue dress, a brown muslin dress, and an afternoon dress made of cream-colored chiffon. These outfit transitions correspond to developments in her character: she goes from being a somewhat dowdy wife to a woman stepping out on her husband to a pampered and pompous mistress who appears by the end of the chapter to be a haughty, disdainful, and altogether unpleasant person. Later in the novel, we will see her in a different outfit, and she will again act like a different person.

**Withheld Information.** Myrtle’s sister Catherine mentions to Nick that Gatsby might be the cousin of Kaiser Wilhelm, and that this may be where he gets his money. While untrue, this rumor is a byproduct of the mystery that surrounds Gatsby, which Fitzgerald will continue to build in subsequent chapters. By withholding information, Fitzgerald is able to increase interest in Jay Gatsby and draw the reader deeper into the story.

**Symbols**

**Colors.** Fitzgerald continues to build on the color gray as a symbol of desolation and of decay in this chapter, particularly in his description of the valley of ashes. Men there are gray. The houses are gray. The train tracks and the cars are all covered with an ashy gray dust, just as George Wilson’s clothes are when we see him at the garage. Gray thus becomes a symbol of death and lifelessness. Tom even goes so far as to say that George Wilson is “so dumb he doesn’t even know he’s alive.”

**Doctor T. J. Eckleburg’s eyes.** Doctor T. J. Eckleburg was an oculist who purchased a billboard in the valley of ashes. This billboard went forgotten and unnoticed for a long time, eventually fading to the point where the blue of the doctor’s eyes became less bright, but not less disarming. Fitzgerald uses the eyes as a symbol of God or of a god who stares solemnly out at his creation, watching in silence as civilization begins to decay. God, Fitzgerald suggests, has turned His back on humanity.
**The Valley of Ashes.** Fitzgerald describes the landscape between East Egg and New York City as a symbolic valley of ashes where civilization has begun to decay and men shamble around in gray clothes, gray cars, and gray houses covered with ashes. This is a potent symbol of desolation and decline, and it stands in stark contrast to the opulence of East and West Egg, which seem vibrant and hopeful by comparison. This is the place where people go when they have no more hope, and the valley thus becomes a symbol of the failure of the American Dream.

**Important Theme**

**The American Dream.** Fitzgerald continues to develop the theme of the American Dream, using the symbolic valley of ashes to show the readers what has happened to that dream in the modern era. Financial and social stratification, fueled by the rapid growth of industry in America, has left many of its citizens behind. Men like George Wilson, for instance, have no hope of bettering themselves, because the modern world leaves them no options to climb the social ladder. George Wilson owns a garage and nothing more. These men live in the ashes and nothing more. For many Americans, Fitzgerald argues, the American Dream will never be a reality. In later chapters, we’ll see how the desire to realize that dream affects the main characters.

**Chapter Summaries: Chapter 3 Summary and Analysis**

Summer in West Egg is a series of parties for Nick, and perhaps the best of all is one Gatsby invites him to at the beginning of this chapter. Nick has been observing the parties for weeks by this time and knows something of what happens there: the driveway begins to fill with cars, invited and uninvited guests come and go and stay to all hours of the night, listening to music from the orchestra, drinking cocktails mixed with the juice of hundreds of lemons and oranges supplied by a fruiterer on a weekly basis; fights break out; relationships begin and end; guests swim and fall into the pool; these parties are, in short, raucous, and Nick is happy to receive a personal invitation from Gatsby himself, who sends a chauffeur to invite him one Saturday.

Nick arrives to find that none of the guests know where Gatsby is and furthermore that they’re affronted that he would ask. It’s immediately apparent that none of these people are there for Gatsby and that none of them can be considered his friends. Jordan Baker, who appears just as Nick moves toward the bar, has no clue as to Gatsby’s true whereabouts, but doesn’t seem to mind gossiping about him beside the pool with two girls dressed in yellow. One of them tells Nick and Jordan that Gatsby sent her a brand new dress after she tore her old one at another of his parties. No one has any idea who the man really is. Some say he was a German spy in the war. Others think he killed a man. Nick doesn’t know what to think about Gatsby, and this fuels the mystery that Fitzgerald has been building about Gatsby from the start.

After the first supper (there’s a second after midnight), Nick and Jordan attempt to find Gatsby and spend some time exploring his large stately mansion, meeting a man described simply as wearing owl-eyed spectacles and having been drunk for a full week. Owl Eyes points out with some surprise that the books in Gatsby’s library are real. He was expecting them to be fake, which is to say, he thinks Gatsby’s fake and this is all an elaborate façade constructed to hide his true self. Naturally, Nick and Jordan find this all rather absurd and, after shaking Owl Eyes’ hand, leave him to dry out in the library while they continue their search. Downstairs, dancing has started up again, and Nick sits at one of the tables to watch. He strikes up a conversation with another man at the table, bonding with him about fighting in World War I, before the man finally reveals that he’s Gatsby. Their exchange is awkward and unexpected and quickly gets interrupted by an important business call from Chicago. After Gatsby’s sudden departure, the orchestra begins to play a popular (fictional) jazz composition.
Not long after Gatsby leaves, his butler comes to say that he’d like to speak with Jordan. Nick, alone now, heads up to a ballroom above the terrace, where one of the girls in yellow is crying and playing the piano, devastated by a fight she had with her husband. Indeed, every woman there seems to be having a fight with her husband. Nick thinks it’s probably time to leave, and while he’s waiting for a servant to fetch his hat he sees Gatsby and Jordan, who are returning from their private conversation. Jordan refuses to tell Nick what they talked about, at least for the moment, and together they spend some time trying to extricate themselves from the party, which has resulted in a car accident that has trapped many cars in the driveway. It seems old Owl Eyes was in the car when it veered into a ditch, and the driver, too wasted to understand what’s happened, doesn’t realize that the steering wheel has broken off. It’s a strange end to an already over the top party.

Nick then makes a point of saying that life in West Egg isn’t just about parties. He also works and studies investments during the week, eats dinner at the Yale Club, and for a while can be seen around town with Jordan Baker. Unfortunately, Nick sours a little on Jordan because of a story he remembers hearing about her cheating in a golf tournament. This leads Nick to make the statement: “I am one of the few honest people that I have ever known.” Nick is completely sincere. Fitzgerald, on the other hand, has already established that Nick can be a very critical and judgmental person, so he may not be the best judge of his own character.

Nick also reveals that there was a girl back home who was getting perhaps too attached, and that he made sure to break it off. He mentions this only in passing, so that it’s easy to miss it. This suggests that there are many aspects of his character that he would like to keep hidden.

**Allusions**

**Belasco.** David Belasco, namesake of the Belasco Theatre in New York City, was a theatrical producer, director, and playwright. His theatrical productions were well-known for their acute attention to detail, which included installing a functional laundromat in one production and adding scent to another. Owl Eyes refers to Gatsby as “a regular Belasco,” meaning that his entire house is a kind of set where he’s putting on a performance.

**Castile.** A powerful kingdom on the Iberian Peninsula in what’s now modern-day Spain. In the Middle Ages, Castile was a rich and imperious state, home to many great families and artists. Their clothing was particularly vibrant, which Fitzgerald alludes to when he says some ladies at the party were wearing “shawls beyond the dreams of Castile,” meaning that they’re even richer and more luxurious than those found in Castile.

**Gilda Gray and the Ziegfeld Follies.** Gilda Gray, a famous dancer and actress from the 1920s, well-known for the “shimmy,” which became popular during the Jazz Age. In 1922, she appeared in Florenz Ziegfield’s namesake “Follies,” a long-running series of theatrical Broadway productions that included dance, music, vaudeville, and dramatic and comedic performances. Ziegfield’s Follies were world-renowned, and appearing in them was a sign of enormous talent and skill. It’s no wonder that the guests at Gatsby’s party are excited by the prospect of meeting Gilda Gray’s understudy.

**“Jazz History of the World” by Vladimir Tostoff.** A fictional composition Fitzgerald made up for this novel. “Tostoff” may be a clever bit of word play on Fitzgerald’s part, indicating that he casually “tossed off” the fake name.

**John Lawson Stoddard’s Lectures.** Stoddard, an American writer, was famous for his “lectures,” or travelogues, in which he wrote about his adventures in various foreign countries. Volume One, which Owl Eyes pulls from the shelf, concerns Stoddard’s time in Norway, Switzerland, Athens, and Venice. Fitzgerald refers to it because it gives Gatsby’s private library both legitimacy and importance, suggesting that, even if Gatsby hasn’t read the books, he has the sense to buy them.
Foreshadowing

**False appearances.** Fitzgerald uses Owl Eyes’ expectation that the books in Gatsby’s library are fake to prime the reader for the revelation that Gatsby has been keeping secrets from people and might not be who he says he is. For more on Gatsby’s true identity, see Chapter VI.

**Car crashes.** This chapter marks the first car crash in the novel. It’s notable in that it becomes absurd, was caused by excessive alcohol consumption, and results in no serious injuries. For information about the second car crash, see Chapter VII.

Symbols

**Books.** Fitzgerald continues to develop books as a symbol in this chapter, once again using books as both tools of character development and symbols of one’s social status. Gatsby’s library, as Owl Eyes points out, is full of books that he expected to be fake, but which turned out to be as real as he is. Fitzgerald uses the owl-eyed man’s astonishment at this to suggest that Gatsby might be a fake and that, if so, he’s a very successful one.

**Colors.** In this chapter, the color yellow becomes more prominent, appearing in the dresses of the two women in yellow, in the paint of Gatsby’s station wagon, in the turkey skin and “yellow cocktail music” and skinny flutes of champagne that float around the party on ornate silver platters. It’s clear, from these descriptions, that yellow has been associated with opulence and money, the same way gold is associated with riches.

**Eyes.** In contrast to Doctor T. J. Eckleburg’s eyes, which gaze out over the valley of ashes like those of an all-knowing but altogether indifferent god, the owl eyes of the drunken party guest in this chapter are symbols of blindness or a failure to see the truth of what’s right in front of you. His expectation that the books will be made of cardboard and subsequent astonishment at finding them to be real indicates to the reader that things aren’t always as they appear, and that even God’s eyes can be blind to a person’s true intentions.

Important Theme

**Performance.** There are many performances in this chapter (the gypsy’s dance number, the orchestra’s jazz numbers, and the woman in yellow’s piano playing), but the most important performances are those from people pretending to be something they’re not. This could be said of all the guests at this party, who, in attempting to have fun and make connections, pretend to be happier and more successful than many of them actually are. Jordan Baker, for instance, cheated at a pro golf tournament once, but acts like a champion. Nick pretends not to think much of the parties he attends, but that’s all he can write about. And Gatsby, too, pretends to be someone greater and richer than he is. For more on Gatsby’s true identity, see Chapter VI.

Chapter Summaries: Chapter 4 Summary and Analysis

Nick starts this chapter by listing all the guests who attended one particular party at Gatsby’s. It’s a fairly comprehensive list, divided into groups from East Egg and West Egg, and detailing where necessary what exactly made these guests important. One guest was notable for being brother to a man who strangled his wife. Another is well-known for staying so long at Gatsby’s parties as to be considered a “boader.” None of these people, of course, know their host well enough to really be considered his friends, and Nick doesn’t seem to think highly of them. He lists them only to indicate to the reader that all Gatsby’s parties were attended by the rich and glamorous. This gives them a sheen of importance and, also, of superficiality.
Nick doesn’t really get to know Gatsby until he drives up one day and invites him to lunch out of the blue. Together, they drive into the City, discussing Gatsby’s past, and Nick realizes that Gatsby likely isn’t an Oxford man, as he often claims to be. At one point, Gatsby even makes the mistake of saying San Francisco is in the Midwest. This makes Nick suspicious of Gatsby, but no less interested and not unwilling to forgive him for lying, because the way he does it is so awkward and insecure that it seems he’s desperate for Nick to like him; and then of course there are some parts of his story that are true. He really does have a medal from Montenegro, where he fought in World War I, and he really did go to Oxford. He even has a picture to prove it. Having earned some of Nick’s trust, Gatsby asks him to speak with Jordan Barker, who will tell him something important; but Gatsby won’t say what that thing is or explain why he needs Jordan to tell Nick about it for him. So by the end of their drive Nick isn’t sure what to think or why Gatsby’s being so cryptic.

Only during lunch does Nick understand that Gatsby needs to lie about certain things in order to protect himself. He’s involved in the bootlegging business, just like everyone says, and has a “friend,” Mr. Wolfsheim, who is a prominent figure in the New York City underworld and who runs the business Gatsby profits from (it’s implied that Wolfsheim has also gotten Gatsby into other less savory businesses, but Fitzgerald does not go into detail about this). Gatsby brings Nick to lunch with Wolfsheim in order to earn Nick’s trust. He seems to think that, if he shows Nick a fraction of the truth, then he’ll be more inclined to help him later. He happens to have a favor he wants to ask, but he can’t do it until Nick trusts him, feels sorry for him, and hears the story that Jordan tells him later that afternoon. It’s sensitive in nature.

Fitzgerald dips into Jordan’s perspective to tell us the story of how Gatsby and Daisy first met. It was back in 1917, when Jordan was sixteen and Daisy was eighteen and Gatsby was just a young military officer in a clean white uniform. Jordan happened to walk by Daisy’s house one morning and saw them sitting in Daisy’s car, speaking very intimately. She wasn’t friends with Daisy then and didn’t know all the details of their affair, but did hear through the town’s rumor mill that Daisy wanted to go up to New York to say goodbye to Gatsby before he was shipped off to war, but her family wouldn’t let her. It seems that Gatsby wanted to marry her, but Daisy wouldn’t consent to it because he was poor and didn’t seem to have a future. Soon after, she got engaged to Tom and seemed to be happy. Then, the day of her bridal dinner, she received a letter from Gatsby and nearly called off her engagement; but the next day she married Tom, then left for a three-month vacation. When Daisy got back, Jordan says, she was crazy about her husband, and everything appeared to be well; then Tom started cheating on her, and their marriage began to sour. It wasn’t until Daisy heard Gatsby’s name at that first dinner that she realized Gatsby was in town. Jordan hadn’t made the connection.

When the narrative switches back to Nick’s perspective, it’s later that same day, and Nick and Jordan are still in New York. Jordan asks Nick for the favor Gatsby wants: to let him and Daisy meet at his house. Nick tacitly agrees and in the light of a street sign draws Jordan to him and kisses her. This is how the chapter ends.

Allusions

1919 World Series. This was the last World Series without a Commissioner of Baseball. It’s believed to have been “fixed” or rigged by a ring of gamblers who conspired with members of the Chicago White Sox to intentionally throw games. This scandal is commonly referred to as the Black Box Scandal. If Meyer Wolfsheim is really behind this scandal, as Gatsby claims, then he’s a very powerful and very dangerous person, and Gatsby would be wise to extricate himself from any and all of their business dealings. Fitzgerald uses the danger Gatsby faces to both call into question his life choices and elicit sympathy from the reader.

Hotel Metropole and Rosey Rosenthal. The Hotel Metropole on West 43rd Street, right by Times Square, where Herman Rosenthal, a small time bookmaker gunned down by members of the Lenox Avenue Gang in July of 1912. Rosenthal’s murder was widely believed to have been ordered by Lieutenant Charles Becker, one of three police officers in the case against Rosenthal. The subsequent trial, in which five men (including Becker) were convicted and executed, proved so complex that it stopped and then started up again two years
later after police could investigate the crimes in greater detail. Wolfsheim indicates that he was in the Hotel Metropole at the time of the murder and that this makes it too painful for him to eat lunch there. This allusion cements the reader’s idea of him as an underworld figure and implies that the Metropole may have been a place frequented by crime lords like Wolfsheim.

“The Sheik of Araby.” A jazz standard composed in 1921 in response to Rudolph Valentino’s performance in the hit silent film The Sheik. Fitzgerald quotes a few lyrics from the song near the end of this chapter, when Nick and Jordan leave the Plaza and walk New York City’s streets. He uses the song to evoke the mood and feeling of the Jazz Age, but may also be using the lyrics “I’m the Sheik of Araby. / Your love belongs to me” to characterize Gatsby’s love of Daisy as possessive and a little unhealthy.

Von Hindenburg. Paul Von Hindenburg, second President of Germany, was Chief of the German General Staff from 1916 to 1919, at roughly the time when Gatsby met Daisy and left to fight in the war. One of the guests at Gatsby’s Sunday morning gatherings mentioned Von Hindenburg as a way of suggesting that Gatsby has unsavory connections to the Nazi regime. In Chapter II, a different guest made a similar suggestion by saying that Gatsby may have been a German spy. These allusions taken together underscore the pervasive fear and distrust of Germans in America at that time.

Character Development

In this chapter, we see how reckless decision making has led the main characters (Daisy and Tom in particular) to their current predicaments. Daisy made the snap decision to marry Tom after receiving Gatsby’s letter and nearly calling the wedding off. Tom begins having an affair almost immediately after returning from his wedding trip (and perhaps even before). Gatsby, meanwhile, has been doing business with Wolfsheim, which is perhaps the most dangerous decision of all. It seems every character in this book has made terrible life choices, including Nick, who, in moving to New York City, has exposed himself to a lifestyle that he professes to disdain.

Important Motif

Music. In addition to “The Sheik of Araby” and “Jazz History of the World,” there are many references to music in the novel, which describes names as “melodious,” car horns as “three-noted,” and Daisy’s voice as “full of money.” These sounds and musical notes enhance the lively mood of the party scenes and reinforce the fact that this novel is set during the Jazz Age.

Symbols

Cars. Once again, Fitzgerald characterizes people through the description of their cars. Gatsby has what Nick calls a “gorgeous yellow car” (yellow having been previously associated with wealth and luxury), whereas Daisy drove a white roadster when she was eighteen and started dating Gatsby. Their cars are symbols of their social status and reflect their personalities. That Daisy no longer drives a car of her own after marrying Tom emphasizes the fact that she isn’t a free woman and has to rely on men to drive her around (and even to arrange meetings). That Tom rips the front wheel off his car while driving around with a conquest of his equates him with the drunken party guest in Chapter II who crashes a car with Owl Eyes in it. This is, of course, not a very flattering comparison.

Flowers. Picking up on Daisy’s earlier description of Nick as “a rose, an absolute rose,” Fitzgerald uses flowers in this chapter both as symbols and as tools of characterization. A number of Gatsby’s party guests have “the melodious names of flowers.” When a hearse passes, it’s “heaped with blooms.” Daisy’s home in Louisville has the biggest lawn and, presumably, the most beautiful flowers. In this way, flowers become symbols of life and death.
Chapter Summaries: Chapter 5 Summary and Analysis

Daisy agrees to come to tea, curious as to why Nick told her not to bring Tom. Gatsby has had the grass cut and sent over a greenhouse worth of flowers, but very nearly went back home at the last second, convinced that she wouldn’t come. When her car pulls into the driveway, both men jump up, feeling harrowed by the ordeal of waiting. It’s raining outside, and Daisy’s hair is a little damp when Nick invites her inside. He’s surprised to find the living room empty. Gatsby had slipped out in a fit of anxiety and now knocks on the front door, dripping wet, and brushes past Nick on the way to talk to Daisy. This process of setting up the meeting and nearly calling it off and coming back in again has left Gatsby feeling tense and anxious, and this only feeds into Daisy’s surprise and confusion in seeing him again. It’s a painfully awkward encounter at first, while Daisy tries to figure out how she feels, but after Nick leaves things become easier, and Gatsby and Daisy are able to rekindle their love.

When Nick returns, it’s clear that Daisy has been crying (out of happiness and confusion, the reader assumes), but Gatsby is glowing, and it’s for this that Nick thinks that they have gotten over their embarrassment and come to some sort of an arrangement. When Gatsby takes her to his home, she’s amazed by its size and opulence and walks around in a state of bewildered pleasure, marveling at the beauty of the music room, the dressing room, the salon. Soon, this bewilderment makes her distraught, and after delighting in Gatsby’s gold hairbrush she weeps over his shirts. “They’re such beautiful shirts,” she sobs, overwhelmed by everything that he’s shown her. Her sadness suggests that she was never expecting to see Gatsby again and that if she had known that he’d be rich (richer even than Tom), she might’ve married him, after all.

During their tour, Nick spots a picture of Dan Cody, who Gatsby says was his dearest friend, until recently. Gatsby doesn’t elaborate, and soon asks his boarder, Klipspringer, to play the piano for them while they sit together on the couch. Nick notices then that Gatsby’s glow has begun to fade and that the nervousness has crept back in, even through his happiness. Before Nick leaves, he ruminates a moment on Gatsby’s plan and the five years it took him to reunite with Daisy. In that time, his dream of getting back together with Daisy took on a life of its own and began to embellish itself, growing larger, taking on new facets, and transforming Daisy from a girl to an ideal. His dream was almost impossible to obtain, and now that it has been achieved he must do the difficult work of sustaining it. This will not be as easy as he hopes.

Allusions

“Ain’t We Got Fun” and “The Love Nest.” Popular songs from the 1920s. “Ain’t We Got Fun” is a foxtrot first performed in 1920 and has a jaunty tune characteristic of the Roaring Twenties, while “The Love Nest” is a song from the musical Mary composed by Lou Hirsch, one of the most famous composers of the time. Both are meant to evoke the style and energy of the Jazz Age.

Economics: An Introduction to the General Reader by Henry Clay. A textbook published in 1918 and written by Henry Clay (1883-1954, not to be confused with Henry Clay, the politician from Kentucky well-known for developing the “American System,” an economic plan he implemented in the mid-1810s). Its presence indicates that Nick has indeed been studying economics very hard, though it may seem like he spends all his time partying.

Immanuel Kant. A German philosopher perhaps best known for his work Critique of Pure Reason, in which he discusses the nature of a priori knowledge, which is obtained independent of experience, and a posteriori knowledge, which is obtained only through experience. Kant developed the habit of staring out of his window at the church steeple Nick mentions whenever he needed a break from work. In the 1780s, the steeple was obscured by trees in a neighbor’s garden, and Kant found himself restless and unable to work (the neighbor eventually trimmed his trees, but the anecdote continues to be passed down as an example of how great
thinkers like Kant can be waylaid by simple things like trees). Nick draws this comparison to Kant both to suggest that he’s a great thinker (as is suggested by the quality of this book) and that he is, in some ways, drawing some comfort from the sight of Gatsby’s house. It and, by extension, Gatsby himself are perhaps the only things that make his life in New York bearable.

Marie Antoinette. Queen of France, married to King Louis XVI, the Sun King, and beheaded during the French Revolution in 1793 at the age of 37. Marie Antoinette was famous for being conceited and for having no regard whatsoever for the poor. She’s also well-known for her exquisite taste and is the namesake of the Marie Antoinette music room in Gatsby’s house, which is built in the style popular during her lifetime. In other words, this music room is a period piece.

Restoration. The English Restoration, which took place in 1660 when King Charles II re instituted the Irish, Scottish, and English monarchies after the War of the Three Kingdoms. This period lasted for approximately twenty-five to thirty years, until the end of Charles II’s reign, and gave its name to the Restoration style of architecture, which emulates the designs popular in the time period.

Foreshadowing

In the beginning of this chapter, Gatsby mentions that he hasn’t used his pool all summer and would like to go for a swim. This foreshadows a scene later in the book where Gatsby makes use of his pool, but not in the way one might expect. For more on that, see Chapter VIII.

Important Motif

Music. Fitzgerald continues to use musical imagery to describe people and their voices. This motif is epitomized in the description of Daisy’s voice, which was first described as thrilling and is now a “deathless song” that lures Gatsby in and enchants him with its promises of a better life. It’s important to note, however, that while Daisy’s voice may be a deathless song, Gatsby’s isn’t, and this difference between both their timelessness and beauty suggests that Gatsby will not meet the same end as Daisy. For more on that, see Chapter VIII.

Repetition

In this chapter, several words are repeated on the tour of Gatsby’s house, including “colossal,” “ghostly,” and “embarrassment.” Respectively, these mean grand and larger than life; pale and disembodied; and ashamed or uncomfortable. Collectively, these repeated words contribute to an atmosphere at once imposing and unsettling and suggest that Gatsby’s dream of seducing Daisy and taking her away from Tom will end badly.

Important Symbol

The Green Light. As mentioned before, the green light on Daisy’s dock becomes a symbol of hope and desire, of the longing to achieve a bright and dreamt-of future. It’s also, by its very nature, a distant and unattainable hope, a kind of light that can only be seen at night, when the dock is lit, and can only take on its particular shape and brightness when one is clear across the bay, staring at it as if from another life. Nick notes with some sadness that, once Daisy was near to Gatsby again, that light lost its magic. “It had seemed very near to her,” he says, “almost touching her. It had seemed as close as a star to the moon.” In that sense, the green light is also a powerful symbol of Gatsby’s love.

Important Themes
Dreams. Fitzgerald builds on the theme of the American Dream by folding it into Gatsby’s own dreams, making the desire to make a name for one’s self and become rich, as in the American Dream, equivalent to Gatsby’s desire to reunite with Daisy. He was willing to do anything to attain this dream, including getting involved with Wolfsheim, and spent years trying to achieve it; it’s only natural, then, that things don’t work out exactly as he planned. Nick says that there must have been some “moments even that afternoon when Daisy tumbled short of his dreams,” meaning that he’d built her and his dream up to the point where nothing could possibly live up to it. Like the American Dream as a whole, it has been corrupted by money and power to a point where it is no longer real or viable.

Life and Death. Fitzgerald has been flirting with the themes of life and death since Chapter II, when the drunk party guest crashed the car with Owl Eyes in it. In this chapter, those themes are emphasized by the description of Daisy’s voice as a “deathless song.” This effectively equates Daisy with a deathless or charmed existence and suggests that Gatsby, who becomes enchanted with this voice, doesn’t have the same luxury. When Nick thinks he hears Owl Eyes’ “ghostly” laughter during the tour, it’s as if Gatsby’s house has become one giant, empty tomb.

Light and Dark. Related to the themes of life and death are the themes of light and dark. Daisy, who has long been associated with the color white and with gaiety, here transmutes into Gatsby’s dream, in the process becoming “deck[ed] out with every bright feather” that floated Gatsby’s way while he was building the dream. In the beginning of the chapter, when Gatsby leaves all the lights on at his house, it’s as if he’s trying to invite Daisy to visit, using his house as a beacon, in the same way that the green light at the end of Daisy’s dock draws Gatsby to it. This is the same green light Nick saw Gatsby reaching toward at the end of the first chapter, and it becomes a symbol of hope and the future.

Time. Fitzgerald has been subtly hinting that time is as important to the narrative as dreams, but this chapter brings time to the forefront, manifesting it in the literal clock that Gatsby nearly knocks off the mantle when he hits it with his head. It has been five years almost exactly since he and Daisy last saw each other, and in all that time Gatsby has never forgotten her or even allowed himself to love someone else. Time thus becomes both a curse (in that it seems interminable) and a gift (in that it gives Gatsby time to amass his fortune).

Chapter Summaries: Chapter 6 Summary and Analysis

Nick breaks from the chronological narrative here to provide a long account of Gatsby’s youth. He was born Jimmy Gatz to “shiftless and unsuccessful farm people.” He never accepted that this was his lot in life and was determined to better himself, and so when Dan Cody, a wealthy yacht owner, dropped anchor in Lake Superior, Jimmy rowed up beside the yacht to warn him of foul weather coming. This was enough to impress Cody and secure Jimmy, who’d changed his name to Gatsby on the spot, a position as Cody’s right-hand man, a kind of personal valet in a blue coat and a pair of white duck trousers. Before that, Nick tells us, Gatsby had himself been something of a drifter, working as a clam-digger, caddying around with women, and once, briefly, attending St. Olaf college in Minnesota, where he was disappointed with the amount of attention he garnered from the college and the students. Jimmy Gatz, it seemed, believed that he deserved better and was equivalent to the son of a god. Indeed, Nick says, Jay Gatsby the social climber and self-made man seems to have sprung from Gatsby’s Platonic conception of himself, meaning that he differentiated between his “real” self (represented by his legal name) and his “ideal” self, in the way that Plato, that famed ancient Greek philosopher, differentiated between the real world and the ideal world. Gatsby was whoever he wanted to be.

When Nick returns to the main narrative, it’s to say that for some weeks after the reporter first appeared he distanced himself from Gatsby’s affairs and saw very little of him, partly because he wasn’t invited over to Gatsby’s and partly because he was himself busy with Jordan Baker, whom he was dating semi-seriously. Finally one Sunday morning he pays an unexpected visit to Gatsby and is surprised to see Tom Buchanan,
Daisy’s Tom, riding up on a fine horse along with his friends the Sloanes. This is Tom and Gatsby’s first true meeting, and it’s tense with all that goes unsaid. It’s clear that Tom doesn’t remember their brief introduction after the lunch with Wolfsheim, and Gatsby uses this ignorance against him, saying rather aggressively that he “knows” Tom’s wife, the implication being that he knows Daisy in the Biblical sense. Daisy and Gatsby have at this point been seeing each other in secret for two weeks, and only Tom, in his supreme arrogance, seems oblivious to their relationship. In fact, he’s rather dismissive of it and says, “Is that so?” when Gatsby says he knows Daisy. This social slight increases the narrative tension for the reader, who wonders how and when the truth will come out, but gives Gatsby the time he needs to get himself under control. What follows is a very awkward scene where the Sloanes invite Gatsby to ride with them to their house, but he doesn’t have a horse, and as soon as they step inside to talk, Tom, who hangs back with Nick, says they don’t really want him to come because they have a dinner party that night and he won’t know anyone they invited. Sure enough, the Sloanes leave without him.

Tom, perturbed by this encounter, accompanies Daisy to Gatsby’s party that Saturday. This is the first party Daisy attends at his house, which is surprising, given how popular they are, and she looks on it with both excitement and disdain, meeting all the famous guests, then slipping out to sit with Gatsby on Nick’s front steps. Afterward, when Daisy realizes that Tom has taken up with some girl, she passive-aggressively offers him her little gold pencil so he can write her number down. It’s clear then that Daisy hasn’t been having a good time and that she and Tom both regard the party and its guests with some reproach. Tom begins inquiring whether or not Gatsby’s a bootlegger, and Daisy briefly sings a sad, emotional song before snapping that the girl Tom’s interested in wasn’t even invited. The party devolves from there. Tom and Daisy go home, and Gatsby asks Nick to wait until the party’s over. “She didn’t like it,” he tells Nick, and this frustrates him, because they used to be so in sync. He would like her to tell Tom that she never loved him so that the two of them can run away and start over, but this doesn’t happen. Nick says, “You can’t relive the past,” and Gatsby balks; but in the end Nick is right. Gatsby’s idea of himself forever changed the night he first kissed Daisy. He stopped being “the son of a God,” as he liked to think of himself. He was just mortal and fell in love with the wrong woman.

Allusions

**Madame de Maintenon.** Françoise d’Aubigné, Marquise de Maintenon, the second wife of Louis XIV and, technically, the Queen of France. The marriage was never publicly acknowledged, however, and she didn’t have any official authority in the court. Her influence and power over the king was wielded behind the scenes, where she was known to hold sway over members of the court. Fitzgerald alludes to her to suggest that Ella Kaye, the newspaper woman, had a similar level of influence over Dan Cody, and that their relationship was complicated but largely secret.

**Plato.** An ancient Greek philosopher best known for his texts the *Republic* and the *Symposium*. He argued that there’s a difference between the “real” world and the “ideal” world, particularly with regard to justice and the law. According to him, we’re able to make the ideal world we want to live in, just as Gatsby made himself into the person he wanted to be. This is what Nick means when he says Gatsby is a product of his “Platonic conception of himself.” He’s his own ideal.

**“Three O’Clock in the Morning.”** A popular waltz from the 1920s. It was composed by Julián Robledo and has become a major jazz standard, with later versions recorded by jazz greats like Dizzy Gillespie and Thelonious Monk.

Motifs

**Flowers.** Flowers are brought to the forefront as both a symbol and a motif in this chapter, which sees a “gray, florid man” (Dan Cody) sail around on a yacht and an “orchid of a woman” kiss her director underneath a
white plum tree on Gatsby’s estate. This builds on Daisy’s earlier description of Nick as a “rose,” which suggests that the flower motif is used to highlight ostentation in certain characters.

**Music.** Music again appears most often in reference to Daisy, whose voice “plays murmurous tricks in her throat” and sings “in a husky, rhythmic whisper, bringing out meaning in each word that it had never had before and would never have again.” Music can thus be seen as both a fleeting and emotionally charged medium that the reader can use to track Daisy’s psychological state.

**Setting**

**St. Olaf College.** A small Lutheran college in Northfield, Minnesota. Gatsby (briefly) attends St. Olaf, intending to work his way through as a janitor. Two weeks into the semester, he gets tired of it and goes back to Lake Superior, where he bums around, unsure what to do, until he meets Dan Cody.

**Symbols**

**Colors.** Yellow and white again play a large role in this chapter, with Daisy’s “gold pencil” symbolizing her wealth and status and the “white plum tree” symbolizing the innocence and the sexuality of the lovers sitting underneath it. Then, too, there’s the color green, which Daisy subverts in this chapter by saying, half in jest, that she’ll hand out “green cards” to the men whom she’ll allow to kiss her. In this, the green card seems to mean “go” or “yes,” whereas the green light symbolizes hope and the future. By combining the two, we see that the color green is one that pushes the characters toward their desires, whether it be to kiss someone at a party or reunite with a lost love.

**Flowers.** Fitzgerald continues to use flowers as symbols of life and death in this chapter. When Gatsby kisses Daisy for the first time, she “blossom[s] for him like a flower.” This symbolizes both her vitality and their sexual relationship, which begins that night. Similarly, the “orchid of a woman” Daisy sees at Gatsby’s party is very clearly having an affair with her director, and their sexual attraction is symbolized by the “orchid” and by the blooms of the white plum tree under which they sit.

**Important Theme**

**Life and Death.** Fitzgerald builds on the themes of life and death at the very end of this chapter when he calls Daisy’s breath “perishable.” Throughout this chapter and in particular in the backstory, Gatsby has been referred to as a kind of god or immortal, a self-made man with delusions of grandeur that earn him the moniker “great.” His greatness is his ability to make himself into whatever he wants to be, but this ability is undermined by his love of Daisy, whom he hesitates to even kiss because he knows that her “perishable” breath will make it impossible for him to continue as a “God.” He becomes a mortal in his mind the moment he kisses Daisy. You could even say that she kills him.

**Chapter Summaries: Chapter 7 Summary and Analysis**

By the beginning of this chapter, Gatsby has stopped throwing his big parties, in part because Daisy doesn’t approve of them and in part because Wolfsheim, his business partner, wants to do a favor for a family of former hotel owners, who come to replace Gatsby’s former servants. Daisy has been coming over almost every afternoon, and Nick isn’t surprised that they haven’t been in touch with him much lately. When Gatsby does finally call, it’s out of the blue and only because Daisy has asked him to invite Nick to lunch at her house the next day. Nick is right to suspect that this will not end well. It’s scarily hot when he arrives at the Buchanans’ house, and Jordan, Tom, and Daisy have been drinking, waiting for him and Gatsby to arrive. When they enter the salon, both Jordan and Daisy say, “We can’t move.” It’s the heat.
In the other room, Tom is yelling at George Wilson, refusing to sell him the car they discussed in Chapter II. Daisy and Jordan have both assumed that it’s Tom’s mistress on the phone, but Nick assures them that it isn’t. This telephone exchange leaves Tom feeling upset and brutish, and he flings open the door of the salon with fury before stalking in and out. In the wake of her husband’s display of irritation, Daisy must soothe Gatsby, telling him she loves him with a kiss before introducing him to her daughter. Nick notes that Gatsby seems surprised by the child’s existence and that he doesn’t seem to want to acknowledge that Daisy and Tom were ever so in love as to produce a child. He doesn’t want to acknowledge that they’re married at all. Once Tom returns, the two lovers don’t know how to carry themselves in order to hide the affair, and Daisy nervously suggests that they go into the City, making the mistake of saying that Gatsby looks cool. “You always look so cool,” she says, meaning that he doesn’t seem to be sweating, meaning that she loves him. It’s this intimate remark that finally clues Tom into what has been happening behind his back. He doesn’t take it well.

Outside, Tom insists on driving Gatsby’s “circus wagon” of a car. This distasteful suggestion is an attempt on Tom’s part to assert dominance, and it’s clear, when he orders Daisy to get into the car, that he’s trying to replace Gatsby in her mind and keep Daisy all to himself. However, Daisy refuses to go with him, and Tom ends up driving Nick and Jordan in Gatsby’s car while Gatsby drives Daisy in Tom’s car. Gatsby’s unfortunate lie about there not being much gas in the car leads Nick to insist upon stopping at Wilson’s garage, where Wilson, looking sick and upset, tells Tom that he’d like to buy his car so he can make a little money off it and move out West with his wife. He’s aware that she’s having an affair but doesn’t yet suspect Tom, and it’s this uncomfortable realization that leads Tom to agree to selling the car. It’s unclear where this would leave Tom and Myrtle. Myrtle herself, watching this exchange from an upstairs window, doesn’t hear what they say, but fixes her eyes jealously on Jordan Baker, whom she mistakes for Tom’s wife. This will lead to trouble.

Once in the City, they aren’t sure what to do. Jordan suggests going to the movies, and Daisy wants to rent five bathrooms and take five baths, but after a long argument the group decides on what may well be the hottest option: renting a single, stifling room and drinking mint juleps in the afternoon heat. This makes all of them cranky, and soon after they arrive Tom harps on Gatsby’s overuse of the term “old sport,” which he finds rather absurd. In fact, he finds almost everything about Gatsby absurd, including his pink suit. Mendelssohn’s “Wedding March” starts to play, inspiring Daisy to tell the story of how a man fainted at her wedding, which took place in Louisville in mid-June, when the heat was near unbearable. Following this, Tom questions whether or not Gatsby went to Oxford (he really did, thanks to a special program available to officers after the war), makes a racist comment about miscegenation, and finally confronts the two lovers about the affair. Gatsby tells Tom that Daisy never loved him, which is revealed, in the course of their argument, to not be entirely true. She says he’s revolting, but she did love him at the same time that she loved Gatsby. She does admit that much. Hearing this, Gatsby deflates and is then forced to defend himself against Tom’s accusations that he’s a bootlegger (and worse). He very nearly manages to berate Daisy into staying with him, but Daisy, shaken by the argument and afraid of what she’s done, isn’t sure what to do. She and Gatsby leave in Gatsby’s car, and the afternoon is ruined.

In the final sections of the chapter, Nick relates how, on the long drive back to East Egg, Daisy killed Myrtle in a hit and run. It seems Wilson had been keeping Myrtle locked up in the house, waiting until he could sell Tom’s car and pay for their move West, but Myrtle happened to fight her way out at the exact moment that Gatsby’s car sped past. Myrtle, having seen Tom driving Gatsby’s car, thought it was his and ran out into the street to stop him. Daisy, drunk and a little shaken by what happened at the hotel, swerved and hit her, and together she and Gatsby left the crime scene in the hopes of not getting caught. Soon after, Tom, Nick, and Jordan, driving in Tom’s car, pull up to the scene, not realizing at first that Myrtle has been killed. Once a man in the crowd identifies the car as yellow, not green, and this leads Wilson to accuse Tom of the murder. He tells Wilson and the police that it wasn’t his car, but doesn’t say who it belonged to (it’s unclear why the police don’t ask).
Somehow, Tom, Nick, and Jordan manage to extricate themselves from the crime scene, then drive back to East Egg. Daisy’s already home, and the lights are on at her house. Seeing this, Tom apologizes to Nick, saying he should’ve dropped him in West Egg and offering to call him a cab. Jordan wants him to come inside and get some supper, but Nick refuses, and this more or less ends their relationship. After a moment, Nick begins to walk down the drive to the gate, but runs into Gatsby, who has been waiting on the lawn, watching for a sign or message from Daisy. It turns out she was the one driving when Myrtle was hit, but Gatsby intends to take the fall for her, of course. He’s watching over her now just in case Tom confronts her about the car crash or what happened at the hotel. Unbeknownst to him, she isn’t in her room, as he thinks, but rather sitting in the kitchen, eating cold chicken and discussing her options with Tom. Nick sees this through a window and understands that they are reuniting against Gatsby, but in the end decides not to tell Gatsby about this. He goes home, leaving Gatsby alone in the dark.

Allusions

Mendelssohn’s “Wedding March.” One of the best-known pieces from the suite of incidental music Mendelssohn composed for a production of Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. It’s one of the most popular pieces Mendelssohn composed and is still played at weddings today (typically on an organ). It’s used in this chapter to remind Daisy of her own wedding and reinforce the fact that she and Tom do in fact have a complicated relationship that can’t be so easily set aside for Gatsby.

Trimalchio. One of the many characters in Petronius’ *Satyricon*, the great Roman satire. Trimalchio appears only in the section called “The Banquet with Trimalchio” and comes across as a crude, arrogant man who was once a slave and clawed his way to the top through dangerous means. Fitzgerald is drawing this comparison to suggest that Gatsby is himself arrogant and unaccustomed to his new social status and also that his character is in some ways a satire of upper class ideals.

Structure

Notice how Fitzgerald breaks from the chronological narrative to present a fact-based account not unlike a police report in which he draws on evidence Nick learned from the police’s official inquest to describe the events leading up to the car crash. This jarring shift in tone and break in the timeline of the novel are meant to represent the traumatic break the car crash inflicts on the main characters. This is an example of form meeting function.

Important Symbol

Cars. Since the beginning, cars have been a symbol of one’s social status and wealth. In *Chapter III*, however, the car’s symbolism started to change, taking on dangerous and deadly overtones in the scene where the drunk party guest crashes the car with Owl Eyes in the passenger’s seat. The hit and run in this chapter completes the shift and turns the car into a symbol of death.

Important Themes

Dreams. In this chapter, dreams begin to lose their lustre and become more down-to-earth. Daisy calls her daughter Pammy a “dream,” implying that she’s both a beautiful girl and the real physical manifestation of Daisy’s dream of a happy married life. Daisy wanted to be wealthy and taken care of, just as Gatsby wanted to be wealthy and take care of her, but neither of these dreams are realized as they would hope. In contrast, Jordan Baker, whom Nick describes as “too wise for dreams,” doesn’t have such grand ideas of the future, and this makes her something of an innocuous character, with no threat of her either dying or falling in love within the course of the novel.
Safety. There are many different kinds of safety present in this novel: the financial security that comes from being wealthy; the physical safety of having someone watching out for you; and the deep psychological security that comes of being privileged, well-regarded, and well-loved. Daisy, by the end of this chapter, has all three, having been protected by Gatsby, provided for financially by Tom, and loved by the both of them. This is exactly the kind of security that makes Daisy’s voice a “deathless song.” She’s impervious to death because others are shielding her from it.

Chapter Summaries: Chapter 8 Summary and Analysis

In the wake of Myrtle’s murder, Nick is unable to sleep. Near dawn, he hears Gatsby pull up in a taxi and goes over to speak with him. After fumbling around, turning on lights and looking for cigarettes, the two sit smoking in the drawing-room, discussing what to do next. Nick suggests Gatsby get out of town, just for a week, just until the fuss dies down, but Gatsby won’t hear of it. He has to stay until Daisy makes a decision. Nick doesn’t have the heart to tell him that she already has, and that she didn’t pick him.

It’s during this conversation that Gatsby tells Nick about Dan Cody and his past. Nick told this story earlier to allay the reader’s concerns about Gatsby’s very shady business dealings, but Gatsby tells it to Nick now to bring him into his confidence and to finally, after years and years, make another friend. Gatsby also tells Nick about meeting Daisy in Louisville while he was still a young officer and about seducing her one night. “I can’t describe to you how surprised I was to find out I loved her,” he says, and explains how the rest of his life became centered around Daisy. While in the war, they wrote letters back and forth, and when he did well and came out of the fighting with the rank of a major, he tried his best to get back to her. Then, while Gatsby was still at Oxford, she met Tom and married him. This was a terrible blow. Gatsby returned to Louisville while she was still on her honeymoon in France, and then, finding himself broke and out of work, he went about trying to find his way back to her. This process took him years.

At dawn, a servant comes in to tell Gatsby he’s going to drain the swimming pool soon. It’s the end of summer, and there won’t be any more parties at the estate. Still, Gatsby doesn’t want to drain the pool just yet. He hasn’t used it and decides now that he wants to. Nick leaves him to his swim and heads into the City, promising to call at noon. He’s useless at work, incapable of concentrating, so when Jordan calls him up to say that she’s left Daisy’s and is heading out to Southampton, it doesn’t take much for them to snap at each other and end the affair once and for all. Nick tries calling Gatsby after that, to no answer. It’s just noon.

Fitzgerald again breaks from the chronological narrative in order to relate how George Wilson, grieving for Myrtle, gradually picked himself up and began searching for her killer. First he had to calm down, and that took several hours, just sitting on his couch and rocking back and forth while he cried. His neighbor, Michaelis, who’d witnessed the accident and ran the coffee shop next to Wilson’s garage, sat with him and tried to comfort him, asking him if he went to church and wanted to talk to someone. George, who didn’t attend church regularly, didn’t have one to turn to, but he did believe in God. He’d even told Myrtle once, “You may fool me, but you can’t fool God!” He’d been looking out the window at the time, staring out at the eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg, the oculist whose huge billboard stands over the Valley of Ashes. This equation of God and the Doctor’s eyes makes Michaelis uncomfortable, so the two men part. That’s when Wilson begins looking for Myrtle’s killer.

He starts out on foot. He walks from Port Roosevelt to Gad’s Hill, stopping briefly to buy a cup of coffee and a sandwich. His movements at this point are easy for the police to retrace, after, because he’s walking along the side of the road, looking like a crazy person. Then he falls off the map for three hours until he reappears at half-past two in West Egg, where he goes from door to door, looking for Gatsby’s house. It’s the chauffeur who hears the shots. Gatsby was swimming in the pool at the time and doesn’t appear to have had a chance to defend himself. When Nick gets back from work, the butler, the chauffeur, and the gardener help him haul the
body out of the pool. Only then do they find Wilson’s body. Evidently he’d shot himself.

Symbols

**Doctor T. J. Eckleburg’s Eyes.** Wilson cements the idea that the Doctor’s eyes are a symbol of God in this chapter by staring out the window at them and telling Myrtle, “You may fool me, but you can’t fool God!” It would seem, given Myrtle’s death, that God hasn’t turned his back on the Valley of Ashes, as earlier chapters suggest, but in reality Wilson is just a madman tricked by grief into believing that the eyes staring back at him are God’s, and that this in some way justifies the revenge he’s about to exact. If God has indeed abandoned humanity, then it follows that George Wilson’s decision to shoot Gatsby is a result of his realization that God will not punish his wife’s murderer. That’s why he has to do it himself.

**Flowers.** With Gatsby’s death, the floral symbolism suddenly takes on an insidious new layer, with roses in particular being described as “grotesque” in the moments before Gatsby’s death. Traditionally, roses have been associated with love and romance, their vibrant red colors symbolizing passion and desire. Here, the rose becomes grotesque precisely for those associations, because real love, as Gatsby realizes, isn’t possible in this novel and has only led to heartbreak and inevitably to death. Thus, the rose Gatsby sees becomes a mockery of love, and all flowers are figured as vehicles of desolation and decay.

Themes

**Death.** It becomes clear in this chapter that Fitzgerald has been telling us the story of Gatsby’s death all along and that he has been preparing us for it through the use of symbolism, imagery, and foreshadowing. This theme of death, for instance, has been woven throughout the novel, and it appears for the last time when Wilson materializes beside Gatsby’s pool. He’s described as one of the poor ghosts “breathing dreams like air” and as an “ashen, fantastic figure” intent on destroying Gatsby’s dreams. Wilson thus becomes a personification of Death itself that sucks the life out of Gatsby and his beautiful dream of the world.

**Dreams and the American Dream.** Near the end of the chapter, Nick relates how, in the hours before the murder, Gatsby must’ve given up on Daisy and finally admitted to himself that she was never going to call him. “I have an idea that Gatsby himself didn’t believe [it, the phone call] would come, and perhaps he no longer cared,” Nick says. If so, that would mean Gatsby had given up on his dreams, not just of winning Daisy back but also of being as rich, successful, and happy as he’d always wanted to be. In this way, Gatsby’s dream becomes tied up with the American Dream, and both die in this chapter even before Wilson pulls the trigger.

**Chapter Summaries: Chapter 9 Summary and Analysis**

In this ninth and final chapter, Nick, being perhaps Gatsby’s only friend, becomes the one who fields questions about him, manages his estate, and even arranges his funeral. His first call is to Daisy, thinking she’d like to know what happened, but it seems she and Tom have left town and might never come back. Wolfsheim, too, is unreachable by phone, and Nick goes to great lengths to track him down, first sending a letter along with Gatsby’s butler and then refusing to accept the transparent letter he writes in return about being too busy to come down but all too willing to help in other ways. So it seems Wolfsheim has washed his hands of the business. In the midst of all this, Nick receives a phone call from one of Gatsby’s old contacts, Slagle, who says that someone called “Young Parke” is in trouble. Then, just as soon Nick tells Slagle that Gatsby’s dead, Slagle hangs up, and Nick is left to wonder about Gatsby’s connections to the underworld.

Soon after, a postcard arrives from Gatsby’s father, Mr. Gatz, who asks Nick to delay Gatsby’s funeral until he arrives. Mr. Gatz is a “solemn old man” who wears a cheap coat and thinks the world of his son. He’s somewhat in awe of the house, of its splendid hallways and vast rooms, and this helps to allay some of the
grief of his son’s death. Nick asks him what he wants to do about the body, suggesting perhaps that he should take it west, but Mr. Gatz says no. His son would’ve wanted to be buried in the East. That same night, Nick receives a call from Gatsby’s “boarder,” Mr. Klipspringer, who is wondering if Nick could have a pair of his shoes sent along to the house he’s staying in out in Greenwich. Nick, having expected Klipspringer to act like a friend and come to Gatsby’s funeral, hangs up in disgust and doesn’t send him the shoes. He doesn’t want Mr. Gatz to be the only other person at the funeral, so he attempts once more to reach Wolfsheim, calling on him at a building belonging to “The Swastika Holding Company.” (Wolfsheim is, of course, Jewish.) Wolfsheim reminisces about first meeting Gatsby and using him to further his own business dealings, but in the end refuses the invitation to the funeral. “I can’t get mixed up in it,” he says. So that’s that.

Right before the funeral, Mr. Gatz shows Nick a photograph Gatsby had sent him of the estate in West Egg. It’s smudged all over, as if Mr. Gatz had been showing it off back home, boasting about his rich and successful son. He also shows Nick a copy of an old book in which Gatsby had written out his daily schedule: 6:00 AM, rise from bed. Practice elocution, 6:00 - 6:00 PM. He’d also written out his “resolves” in a list: no more smoking. Bath every other day. Be better to parents. It’s easy to see how a boy this regimented could’ve had success in the military and how he was able to then move up in the world. Nick is still thinking about this when the funeral begins and Owl Eyes joins them at the grave. He doesn’t know how Owl Eyes knew about the funeral. It’s a solemn little affair.

Nick again breaks from the chronological narrative to tell us what he loves about the Midwest, and to explain how, after Gatsby’s death, New York and the East Coast lost its allure. He sees West Egg as a kind of fantastic landscape where life is vivid, exciting, and fast, but also, like a painting by El Greco, grotesque and lustreless, full of cold, rich figures who seem to haunt the landscape the way Gatsby’s death haunts Nick. He leaves the East after Gatsby’s murder and never returns. But before he goes he has a chat with Jordan Baker. Their relationship has left a mark on him, and he’s still half in love with her. It seems they were both half in love and had been surprised and a little bit exhilarated by it. Now Jordan doesn’t care about Nick at all, and what’s more, she doesn’t think that he’s a very nice guy. “I thought you were rather an honest, straightforward person.” This recalls Nick’s earlier insistence that he is one of the few honest people he’s ever known. Compared to all the other characters in the novel, he certainly is. But that isn’t really a compliment.

Nick also mentions how, years later, he runs into Tom in the streets of Chicago and learns that he was the one who told Wilson about Gatsby and fingered him as the murderer. Even worse, Tom seems to feel no remorse about it at all. He even says, “That fellow had it coming to him,” which is just what you’d expect from someone like Tom.

On Nick’s last night in West Egg, with his trunk packed and his car sold, he walks out onto the lawn, staring out across the water and thinking about the green light. Gatsby believed in it, he says, perhaps too much, and though it drove him ceaselessly toward the future, in the end, he wasn’t able to achieve his dream. Still, Nick says, we continue to reach for it. “So we beat on,” he says, “boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.”

Allusions

El Greco. The nickname of Doménikos Theotokópoulos, a Greek and Spanish painter from the Spanish Renaissance perhaps best known for his works The Burial of the Count of Orgaz and View of Toledo. His paintings have a dark, haunting quality that Nick alludes to when he discusses how West Egg and New York were ruined for him after Gatsby’s death.

James J. Hill. A Canadian-American railroad tycoon and executive, the CEO of a family of lines led by Great Northern Railway. His nickname was “The Empire Builder,” which is now the name of the train route operated by Amtrak that runs from Chicago to the Pacific Northwest. Mr. Gatz alludes to him to suggest that
Gatsby could have been as rich and powerful as James J. Hill, if he’d lived long enough. This is the last of many such allusions to wealthy entrepreneurs in this novel, all of which when taken together can be seen as prototypes for the man Gatsby wanted to be.

**Hop-along Cassidy by Clarence E. Mulford.** One in a series of popular cowboy books all centered around the title character. Gatsby writes his schedule out in the back of the book, where he also lists his “resolves.” It’s very telling that the young Jimmy Gatz wrote all of this in a dimestore cowboy novel. It’s proof that he was an adventurous, ambitious young man determined to make his own way, and that he believed in the traditional gender roles espoused by Hop-along Cassidy, who had a weakness for damsels in distress, just as Gatsby does.

**Important Symbol**

**The Green Light.** This light, an established symbol of the American Dream, shines again at the very end of this novel, as Nick stands on Gatsby’s lawn and considers his friend’s shattered dreams. He says, “Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgiastic future that year by year recedes from us,” as if simply by reaching for something more we get further and further away from it. This longing to live better lives and become better (or greater) people drives us all, and there’s nothing we can do to stop this. That’s why the light is fixed in the distance while we’re borne back into the past.

**Themes**

**Home.** Given that Gatsby ran away from his parents as a teenager and bought his house with money earned from bootlegging, the traditional idea of “home” doesn’t apply in this novel. Most of the main characters are itinerant in the sense that they decide first where they want to make their home and then go there, leaving everyone behind and remaking their lives anew. Nick does it. Gatsby does it. Even Tom and Daisy, who have already had to leave Chicago because of one scandal, leave East Egg in a hurry, packing their things the day after Myrtle’s death. Everyone is in a constant state of motion, and no one, not even Gatsby’s party guests, appears to have a home. Like Klipspringer, they all go wherever is most convenient. Only Gatsby, who has spent his entire life trying to get to West Egg, decides to stay, risking retribution for Myrtle’s death, in the hopes that Daisy will choose him over Tom. West Egg isn’t really his home, but it is where he ends up, and, in this novel, that’s enough.

**Honesty.** Fitzgerald again raises the question of truth when Jordan tells Nick that she thought he was an “honest, straightforward person.” At this point in the narrative, the reader already knows, from Nick’s previous statement about being one of the few honest people he has ever met, that he isn’t the most reliable narrator and that he may also be a liar, though of a different kind. Nick is a character who likes to hold himself above others and judge them based on his own personal standards, but this doesn’t necessarily make him honest. One might even make the argument that there are no honest characters in this novel.

**Safety.** In addition to accusing Nick of being a less than honest person, Jordan also reminds him that he once said “a bad driver [is] only safe until she [meets] another bad driver.” This statement refers in part to Daisy and the car accident but also to Nick and Jordan, who are, emotionally speaking, bad drivers, incapable of maintaining control over their own feelings. Thus, safety, which has previously been discussed in terms of one’s wealth and privilege, here becomes a question of one’s ability to remain safe or avoid accidents. Neither Nick nor Jordan can avoid accidents. And, indeed, no one in this novel can.

**Themes: Theme**
The American Dream

The American Dream (in particular, the failure to achieve it) is one of the most important themes in the novel. It’s established early on in the first chapter when a stranger asks Nick for directions, making him “a guide, a pathfinder, an original settler,” like the brave pioneers who traveled West in hopes of building better lives for themselves. Immediately after that, Nick tells us that he read a series of finance books in the hopes of making his fortune. Fitzgerald uses this juxtaposition of bankers and pioneers to suggest that the American Dream of owning land and making a name for one’s self has been subsumed by the desire to become rich and thereby perpetuate a capitalist system.

This desire to be rich and successful is at the core of Gatsby’s dream of reuniting with Daisy. He was willing to do anything to attain this dream, including getting involved with Mr. Wolfsheim’s businesses. In a brutally ironic twist, the bootlegging that makes Gatsby rich enough for Daisy is also one of the main reasons he loses her, because when Tom tells her about it in Chapter VII she hesitates and thinks twice about leaving him for Gatsby. Gatsby’s dream self-destructs because, like the American Dream as a whole, it has been corrupted by money and power to the point where it is no longer real or viable. In that sense, both Gatsby’s dream and the larger American Dream die even before Wilson pulls the trigger. Gatsby’s death merely cements what we already know.

Home

In this context, “homes” should be distinguished from mere “houses,” of which there are many in the novel, including Nick’s summer house and Gatsby’s palatial estate. With the one exception of Jordan, whose idea of home we’re not privy to, the main characters are itinerant, in the sense that they leave their childhood homes and spend most of their adult lives moving around, never really making new lives for themselves. Gatsby, for instance, runs away from home, leaving behind the name Jimmy Gatz. Nick also leaves home at the beginning of the novel, only to return at the end, while Daisy and Tom, who had to leave Chicago because of one scandal, have to leave East Egg because of another. Like Klipspringer, the boarder, they all go wherever is most convenient.

Honesty

In the opening passages of the novel, Nick relates a piece of advice that his father gave him in his “younger and more vulnerable years”: to remember whenever he wants to criticize someone that “all the people in this world haven’t had the advantages [he’s] had.” That his own father tells him that he should be less critical of others suggests that he’s an inherently critical person and that his privilege and wealth (his family owns a successful wholesale hardware business) have made him myopic, insensitive to the struggles of others and unwilling to admit that his point of view might be flawed. Fitzgerald inserts this bit of advice at the beginning to color Nick’s narration, making it less reliable but at the same time far more personal. He introduces Nick as a flawed, intelligent, and often poetic narrator, but the reader, finding beauty in his narrative voice, is inclined to keep reading anyway, even when he says conceitedly, “I am one of the few honest people that I have ever known,” at the end of Chapter III.

Hope

In Chapter I, Gatsby is described as having an “extraordinary gift for hope,” meaning that he has a sensitivity to life and a sense of its possibilities that surpass those of others. His hope is more or less synonymous with his ability to dream (if not with his dream itself). The people who live in the Valley of Ashes, then, are “hopeless” specifically because they’ve lost most of their ability to dream and realize their dreams. George Wilson’s only hope of a better life is to sell off Tom’s car and use the profits to move out west with Myrtle.
When this last shred of hope dies, his only real desire is to kill the person responsible, whom he mistakenly assumes to be Gatsby. In that sense, Chapter VIII, when Wilson shoots Gatsby, is an account of what happens when hope dies.

**Life and Death**

Fitzgerald establishes the themes of life and death late in Chapter II, when the drunk party guest crashes the car with Owl Eyes in it. Thus, cars become symbols of death or, when the characters aren’t crashing them, of one’s social status. In Chapter V, during the tour of Gatsby’s house, Nick thinks he hears Owl Eyes’s “ghostly” laughter emanating from one of the many rooms. It is almost as if Gatsby’s house has become a giant, empty tomb where he awaits his death.

In Chapter V, when Daisy and Gatsby rekindle their love, Nick refers to her voice as a “deathless song.” This effectively equates Daisy with a “deathless” or charmed existence and suggests that Gatsby, who becomes enchanted with this voice, doesn’t have the same experience. Together, the two are “possessed by intense life,” but separated, it is only Daisy who survives the affair. This is in part due to the fact that Daisy is married to a rich man who can protect her, if not be faithful to her. As Gatsby says in Chapter VII, “Her voice is full of money,” and this is what makes her near invulnerable to harm.

**Light and Dark**

Related to the themes of life and death are the themes of light and dark. At the very beginning of Chapter V, when Nick returns from his date with Jordan in New York City, Gatsby’s house is “lit from tower to cellar.” Gatsby explains this away by saying he was looking into the rooms of his house, but the effect of leaving the lights on is that the house seems like a giant, shining beacon, not unlike the green light at the end of Daisy’s dock that draws Gatsby toward it.

**Money**

Money and wealth are key themes in the novel and function as identifiers of a character’s social status. Tom, for instance, descends from “old money” and carries himself like somebody who is accustomed to privilege and prestige. In contrast, the residents of West Egg, including Gatsby, are members of the nouveau riche, a class of people who have only recently earned their money, without having to rely on their family’s old money. East Egg and West Egg themselves embody the divide between the old money and the new and represent the social stratification apparent in New York City (and the nation as a whole) in that time period.

**Materialism**

Hand in hand with money comes materialism, which stems from the desire for not only wealth or privilege but things that will display one’s wealth. Hence Gatsby’s house, with its hired orchestra and absurdly beautiful music rooms. Perhaps the best example of materialism is Daisy’s acceptance of the pearl necklace worth $350,000 that Tom gives her. Her affections are effectively bought by this necklace and by the promise of more like it. Daisy wants nothing more than to be safe and secure financially. That is why Gatsby has to be rich in order to win her back. Her materialism is more important to Daisy than his love, whereas his love is more important to him than materialism in general. This is the essential difference between Gatsby and Daisy.

**The Past**

Many of the characters in the novel appear to be outrunning their past: Gatsby assumes his new identity,
Daisy and Tom escape the scandal he caused in Chicago, and Jordan Baker buries the fact that she once cheated in a golf tournament. They are all in some way trying to forget who they were and what they did at that time in their lives. And yet, paradoxically, Gatsby also wants to relive select parts of his past, especially his brief affair with Daisy in Louisville. This desire is so consuming that Nick tells him in Chapter VI that he can’t repeat the past, to which Gatsby just responds, “Why of course you can!” He seems convinced of it. This doesn’t work out for him.

**Performance**

This novel is rife with varying forms of entertainment: the gypsy’s dance number in Chapter III, the woman in yellow playing the piano (also in Chapter III), and the jazz standards the orchestra plays throughout Gatsby’s parties. Taken collectively, these performances contribute to the air of luxury and privilege that pervades the party scenes. Individually, they give readers a window into life in the Jazz Age, where excessive drinking, partying, and recklessness often led to disaster, as it does in this novel.

Of all the different performances in this novel, the most important are from people pretending to be something or someone they’re not. This could be said of all the guests at Gatsby’s party, who, in attempting to have fun and make connections, pretend to be happier and more successful than many of them actually are. Jordan Baker, for instance, cheated at a pro golf tournament once but still acts like a champion. Nick pretends not to think much of the parties he attends, but that’s all he can write about. And of course Gatsby pretends to be someone greater than he is, even taking the name “Gatsby” to hide his true identity: Jimmy Gatz, the son of farmers from North Dakota.

**Safety**

There are many different kinds of safety present in this novel: the financial security that comes of being wealthy; the physical safety of having someone to protect you; and the deep psychological security that stems from being privileged, well-regarded, and well-loved. Of the main characters, Daisy is the only one with all three, having been protected by Gatsby, provided for financially by Tom, and loved by both of them. This is exactly the kind of security that makes Daisy’s voice a “deathless song.” She’s impervious to death because others are shielding her from it.

In Chapter IX, when Nick and Jordan meet for the last time, Jordan reminds him of something he once said: “a bad driver [is] only safe until she [meets] another bad driver.” This statement might have been inspired by Daisy and the hit-and-run but refers here to Nick and Jordan, who are both “bad drivers” emotionally speaking, incapable of maintaining control over their own feelings. In this way, safety, which has previously been discussed in terms of one’s wealth and privilege, here becomes a question of one’s ability to be safe or avoid accidents, whether literal or metaphorical. Neither Nick nor Jordan can avoid accidents. No one in this novel can.

**Time**

Fitzgerald first hints at the importance of time to the narrative in Chapter II, when Nick attends a party at Tom’s flat in the city. This party seems to speed up as Nick gets drunker, making events like Tom’s breaking Myrtle’s nose and Nick’s stumbling drunk into the elevator appear to happen in rapid succession. Fitzgerald indicates that Nick lost time or blacked out with an ellipsis followed by a sentence that begins, “I was standing beside his bed” (where the bed belongs to Mr. McKee, a downstairs neighbor of Tom’s). It is unclear what happens in this ellipsis or why Nick was even in Mr. McKee’s room, but the end result is that time seems to lurch forward somehow, becoming more selective and less chronological as it goes.
Themes

Fitzgerald's ambitions as a writer paralleled those of his spiritual ancestors of the nineteenth century (Melville, Whitman, Thoreau), who rendered in imaginative literature the emergence of America as a nation. Like them, he believed in the capacity of the American people to perpetually rediscover the promise of America. Like them, he recognized that there was a continuous clash between the reality of life in the United States and a mythic vision of what it might be. But he felt that he was writing towards the end of a golden era, while they worked closer to its inception. Still, he felt that he could share their vocation, that he could also be an artist who served as a witness to the struggle and as a kind of conscience who reminded Americans of what they had lost sight of. He saw the obligation of the artist as primarily one of inspiration, helping people to recover their vision and continue the quest.

Fitzgerald was also a thoroughly romantic artist in the most traditional sense; and, for him, women like Daisy represented the deepest seductive power of the Dream as well as its greatest dangers. Even if a man was doomed to destruction in pursuit of the Dream, the undertaking was worth the risk; indeed, for the exceptional man, to fully realize his character, it was essential. Thus, Gatsby's (and possibly America's) greatness was in his ability to put aside the lessons of bitter experience and try to relive the Dream as if it could be recaptured afresh. As Gatsby says when Nick tells him he can't recapture the past, "Of course you can, old sport." Gatsby's full participation, his heedless pursuit, is what makes him the quintessential American hero. The fact that he dies, in a sense, ennobling, but it is also a warning. And yet, Fitzgerald hoped that there would always be men like Gatsby, whose nature was to "beat on, boats against the current," to make the gorgeous gesture that animates existence.

Nick, the artistic conscience as observer, is the necessary counterweight to the wild extravagance of Gatsby. His support of Gatsby, his participation to some extent in Gatsby's heart-driven surge toward romantic beauty, and his ability to judge other people's actions with compassion are examples of fundamental decency carried beyond complacency. Without him to register Gatsby's "romantic readiness," to appreciate Gatsby's "heightened sensitivity," the cultural landscape would be barren and desolate. He is the conserver of the Dream, as Gatsby is its reanimator. His appreciation of beauty is as vital to its existence as is Gatsby's immediate celebration. "Reserving judgment," he says, "is a matter of infinite hope." That is what The Great Gatsby is ultimately about.

Themes

Culture Clash
By juxtaposing characters from the West and East in America in The Great Gatsby, Fitzgerald was making some moral observations about the people who live there. Those in the Midwest—the newly arrived Nick Carraway—were fair, relatively innocent, unsophisticated, while those who lived in the East for some time—Tom and Daisy Buchanan—were unfair, corrupt, and materialistic. The Westerners who moved East, furthermore, brought the violence of the Old West days to their new lives. Fitzgerald romanticizes the Midwest, since it is where the idealistic Jay Gatz was born and to where the morally enlightened Nick returns. It serves metaphorically as a condition of the heart, of going home to a moral existence rooted in basic, conservative values. Further, the houses of East Egg and West Egg represent similar moral differences. The East is where Daisy and Tom live, and the West is where Gatsby and Nick live. Fitzgerald refers to the West as the green breast of a new world, a reflection of a man's dream, an America subsumed in this image. The materialism of the East creates the tragedy of destruction, dishonesty, and fear. No values exist in such an environment.

American Dream
Gatsby represents the American dream of self-made wealth and happiness, the spirit of youth and
resourcefulness, and the ability to make something of one's self despite one's origins. He achieved more than his parents had and felt he was pursuing a perfect dream, Daisy, who for him embodied the elements of success. Gatsby's mentor, Dan Cody, was the ultimate self-made man who influenced Gatsby in his tender, impressionable youth. When Gatsby found he could not win Daisy's love, he pursued the American Dream in the guise of Cody. Inherent in this dream, however, was the possibility of giving in to temptation and to corrupt get-rich-quick schemes like bootlegging and gambling. Fitzgerald's book mirrors the headiness, ambition, despair, and disillusionment of America in the 1920s: its ideals lost behind the trappings of class and material success.

Examples of the American Dream gone awry are plentiful in *The Great Gatsby*: Meyer Wolfsheim's enterprising ways to make money are criminal; Jordan Baker's attempts at sporting fame lead her to cheating; and the Buchanans' thirst for the good life victimizes others to the point of murder. Only Gatsby, who was relatively unselfish in his life, and whose primary flaw was a naive idealism, could be construed as fulfilling the author's vision of the American Dream. Throughout the novel are many references to his tendency to dream, but in fact, his world rests insecurely on a fairy's wing. On the flip side of the American Dream, then, is a naivete and a susceptibility to evil and poor-intentioned people.

**Appearances and Reality**

Since there is no real love between Gatsby and Daisy, in *The Great Gatsby*, there is no real truth to Gatsby's vision. Hand in hand with this idea is the appearances and reality theme. Fitzgerald displays what critics have termed an ability to see the face behind the mask. Thus, behind the expensive parties, Gatsby is a lonely man. Though hundreds had come to his mansion, hardly anyone came to his funeral. Owl Eyes, Mr. Klipspringer, and the long list of partygoers simply use Gatsby for their pleasures. Gatsby himself is a put-on, with his “Oggsford” accent, fine clothes, and “old boy” routine; behind this facade is a man who is involved in racketeering. Gatsby's greatness lies in his capacity for illusion. Had he seen Daisy for what she was, he could not have loved her with such singleminded devotion. He tries to recapture Daisy, and for a time it looks as though he will succeed. But he must fail because of his inability to separate the ideal from the real. The famous verbal exchange between Nick and Gatsby typifies this: Concerning his behavior with Daisy, Nick tells him he can't repeat the past. “Can't repeat the past,” Gatsby replies, “Why of course you can!”

**Moral Corruption**

The wealthy class is morally corrupt in *The Great Gatsby*, and the objective correlative (a term coined by poet and critic T. S. Eliot that refers to an object that takes on greater significance and comes to symbolize the mood and world of a literary work) in this case is the eyes of Dr. Eckleburg, which preside over the valley of ashes near Wilson's garage. There are no spiritual values in a place where money reigns: the traditional ideas of God and Religion are dead here, and the American dream is direly corrupted. This is no place for Nick, who is honest. He is the kind of person who says he is one of the few honest people he's ever met, and one who is let down by the world of excess and indulgence. His mark of sanity is to leave the wasteland environment to return home in the West. In a similar manner, T. S. Eliot's renowned poem *The Waste Land* describes the decline of Western civilization and its lack of spirituality through the objective correlative (defining image) of the wasteland.

**Characters**

**Jay Gatsby**

Jay Gatsby embodies the American Dream, ascending from poverty to a station of immense wealth. He is born James Gatz and grows up on his family’s farm in the midwest. He attends college in Minnesota, working as a janitor to pay his tuition, until he meets Dan Cody, a wealthy gold miner. Cody takes Gatsby under his wing, mentoring him and introducing him to the lure of wealth and materialism. Gatsby remains Cody’s
protege until Cody’s death, at which point Gatsby joins the army. (Read our extended character analysis of Jay Gatsby.)

Nick Carraway

Nick Carraway narrates the novel’s events. Nick comes from a well-to-do but unglamorous upper-midwest background. When he moves to New York, where he lives in a cottage next door to the Gatsby Mansion and sells bonds on Wall Street, he is reunited with his cousin Daisy Buchanan. As a crucial link between long-lost paramours Gatsby and Daisy, Nick falls into the rushing current of the plot. (Read our extended character analysis of Nick Carraway.)

Daisy Buchanan

Daisy is a “golden girl,” born with money, beauty, and status. All throughout her life, her beauty and wealth have made men covet her, and she has honed her charms well. However, despite her advantages, Daisy appears to be an unhappy cynic, married to an unfaithful husband and left hoping that her daughter will be a “beautiful fool,” as she once was. (Read our extended character analysis of Daisy Buchanan.)

Tom Buchanan

Tom Buchanan is a brute who embodies the preening, power-hungry narrow-mindedness of the East Egg elite. Nick, who knew Tom from their time at Yale, remarks that Tom was once an incredibly talented football player. While still wealthy and physically imposing, Tom, at the young age of 30, is already past his prime. Tom seems to be drifting through life, seeking out some “irrecoverable football game.” (Read our extended character analysis of Tom Buchanan.)

Jordan Baker

Jordan Baker is the childhood friend of Daisy Buchanan. A professional golfer, she quickly attracts the attention of Nick Carraway, and the two begin a romantic relationship. Nick is initially taken in by Jordan’s apparent detachment from the rest of the elitist East Egg society. However, she quickly proves to be just as vapid and dishonest as the rest of the “secret society.” (Read our extended character analysis of Jordan Baker.)

Minor Characters

In addition to the characters above, Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby includes many minor characters. For more information about these characters, read more about them on their own page.

Characters: Jay Gatsby

Extended Character Analysis

Jay Gatsby embodies the American Dream, ascending from poverty to a station of immense wealth. He is born James Gatz and grows up on his family’s farm in the midwest. He attends college in Minnesota, working as a janitor to pay his tuition, until he meets Dan Cody, a wealthy gold miner. Cody takes Gatsby under his wing, mentoring him and introducing him to the lure of wealth and materialism. Gatsby remains Cody’s protege until Cody’s death, at which point Gatsby joins the army.
While stationed in Alabama, Gatsby meets Daisy Fay and immediately falls in love with her. Meeting Daisy only serves to enhance his fixation on wealth. After leaving to serve in the war and returning to build a bootlegging and drug-smuggling empire, he remains fixated on Daisy, who has since married Tom Buchanan. Gatsby ultimately comes to believe that only reclaiming Daisy’s love will fill the emptiness in his life. Rather than viewing Daisy as an independent person with a life and goals of her own, Gatsby instead treats her as a possession that was stolen away from him by life’s circumstances. He is unable to comprehend—or rather, unwilling to admit—that Daisy could be capable of loving another man.

Gatsby displays an intense desire to be the sole recipient of Daisy’s love. Not only does he ask Daisy to leave Tom, he also insists that she admits to never having loved him at all. In a broader sense, life’s complexities and nuances are largely lost on Gatsby, whose single-minded fixation on his material and romantic goals is the product of a life otherwise devoid of meaning and connection. At his core, Gatsby leads an empty existence, reliant on external factors for his happiness and fulfilment. For him, satisfaction is not gleaned from the acquisition of his goals, but rather from the endless pursuit of them. He is a dreamer first and foremost, forever driven to strive for more whenever a new benchmark is reached.

Gatsby represents the American Dream itself, flashy and alluring, but ultimately made of empty promises. No matter how hard Gatsby works, he will never truly obtain inner fulfilment because the American Dream has externalized happiness, framing it as something that can be bought. Gatsby is disconnected from the reality that the rest of the characters live in, one which is defined by the limitations of gender and class.

However, for all the ways Gatsby is disconnected from reality, his insulation is also what draws people like Daisy and Nick to him. Jay Gatsby ignores others’ notions of limitation. Instead, he continues to dream and strives to make his dreams into reality. For Daisy, with her abusive husband and cynical attitude about her place in the world, Gatsby is a fantasy she can escape into. He is the hopelessly devoted romantic who fought his way to the top just for her. For Nick, who craves authenticity in a world that seems to lack it, there is an earnestness in Gatsby’s motivations that transcends the superficiality of his actions. However, for both Daisy and Nick, Gatsby’s dream is a form of escapism, not something they genuinely believe in. Ultimately, Gatsby’s ideals are shattered, and he is left alone, disillusioned and unable to come to terms with the fact that his dreams were built on lies.

Time also plays a significant role in Gatsby’s characterization, specifically his inability to live in the present. As a child, he continuously strode towards an indeterminate future where he could escape poverty. His youth was spent chasing after money and status, desperately rejecting his humble upbringings in favor of rewriting his history to align with the future he sought. However, upon achieving his goals, he is left dissatisfied. So, rather than attempting to find happiness in the present, Gatsby turns back to the past, hoping that rekindling his relationship with Daisy will fulfill him. This proves to be a fool’s errand. Whereas the future is always moving closer, the past is always moving further away. No matter how hard Gatsby tries to recreate the past, true happiness does not dwell there and, indeed, never did. Unwilling to embrace the present, increasingly disillusioned with the future, and desperately chasing after the unobtainable past, Gatsby is left to stagnate, shot dead in the unmoving currents of a swimming pool. Gatsby remains a figurehead for human aspiration, an American Icarus in whose life one finds both the lofty heights of dreams and the inevitable tragedy of their fall.

**Characters: Nick Carraway**

**Extended Character Analysis**

Nick Carraway narrates the novel’s events. Nick comes from a well-to-do but unglamorous upper-midwest background. When he moves to New York, where he lives in a cottage next door to the Gatsby Mansion and
sells bonds on Wall Street, he is reunited with his cousin Daisy Buchanan. As a crucial link between long-lost paramours Gatsby and Daisy, Nick falls into the rushing current of the plot.

Though Gatsby is the heart of the novel’s narrative, everything readers know about Gatsby is filtered through Nick. The novel is narrated from his point of view as a retrospective look at his acquaintance with Gatsby and the lessons he has learned from it. Nick can be read as an unreliable narrator, especially with regards to his own alleged impartiality. Though he claims to be one of the most honest people he knows, his “truthful” observations often carry undertones of judgement and condescension, and, in the case of Gatsby, affection and awe. Rather than playing the mercenary cynic that Nick portrays himself as, he is ultimately swept up in the same dreamy fantasy that Gatsby is.

At the start of their acquaintance, Gatsby uses Nick to get close to Daisy, and Nick takes pleasure in observing Gatsby’s eccentricity. However, Nick seems to develop a genuine affection for Gatsby, serving as both his greatest supporter and harshest critic. Ultimately, Nick sees something in Gatsby that the world of upper class elites lacks: dreams. Nick is drawn to Gatsby’s naive idealism, finding it admirable in a world that he has come to view as empty and superficial.

Nick’s support of Gatsby can be interpreted in different ways. By one reading, Nick is simply caught up in Gatsby’s machinations to be close to Daisy. His support stems from his proximity to Daisy and Gatsby and a futile desire to see them both happy. Nick admires Gatsby’s idealism and resents Tom’s crude, abusive nature, further spurring his desire to help reunite Daisy and Gatsby. His disgust over Daisy’s refusal to so much as acknowledge Gatsby’s death indicates his genuine belief that they were in love. His steadfast support of Gatsby, even in death, proves that he is a true friend.

By a different interpretation, Nick’s investment in Gatsby and Daisy’s affair is more personal in nature. Nick admits to being jaded and disillusioned with the world, seeing little to admire in the people around him. When Nick meets Gatsby, he is taken in by Gatsby’s naive, straightforward dreams. In an otherwise inauthentic world, Nick craves the earnestness of Gatsby’s dreams. By this reading, Nick uses Gatsby as a means of fueling his own romantic nature. He is blind to the flaws and dangers of Gatsby’s dreams, placing the ideal of love over the practicalities of reality, just as Gatsby himself does.

Nick is a somewhat enigmatic character, foregrounding Gatsby’s story before his own. It is through Nick that readers are introduced to Gatsby, but it is also through Gatsby that readers come to know Nick. Nick is disgusted by both the East Egg elites and the West Egg nouveau riche, viewing them both as superficial and careless. However, Gatsby is the exception to his ire, revealing that Nick, despite his claims to cynicism, is also a dreamer in disguise. However, after watching Gatsby die along with his dreams, Nick is left cynical once again, reflecting bitterly on humanity’s “ceaseless” struggle for things that can never be reclaimed.

**Characters: Daisy Buchanan**

**Extended Character Analysis**

Daisy is a “golden girl,” born with money, beauty, and status. All throughout her life, her beauty and wealth have made men covet her, and she has honed her charms well. However, despite her advantages, Daisy appears to be an unhappy cynic, married to an unfaithful husband and left hoping that her daughter will be a “beautiful fool,” as she once was.

Daisy is a flawed person. She cheats on her husband with Gatsby, kills Myrtle with her reckless driving, and then allows Gatsby to take the blame for it. She is materialistic, self-absorbed, and careless. She looks down on the West Egg nouveau riche with an elitist sneer. However, she also shows moments of genuine depth and
Daisy’s decision to stay with Tom makes her a villain in Nick’s eyes, and it leaves the impression that she never loved Gatsby to begin with. However, Daisy’s actions can be read in different ways. By one reading, Daisy is every bit the materialistic, selfish person that she is made out to be. Her relationship with Gatsby is a novelty and possibly even a way to get back at her philandering husband. Gatsby’s wealth impresses her, but ultimately Gatsby is green money, new and untested. Tom, by contrast, is the gold standard, established and secure. By this reading, her decision to return to Tom is purely mercenary: he can give her the more secure future, and their marriage conforms to societal expectations.

By another reading, Daisy views Gatsby as a fantasy to indulge in. He is the hardworking man of humble origins who swept her off her feet when she was eighteen and amassed a fortune solely for the purpose of being worthy of her. Unlike her philandering husband, Gatsby has only ever had eyes for Daisy. However, Gatsby’s dreams are not Daisy’s reality. She is a married woman with a daughter and a life that, for five years, she has built without him. When he resurfaces, Daisy is just as eager as he is to escape back into the past and relive her “white youth.” However, for Daisy, it is only ever a fantasy. When her comfort and stability are put at risk, she retreats back into the safety of her marriage to Tom, refusing to sacrifice her life, imperfect as it is, for a shaky dream.

By a different interpretation, Daisy really does love Gatsby. In a world that expects her to be a “beautiful fool” decorating the arm of a wealthy man, Gatsby offers her something genuine and authentic. By this reading, Daisy sees the same thing in Gatsby that Nick does: a dream to believe in. She writes to him while he is stationed abroad and genuinely mourns his absence. However, unlike Gatsby, she moves on. As a woman, she knows that her beauty and charms will not last forever. Thus when the great love of her youth returns five years later, she is unhappily married to a philanderer. However, it rapidly becomes clear that Gatsby cannot see her as she now is. He is still stuck five years in the past, unable to accept that Daisy has changed. When Gatsby asks her to disavow having ever loved Tom, she cannot. By asking her to go against her convictions and lie, Gatsby makes the same mistake as Tom, treating Daisy as an ideal or symbol rather than a nuanced human being.

Daisy is a deceptively complex character. Filtered through Gatsby’s lens, she is the ideal of womanhood, an angel whom he must have at all costs. To Tom, she is a fellow member of the “secret society” of rich people who live above the concerns of the rest of the world. In her own words, she is a woman of the view that “everything is terrible” and whose best wish for her daughter is that she grows up to be a “beautiful little fool.” Perhaps she really is the cruel, careless woman that Nick believes her to be. Or, maybe she’s just a cynical, heartbroken woman who wishes she could go back to being the beautiful little fool who didn’t have to acknowledge the cruel realities of the world.

**Characters: Tom Buchanan**

**Extended Character Analysis**

Tom Buchanan is a brute who embodies the preening, power-hungry narrow-mindedness of the East Egg elite. Nick, who knew Tom from their time at Yale, remarks that Tom was once an incredibly talented football player. While still wealthy and physically imposing, Tom, at the young age of 30, is already past his prime. Tom seems to be drifting through life, seeking out some “irrecoverable football game.” Much as Gatsby looks to the past in an effort to find satisfaction, so too does Tom. He is unable to move on from the glory of his
college football career and instead stagnates in his wealthy world, listlessly traveling in search of the golden but unobtainable past.

Ironically, despite Tom’s dissatisfaction, he is everything that Gatsby wants to be: wealthy, influential, and married to Daisy Buchanan. However, Tom exemplifies the fact that happiness cannot be bought. He is racist, classist, sexist, and cruel, keeping mistresses without bothering to hide them from his wife. The essential difference between Tom and Gatsby is that Gatsby has had to earn everything he has, whereas Tom was born with wealth and power. Gatsby had to dream up a better life for himself and work to make it happen, giving him a sense of hope and optimism. Tom, on the other hand, perceives that his best days are already behind him, so he settles into idleness and carelessness, never bothering to dream or strive for anything more.

Tom’s philandering speaks to his need for control and dominance, a remnant of the power he once had on the football field. He ruthlessly bars the advancement-seeking Myrtle Wilson from holding any delusions about improving her station, breaking her nose when she so much as mentions Daisy’s name. Unlike Daisy, who is his equal in social standing, Myrtle is someone Tom can treat as an inferior. Not only is she poor, she is also ugly and overweight, whereas Tom is fit and attractive. Tom maintains complete dominance over Myrtle, physically, socially, and emotionally. Myrtle is so desperate to advance her social status that she willingly takes Tom’s abuse, modeling the abuse of the poor by the wealthy. All told, Tom is a walking powder keg, an unconscious assemblage of narcissism, lust, and listlessness, itching to release his rage on those he perceives as less powerful.

**Characters: Jordan Baker**

**Extended Character Analysis**

Jordan Baker is the childhood friend of Daisy Buchanan. A professional golfer, she quickly attracts the attention of Nick Carraway, and the two begin a romantic relationship. Nick is initially taken in by Jordan’s apparent detachment from the rest of the elitist East Egg society. However, she quickly proves to be just as vapid and dishonest as the rest of the “secret society.” She is impulsive, and Nick describes her as “incurably dishonest.” She is also extremely cynical, a stark contrast to Nick’s cautious realism and Gatsby’s romantic idealism.

Jordan differs from Daisy in that she is a career woman, valuing independence and taking an unsentimental approach to relationships. Whereas Daisy is quick to marry and content to be a wife and mother, Jordan avoids commitment because she cannot stand the thought of putting herself at a disadvantage in a relationship. Her competitive spirit shines through in her chosen career as well, going so far as to cheat in a golf tournament. Jordan is also physically distinguished from Daisy, described as tan and fit, with “sun-strained eyes,” whereas Daisy is soft and pale. The physically unimposing and unhappily married Daisy seems to represent everything that Jordan is trying not to be; Jordan clings tightly to her independence.

Jordan loves to gossip and uses dishonesty and dry, cynical commentary on her surroundings as a means of maintaining control over her emotions. Her need for control also expresses itself in her posture, which is often described as “erect” and “stiff.” Though Nick lumps her in with the “careless” East Egg elites, she is anything but careless with herself. However, she does crave attention and affection, as indicated by her chosen career as a celebrity golfer and her frequent dates. On a metaphorical level, her “bad driving” is another way of forcing people to be aware of her without getting too close. Her final words to Nick reinforce this idea, as she says that bad drivers are only “safe” until they meet other bad drivers, indicating that Nick has broken through her protective barriers.
Characters: Minor Characters

Minor Characters: Pammy Buchanan

Daisy and Tom Buchanan's young daughter, Pammy plays a very minor role in the novel as a possession meant to be displayed. She is always dressed like her mother and represents the shallowness of her parents. Daisy herself hopes that Pammy will grow up to be a "beautiful fool."

Minor Characters: Dan Cody

Dan Cody is Jay Gatsby's best friend and the man responsible for who Gatsby eventually becomes. Cody employs Gatsby for five years, and Nick's observations indicate that Cody drank too much and likely participated in criminal activities. Given their history and that the twenty-five thousand dollars Cody left to Gatsby when he died were never received, it's possible Gatsby turned to crime in order to make his own fortune.

Minor Characters: Henry Gatz

Henry Gatz is Jay Gatsby's father. Despite being poor, he is dignified and immensely proud of his son. He remains ignorant of Jay's bootlegging and underground connections, only believing his son to have been a great man.

Minor Characters: Klipspringer

Mr. Klipspringer lives off Jay Gatsby's wealth by boarding in his mansion and rarely contributes beyond playing the piano for Daisy and Gatsby. Nick perceives Klipspringer to be a friend of Gatsby’s, observing how Gatsby compliments Klipspringer for the music he plays. However, after Gatsby’s death Klipspringer reveals himself to be just as shallow as the rest of Gatsby’s associates, only dwelling in Gatsby's home to take advantage of his lush and extravagant lifestyle.

Minor Characters: Owl Eyes

The minor character Owl Eyes provides a subtle commentary on the vanity of the Long Island elites and reveals aspects of Jay Gatsby’s character. He notes how remarkable it is that the books in Gatsby’s library are real. This comment not only implies the insincerity of “the secret society,” who are superficial and lack substance, but also confirms Gatsby’s character, who has a greater degree of integrity. However, the pages of the volumes have not been cut apart, revealing that while Gatsby aspires to a life of meaning and authenticity, he remains in denial, refusing to face life’s difficult truths.

Minor Characters: George Wilson

George Wilson is married to Myrtle and is one of the primary victims of the Buchanan’s recklessness. George represents the common people victimized by the carelessness and cruelty of the extraordinarily wealthy. He is poor, earns just enough money to get by, and has to ask Tom Buchanan, the man having an affair with Myrtle, for a car so he can move away. After Daisy Buchanan accidentally kills Myrtle in a hit and run, George
descends into a destructive spiral of grief. Seeing his grief as an opportunity, Tom tells George that it was Jay Gatsby who had both seduced and killed Myrtle. This causes George to murder Gatsby.

**Minor Characters: Myrtle Wilson**

Myrtle Wilson is Tom Buchanan’s mistress and George Wilson’s wife. Since Tom and George stand at opposite ends of the socioeconomic spectrum, Myrtle represents the lower classes’ desire for social advancement. Her relationship with Tom is less about love and more about the appearance of wealth and desirability she earns through him. However, her fixation on status and appearances means that she is unable to fight back against Tom’s abuse. Myrtle is so obsessed with material gain that she is willing to prioritize it over her own well-being, which ultimately results in her death when she is struck and killed by a speeding car she believes belongs to Tom. In the end, her life and death exemplify the abuses suffered by the poor at the hands of the wealthy.

**Minor Characters: Meyer Wolfsheim**

A selfish and insecure man, Meyer Wolfsheim is one of Jay Gatsby’s associates in the criminal underworld. He is a mobster who focuses on bootlegging and racketeering. For Nick, Wolfsheim serves as a window into the clandestine part of Gatsby's life because their association clarifies how Gatsby acquired his wealth. However, Nick separates Gatsby and Wolfsheim based on character. Whereas Gatsby cares about others, such as Daisy, Wolfsheim is insensitive and selfish. He even refuses to attend Gatsby’s funeral, claiming that he cannot let such a scandal interfere with his own business interests. Based on his characteristics, Wolfsheim is considered a fictionalized version of Arnold Rothstein, a racketeer and mob kingpin in New York City who was shot to death in 1928.

**Minor Characters: Catherine**

Myrtle Wilson's sister, Catherine is proud of Myrtle's connection to the wealthy Tom Buchanan, and she is unconcerned with the questionable morality surrounding the affair.

**Minor Characters: Michaelis**

Michaelis is a young Greek man who owns a coffee shop next door to George and Myrtle Wilson. After Myrtle is struck and killed by a car, Michaelis is the chief witness to the events.

**Minor Characters: Mr. and Mrs. Mckee**

Mr. and Mrs. Mckee live in the apartment below the one that Tom rents for his dalliances with Myrtle. They attend gatherings at Tom and Myrtle’s flat. Mrs. Mckee is a shrill and “horrible” woman who incessantly flatters Myrtle, believing her to be of the upper classes. Mr. Mckee is a photographer and he tries to use Nick Carraway's and Tom Buchanan's elevated statuses to gain access to the more affluent artistic circles.

**Minor Characters: Mr. Sloane**

Mr. Sloane is a friend of Tom’s who stops by Gatsby’s house while horseback riding with a young woman and Tom. The young woman accompanying Mr. Sloane invites Gatsby over to dinner and Gatsby accepts, not realizing that the invitation was extended as a formality. In order to re-establish the social order, Sloane
departs before Gatsby is finished getting ready. This scene, and Sloane’s surprise over Gatsby’s acceptance of
the invitation, serves as a reminder that even though Gatsby is wealthy, he does not have the upper-class
upbringing of Tom, Daisy, and Sloane.

Characters

The character of Nick Carraway functions prominently in this novel. He is a transplanted Midwesterner who
buys a house in West Egg and sells bonds on Wall Street in New York City. Young and attractive, Nick
becomes friends with Jordan Baker at a dinner party, where he is reunited with his cousin, Daisy. Nick, who
claims to be the only honest person he knows, succumbs to the lavish recklessness of his neighbors and the
knowledge of the secret moral entanglements that comprise their essentially hollow lives. While he is
physically attracted to Jordan, he recognizes her basic dishonesty and inability to commit to a relationship. He
muses on the loss of his innocence and youth when he is with her on his thirtieth birthday and sees himself
driving on a road “toward death through the cooling twilight.” Lacking the romantic vision of Gatsby, Nick
sees life now as it is. Nick deduces that Gatsby is both a racketeer and an incurable romantic, whose ill-gotten
wealth has been acquired solely to gain prominence in the sophisticated, moneyed world of Daisy's circle.

Nick is the moral center of the book. From his perspective, we see the characters misbehave or behave
admirably. In keeping with Nick's code of conduct, inherited from his father, we learn from the very
beginning of the novel that he is “inclined to reserve all judgments” about people because whenever he feels
compelled to criticize someone he remembers “that all the people in this world haven’t had the advantages that
you've had.” His father also told him, prophetically, that “a sense of the fundamental decencies is parcelled
out unequally at birth.” At the novel's end, most readers find that Nick is more akin to Gatsby than to any
other character in the book. Insofar as Gatsby represents the simplicity of heart Fitzgerald associated with the
Midwest, he is really a great man. His ignorance of his real greatness and misunderstanding of his notoriety
endear him to Nick, who tells him he is better than the “whole rotten bunch put together.”

Analysis

Point of View

_The Great Gatsby_ is told from the point of view of Nick Carraway, one of the main characters. The technique
is similar to that used by British novelist Joseph Conrad one of Fitzgerald's literary influences, and shows how
Nick feels about the characters. Superbly chosen by the author, Nick is a romantic, moralist, and judge who
gives the reader retrospective flashbacks that fill us in on the life of Gatsby and then flash forward to
foreshadow his tragedy. Nick must be the kind of person whom others trust. Nick undergoes a transformation
himself because of his observations about experiences surrounding the mysterious figure of Jay Gatsby.
Through this first-person (“I”) narrative technique, we also gain insight into the author's perspective. Nick is
voicing much of Fitzgerald's own sentiments about life. One is quite simply that “you can never judge a book
by its cover” and often times a person's worth is difficult to find at first. Out of the various impressions we
have of these characters, we can agree with Nick's final estimation that Gatsby is worth the whole “rotten
bunch of them put together.”

Setting

As in all of Fitzgerald's stories, the setting is a crucial part of _The Great Gatsby_. West and East are two
opposing poles of values: one is pure and idealistic, and the other is corrupt and materialistic. The Western
states, including the Midwest, represent decency and the basic ethical principles of honesty, while the East is
full of deceit. The difference between East and West Egg is a similar contrast in cultures. The way the
characters line up morally correlates with their geographical choice of lifestyle. The Buchanans began life in
the West but gravitated to the East and stayed there. Gatsby did as well, though only to follow Daisy and to
watch her house across the bay. His utter simplicity and naivete indicates an idealism that has not been lost.
Nick remains the moral center of the book and returns home to the Midwest. To him, the land is “not the wheat or the prairies or the lost Swede towns, but the thrilling returning trains of my youth, and the street lamps and sleigh bells in the frosty dark and the shadows of holly wreaths thrown by lighted windows on the snow. I am part of that.” He finds that he is unadaptable to life in the East. The memory of the East haunts him once he returns home. Another setting of importance is the wasteland of ash heaps, between New York City and Long Island, where the mechanization of modern life destroys all the past values. Nick's view of the modern world is that God is dead, and man makes a valley of ashes; he corrupts ecology, corrupts the American Dream and desecrates it. The only Godlike image in this deathlike existence are the eyes of Dr. J. L. Eckleburg on a billboard advertising glasses.

Satire
Fitzgerald wrote *The Great Gatsby* in the form of a satire, a criticism of society's foibles through humor. The elements of satire in the book include the depiction of the *nouveau riche* (“newly rich”), the sense of vulgarity of the people, the parties intended to draw Daisy over, the grotesque quality of the name “Great” Gatsby in the title. Satire originated in the Roman times, and similarly criticized the rich thugs with no values, tapped into cultural pessimism, and gave readers a glimpse into chaos. *The Great Gatsby* is the tale of the irresponsible rich. Originally, the title of the book was “Trimalchio,” based on an ancient satire of a man called Trimalchio who dresses up to be rich.

Light/Dark Imagery
In *The Great Gatsby*, the author uses light imagery to point out idealism and illusion. The green light that shines off Daisy's dock is one example. Gatsby sees it as his dream, away from his humble beginnings, towards a successful future with the girl of his desire. Daisy and Jordan are in an aura of whiteness like angels—which they are not, of course, yet everything in Gatsby's vision that is associated with Daisy is bright. Her chatter with Jordan is described as “cool as their white dresses and their impersonal eyes” by Nick. The lamp light in the house is “bright on [Tom's] boots and dull on the autumn-leaf yellow of her hair.” Gatsby comments to Daisy and Nick how the light catches the front of his house and makes it look splendid, and Nick notes how Daisy's brass buttons on her dress “gleamed in the sunlight.” Between the frequent mention of moonlight, twilight, and the women's white gowns, Fitzgerald alludes to the dreamlike qualities of Gatsby's world, and indirectly, to Nick's romantic vision. On the other hand, Meyer Wolfsheim, the gambler, is seen in a restaurant hidden in a dark cellar when Gatsby first introduces him to Nick. “Blinking away the brightness of the street, my eyes picked him out obscurely in the anteroom,” says Nick.

Analysis: Places Discussed

Gatsby’s mansion
Gatsby’s mansion. Garish, multilevel home located on “West Egg.” The narrator Nick Carraway describes it as colossal, as ostentatious as it is roomy. Situated on forty acres, the mansion is the site of numerous glitzy and riotous parties thrown by Gatsby, hoping to pique Daisy Buchanan’s interest. The mansion, however, is much more than a lure for Gatsby’s long lost love; it is a symbol of the man himself and his dream of materialism as a vehicle to success both literally and romantically. Gatsby’s home parallels his persona—grand, mysterious, and richly adorned. It is the emblem of a successful businessman and the symbol of what he hopes to recover in Daisy and her love. The mansion is also a representation of a shortsighted American Dream: that material success, in and of itself, will bring one status and happiness. Unfortunately, the dream is based on hollow underpinnings, on the vacuous Daisy and the misguided concept that large amounts of money can be made and used without responsibility. Conversely, the mansion serves also as a symbol of Gatsby’s vision, aspiration, idealism, and belief in the American Dream of the self-made man. Thus, it is simultaneously a symbolic representation of the “great” Gatsby and of the flawed one. Ultimately, Nick Carraway describes the mansion as “that huge incoherent failure of a house.” The mansion exists as both
a vision and failure of such a vision.

**East Egg**

East Egg and West Egg. Fictionalized opposing peninsulas of Long Island Sound described as resembling a giant pair of eggs. They are contrasted in terms of fashionableness, color, and type of wealth. The East Egg mansions glitter along the water; they are more chic and are representative of older, Eastern, inherited wealth. The West Egg residences are more derivative and imitative, representative of the nouveaux riches, affluent newcomers not yet accepted into the highest echelons of wealth. It is Gatsby’s habitation in West Egg that denotes his aspiration to a social status that seems unattainable. The Buchanans, who reside on East Egg, represent the arrogance of an exclusive clique who attend Gatsby’s parties and share in the fruits of his wealth but who essentially despise him. Tom Buchanan, who has inherited his fortune, does not value it in terms of the traditional American ethics of hard work, integrity, fairness, and success coupled with responsibility. The two Eggs also represent the larger framework of an East symbolic of European antiquity, old money, and corruption, and a West symbolic of independence, new money, and the pioneering spirit. Certainly Nick Carraway values Western ideals over Eastern, and at the conclusion of the novel he returns, in a westerly direction, to the traditional and conservative Midwest whence he came.

**Valley of Ashes**

Valley of Ashes. Generally considered to be Flushing in New York City’s borough of Queens, this place exists as a gray, dead, powdery area—even the homes seem to be composed of ashes—passed by motorcars on their way to New York. Here Myrtle and George Wilson live and operate a garage and gasoline station. The valley is a metaphorical representation of the wasteland the American Dream becomes when ethics and morals are disassociated from it. The valley is also the locus of those, such as George and Myrtle, who are victimized by the arrogant wealthy who base their lives on pleasure, avoidance of boredom, and dishonesty. If East and West Egg are two renditions of attainment of the American Dream, the Valley of Ashes is its demise. Literally it is the site where Daisy kills Myrtle, without compunction, and George decides to murder Gatsby. Finally, overlooking the valley are the giant blue eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg, who stares down on the ashes from a billboard. A central symbol of guilt, judgment, and God, it invests the valley with a moral intensity that allies the novel with existential themes and statements about the moral bankruptcy of the modern world, a vast gray, ashen wasteland.

*New York City*

*New York City. Certain integral scenes take place in this city and often entail irresponsibility, adultery, violence, and drunkenness. New York is where Tom Buchanan takes his mistress, where Nick witnesses Tom brutalizing her, where Gatsby reveals his illicit love affair with Daisy, and where a lot of alcohol is consumed. Symbolically, the city represents careless consumption and irresponsible immorality. New York in the 1920’s was a glittering den of writers, socialites, wealthy entrepreneurs, and other moneyed persons who were known for their extravagance and excesses.

**Analysis: Historical Context**

**The Jazz Age and the Roaring Twenties**

The Jazz Age began soon after World War I and ended with the 1929 stock market crash. Victorious, America experienced an economic boom and expansion. Politically, the country made major advances in the area of women's independence. During the war, women had enjoyed economic independence by taking over jobs for the men who fought overseas. After the war, they pursued financial independence and a freer lifestyle. This was the time of the “flappers,” young women who dressed up in jewelry and feather boas, wore bobbed
hairdos, and danced the Charleston. Zelda Fitzgerald and her cronies, including Sara Murphy, exemplified the ultimate flapper look. In *The Great Gatsby*, Jordan Baker is an athletic, independent woman, who maintains a hardened, amoral view of life. Her character represents the new breed of woman in America with a sense of power during this time.

As a reaction against the fads and liberalism that emerged in the big cities after the war, the U.S. Government and conservative elements in the country advocated and imposed legislation restricting the manufacture and distribution of liquor. Its organizers, the Women's Christian Temperance Movement, National Prohibition Party, and others, viewed alcohol as a dangerous drug that disrupted lives and families. They felt it the duty of the government to relieve the temptation of alcohol by banning it altogether. In January, 1919, the U.S. Congress ratified the 18th Amendment to the Constitution that outlawed the “manufacture, sale, or transportation of intoxicating liquors” on a national level. Nine months later, the Volstead Act passed, proving the enforcement means for such measures. Prohibition, however, had little effect on the hedonism of the liquor-loving public, and speakeasies, a type of illegal bar, cropped up everywhere. One Fitzgerald critic, Andre Le Vot, wrote: “The bootlegger entered American folklore with as much public complicity as the outlaws of the Old West had enjoyed.”

**New York City and the Urban Corruption**

Prohibition fostered a large underworld industry in many big cities, including Chicago and New York. For years, New York was under the control of the Irish politicians of Tammany Hall, which assured that corruption persisted. Bootlegging, prostitution, and gambling thrived, while police took money from shady operators engaged in these activities and overlooked the illegalities. A key player in the era of Tammany Hall was Arnold Rothstein (Meyer Wolfsheim in the novel). Through his campaign contributions to the politicians, he was entitled to a monopoly of prostitution and gambling in New York until he was murdered in 1928.

A close friend of Rothstein, Herman “Rosy” Rosenthal, is alluded to in Fitzgerald's book when Gatsby and Nick meet for lunch. Wolfsheim says that “The old Metropole…. I can't forget so long as I live the night they shot Rosy Rosenthal there.” This mobster also made campaign contributions, or paid off, his political boss. When the head of police, Charles Becker, tried to receive some of Rosenthal's payouts, Rosenthal complained to a reporter. This act exposed the entire corruption of Tammany Hall and the New York police force. Two days later, Becker's men murdered Rosenthal on the steps of the Metropole. Becker and four of his men went to the electric chair for their part in the crime.

**The Black Sox Fix of 1919**

The 1919 World Series was the focus of a scandal that sent shock waves around the sports world. The Chicago White Sox were heavily favored to win the World Series against the Cincinnati Reds. Due to low game attendance during World War I, players' salaries were cut back. In defiance, the White Sox threatened to strike against their owner, Charles Comiskey, who had refused to pay them a higher salary. The team's first baseman, Arnold “Chick” Gandil, approached a bookmaker and gambler, Joseph Sullivan, with an offer to intentionally lose the series. Eight players, including left fielder Shoeless Joe Jackson, participated in the scam. With the help of Arnold Rothstein, Sullivan raised the money to pay the players, and began placing bets that the White Sox would lose. The Sox proceeded to suffer one of the greatest sports upsets in history, and lost three games to five. When the scandal was exposed, due to a number of civil cases involving financial losses on the part of those who betted for the Sox, the eight players were banned from baseball for life and branded the “Black Sox.” In the novel, Gatsby tells Nick that Wolfsheim was “the man who fixed the World Series back in 1919.” Shocked, Nick thinks to himself, “It never occurred to me that one man could start to play with the faith of fifty million people—with the single-mindedness of a burglar blowing a safe.” Gatsby himself is tied to possibly shady dealings throughout the course of the book. He takes mysterious phone calls and steps aside for private, undisclosed conversations. It was said that “one time he killed a man who found out that he was nephew to von Hindenburg and second cousin to the devil.”
The Cover Artwork

Fitzgerald's editor, Maxwell Perkins, commissioned a full-color, illustrated jacket design from the Spanish artist Francis Cugat. Cugat had worked previously on movie poster and sets and was employed as a designer in Hollywood. The Art Deco piece that he produced for the novel shows the outlined eyes of a woman looking out of a midnight blue sky above the carnival lights of Coney Island in Manhattan. The piece was completed seven months before the novel, and Fitzgerald may have used it to inspire his own imagery. He calls Daisy the “girl whose disembodied face floated along the ark cornices and blinding signs” of New York.

Analysis: Setting

Set in the summer of 1922, most of the story takes place in the fictitious New York towns of East and West Egg, Long Island, and in New York City. Nick Carraway, who has rented a cottage in West Egg next door to the rented estate where the fabulously wealthy Jay Gatsby lives, renews his acquaintance with his cousin Daisy Buchanan and her husband Tom, who live in East Egg. When Gatsby wishes to meet the charming Daisy, whose voice rings like the sound of money, he selects Nick as his confidant. The glitter and intrigue of the 1920s permeate the story, and the details of the setting are important to the development of the theme.

Analysis: Literary Qualities

Fitzgerald has been justly praised for the narrative structure of The Great Gatsby. As critic Matthew Bruccoli points out, his "narrative control solved the problem of making the mysterious—almost preposterous—Jay Gatsby convincing by letting the truth about him emerge gradually during the course of the novel." Fitzgerald greatly admired novelist Joseph Conrad's employment of a partially involved narrator, and everything that occurs in the novel is presented through Nick's perceptions, thus combining, as Bruccoli puts it, "the effect of a first-person immediacy with authorial perspective."

Nick's tempered approach to life and his undeniable honesty lend an authenticity to his observations. In Nick's narration, Fitzgerald skillfully merges the language of the lyric poet with subjects not traditionally associated with a lyrical sensibility. Gatsby's car is not just an ostentatious display of wealth, it is a mobile realm; his drawer of unusual shirts is more than a display of buying power, it suggests the generosity of abundance; the Buchanans' mansion is not just an example of conspicuous consumption, it is a symbol of a limitless power, almost a natural force; Gatsby's gestures are not just calculated effects, they are manifestations of genuine aristocracy; Daisy's voice is not just "full of money," it is an expression of the magic that stirs the senses.

One of Fitzgerald's greatest strengths is his ability to animate the vision of the American dream even as he reveals the forces that have tainted, if not destroyed, that idyll. Nick's list of "guests" at one of Gatsby's parties hints at the ugliness of the "high" society that beckons to and often swallows those who see in its glitter the realization of their dreams and desires. Predatory names such as Lache, Civet, Ferret, and Blackbuck evoke these people's voracious bestial habits; the suspect quality of "fishy" people like Whitebait, Hammerhead, Fishguard, and Beluga is suggested by their surnames, as is the murky, swamp-like aspect of Catlip, Duckweed, and Beaver. These people's lives are based on an extravagant, tasteless display of cash, unmerited status, or power gained through criminal activity. They are people for whom the American dream has lost its meaning, or for whom it never held meaning. They live in a hollow world that reflects the surface dazzle of advanced technology but lacks any connection to the natural world or to a sense of morality. Perhaps most significantly, these people have no culture; nothing to revive their souls and nothing to replace their desperate groping for diversion and stimulation. This is the world where the dream has died.
Analysis: Social Concerns

In accordance with his epic ambitions to write a novel that took the measure of and expressed the vital spirit of his country, The Great Gatsby is an attempt to explain and evoke the essence of the fundamental myth at the heart of American experience. Fitzgerald understood the evanescent goal of the European explorers, men like Drake, Ralegh, Balboa, and Cartier, who searched for a land that would offer a new beginning for Western Man, an unspoiled paradise, rich in natural beauty, uncorrupted by Old World cynicism, free from the rigid class system of European monarchy, and unblemished by decaying cities. Fitzgerald thought of it as the American Dream; but it emerged in Old World consciousness as far back as Shakespeare's vision of a "Brave new world," and it is described in Fitzgerald's poignant evocation of the "old island" that "flowered once for Dutch sailor's eyes — a fresh, green breast of the new world." Even in the high times of the wild 1920s, Fitzgerald perceptively sensed that the original energy of the Dream was irrevocably vanishing into the Wasteland, and he wanted to record its power before it faded into memory and fable.

To emphasize its magic, Fitzgerald used as his twin foci of The Great Gatsby Nick Carraway, the narrator, and Gatsby himself, both young men born in the American heartland of the Midwest at the dawn of the twentieth century. Like Fitzgerald, they arrive in New York with some of the innocence characteristic of middle America, lured to the great wicked city by its promise of glamour and success, vulnerable to its dangers and its corruptions. They bring some of the classic virtues of the heartland with them — simplicity, determination, loyalty, perhaps most of all an innate sense of honesty and decency. For Gatsby, these virtues have been driven into the deeper recesses of his character because he is so beguiled by love that he serves it as his master. For Nick, the temptations are also quite strong, but he is able to turn back before he is consumed. Both men are animated by their sense of the Dream's possibilities, but Gatsby, the total romantic, is unable to realize that the vision they shared in their youth has been severely altered by the realities of contemporary American life.

One of Fitzgerald's greatest strengths is his ability both to animate the vision and to show the world that has destroyed it. This world is an example of American society at its worst; and, in the list which Nick draws up of the names of the "guests" at one of Gatsby's parties in mid-summer, 1922, one can feel it in all its ugliness. The voracious, bestial habits of these people are evoked by predatory names like Leeche, Civet, Ferret, and Blackbuck (and by Wolfsheim, the gambler who is absent on this occasion); the suspect quality of "fishy" people like Whitebait, Hammerhead, Fishguard, and Beluga is suggested by their surnames, as is the murky, swamplike aspect of Catlip, Duckweed, and Beaver. There are arrivistes and parvenus with names like Ardita Fitz-Peters and G. Earl Muldoon; early specimens of Euro-trash called De Jong, Albrucksburger, and Haag: people whose names project their personality like Swett, Smirke, and Eckhaust. These people's lives are based on an extravagant, totally tasteless display of cash or some other form of status not based on merit of any kind, or on power gained through criminal activity and used solely to subjugate or terrorize. They are people for whom the American Dream has lost its meaning, or who had no sense of it in the first place. The world they are living in has the surface dazzle of advanced technology, but it is fundamentally hollow because it lacks the substance one can only draw from the natural world or from a sense of morality that grows from a genuine quality of personal character. Perhaps most significantly, they have no culture, nothing to revive their souls and nothing to replace their desperate groping for diversion and stimulation. The world which Fitzgerald decries is full of shallow flash, and its true appearance is not Gatsby's opulent house but the Valley of Ashes spread below the cryptic eyes of the mysterious Dr. Eckleburg, the oblivion of emptiness that follows the exhaustion of sensation. This is the world where the Dream has died.

Additional Commentary

The theme of The Great Gatsby is decadence and the decline of society. Although the story is told with grace and beauty, its events are intended to be shocking. True to the spirit of the times, the story involves marital
infidelity, murder, and wealth earned through racketeering. Many of the characters thrive on emotional
dishonesty, and live for appearance rather than substance of character. But the novel is also a moral tale in
which the characters get their "just deserts." Ultimately Nick understands the meaning of their lives and the
sadness of their worlds.

**Analysis: Ideas for Group Discussions**

The Great Gatsby reflects an era that may be like our own, in many ways. A great deal of thought might be
given to the ways in which Fitzgerald represents an age with problems and impulses that may be found in
today's troubled world. Some thought may be given to how historically accurate Fitzgerald's picture of the
1920s is, how much of what he presents is "real," in the same manner that historians and journalists often
attempt to detect the realities of the 1960s and the current period. Topics that might be discussed are the
idealism and the prejudices of the time — such discussions of a postwar period have been especially
stimulating over the years, and Fitzgerald was, more than most, affected by the unsettled times after World
War I.

Another useful approach is to compare the film(s) and novel. It is also interesting to discuss whether Nick or
Gatsby should have narrated the story.

1. What are the chief symbols in the novel, and what do they represent (e.g., the light on Daisy's dock and the
eyes of Dr. Eckleburg)?

2. Does the vagueness of Gatsby's background and somewhat criminal activity cause the work to be less
effective than a more detailed presentation would achieve? What details might be included in order to create a
fuller picture of the protagonist?

3. Is Nick Carraway's admiration of Gatsby truly supported by the text of the novel? Should there be more of
an objective reason for this feeling? Or, is it adequately supported by the text?

4. In what ways does Gatsby seem to be a product of his time and place?

5. Can the reader derive from the book a real sense of the postwar feeling of loss of values and even "quiet
desperation?"

6. Do you sympathize with Gatsby? What qualities of his create your reaction? Is he at all really "great?"

7. Is the conclusion of the novel too contrived? Could it have been made more realistic, more credible? How?

8. Does the relationship between Nick Carraway and Jordan Baker in any way parallel that between Gatsby
and Daisy Buchanan? Was there an intention by Fitzgerald to create an effect thereby?

9. How big a part does "illusion" play in the book, and does a real sense of "disillusion" permeate the text?

10. What seems to be the prevailing "tone" of the work. Does it enhance the impact of the text on the reader?

Leon Lewis
Analysis: Compare and Contrast

- **1920s:** Prohibition is passed, prohibiting the manufacture and sale of liquor. Al Capone takes over as boss of Chicago bootlegging from racketeer Johnny Torrio, who retires after sustaining gunshot wounds.

  **Today:** The use and abuse of alcohol grows in the U.S., as does participation in the twelve-step program called Alcoholics Anonymous, drug rehabilitation centers, and other support mechanisms designed to stem the fallout from drug abuse. Though still powerful in the drug and prostitution business, several Mafia dons, including John Gotti, are imprisoned for life.

- **1920s:** Political machines like New York's Tammany Hall openly and directly influence the outcome of elections by paying lawmakers and police to make or enforce policies in their favor.

  **Today:** While direct bribery of politicians and police is neither open nor widespread, there are still political scandals regarding funding of political campaigns. Members of both Democratic and Republican parties have been accused of taking illegal contributions, and campaign finance reform is a hot political issue.

Analysis: Topics for Discussion

1. What is the American dream? Does it mean the same thing for different characters in the book? Has Jay Gatsby attained what he believes the dream promises?

2. Why does Daisy temporarily leave her husband for Gatsby? Why doesn't she stay with Gatsby?

3. Why does Gatsby love Daisy? How does he demonstrate his love for her? What is the meaning of the green light?

4. What does Nick think about Gatsby? How does his view of Gatsby change?

5. A recurring motif is the bad driver. List the occasions of reckless driving. What does bad driving symbolize?

6. What is the significance of Myrtle Wilson's death? Why does Daisy let Gatsby take the blame for her death?

7. What is the symbolic meaning of the billboard displaying Dr. T. J. Eckleburg's eyes, overlooking the valley of ashes?

8. Why does only one of Gatsby's former guests show up for his funeral?

Analysis: Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Research and report on the social history of "the jazz age," the period in America between 1919 and 1929.

2. Research and report on the expatriate literary scene in Paris during the same period, 1919-1929. One good source is Ernest Hemingway's collection of autobiographical vignettes, A Moveable Feast, in which such writers as Fitzgerald and Gertrude Stein appear as characters.
3. Read a story or novel by Ernest Hemingway and compare it to a Fitzgerald story or novel written at the same time. What are the stylistic differences? How does each author's style reflect his choice of subject material?

4. Honesty is an important theme in *The Great Gatsby*. At the end of chapter 3, Nick says of himself, "I am one of the few honest people that I have ever known." Can you cite examples from the text to support his self-assessment? How would Nick define honesty? Do any of the other characters live up to Nick's ideals of honesty? Choose three characters whom Nick considers dishonest and describe how their dishonesty manifests itself.

5. Nick generally portrays himself as an objective observer of Gatsby's final summer. Is there any evidence that he is more dazzled by Gatsby's way of life than he pretends? Consider his infatuation with Jordan, the seemingly inordinate amount of time he spends with Gatsby and the Buchanans, and the fact that he is writing about the summer's events after they have ended in tragedy.

6. The plot of *The Great Gatsby* is structured around Gatsby's pursuit of Daisy Buchanan. While well-rounded as characters, the women in the novel (Daisy, Jordan, Myrtle Wilson) serve primarily as romantic foils for the male characters (Gatsby, Nick, Tom Buchanan), as flesh-and-blood incarnations—or distortions—of each man's concept of the American dream. In general, however, Fitzgerald was a pioneer at portraying independent, intelligent female characters, and he is often credited with inventing the "flapper" of the 1920s. Read some of his early short stories in *Flappers and Philosophers* or *The Basil and Josephine Stories*, and examine the role of women in these stories.

7. *The Great Gatsby* is a book about images; Gatsby conceptualizes the perfect man and sets about molding himself into this ideal form. Late in his career, Fitzgerald worked as a screenwriter in Hollywood—capital of an industry whose images were targeted for mass consumption and whose stars often served as models for the American public. Read Fitzgerald's unfinished novel, *The Last Tycoon*, or his Pat Hobby Stories, and compare their Hollywood setting to the setting of The Great Gatsby. How does a character's environment help shape his or her self-image?

**Analysis: Topics for Further Study**

- Read three of Fitzgerald's short stories dealing with the Jazz Age and compare and contrast these to *The Great Gatsby*. Suggested stories are: "The Rich Boy," "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz," and "Absolution." Investigate the role of religion and material well-being in Fitzgerald's fiction, based on his life.
- It is said that Fitzgerald's life mirrored the life of America during the decades of the 1920s and 1930s. Chart the decline and growth of America's economy during this time and draw parallels between them and Fitzgerald's life during those particular periods.
- Much has been written of the American expatriate writers in Paris. Read a book by or about these authors, such as *A Charmed Circle* or *The Sun Also Rises* and define the characteristics of these expatriates, their attitudes to events in the U.S. and Europe, and their choice of lifestyle. Include Fitzgerald's trips to Paris and the Riviera in your observations.
- Conservative v. liberal elements in society create specific legislation designed to protect the interests of all citizens. Prohibition was one example of the U.S. government's attempts to appease those who opposed the overabundance of liquor in the society. What are other examples of this in the field of education in the 1920s? Demonstrate how the conservative/liberal elements operated in other countries at that time.
- Examine the Dadaist art movement in Europe—as demonstrated in the works of Marcel Duchamps—and compare its tenets and manifestations to the New York adaptation of this popular art
form. Note the philosophy behind this movement and relate it to the Wasteland motif in *The Great Gatsby*.

- Relate the tales of Bonnie and Clyde's shooting spree, Al Capone's underworld activities, and other major scandals of the times. Examine why gangsterism and crime were romanticized in the Twenties, and why they are romanticized today as well.

**Analysis: Techniques / Literary Precedents**

Fitzgerald has been justly praised for his creation of structure in *The Great Gatsby*. As Matthew Bruccoli points out, his "narrative control solved the problem of making the mysterious — almost preposterous — Jay Gatsby convincing by letting the truth about him emerge gradually during the course of the novel." Fitzgerald greatly admired Joseph Conrad's employment of a partially involved narrator; and everything that occurs in the novel is presented through Nick's perceptions, thus combining, as Bruccoli puts it, "the effect of a first-person immediacy with authorial perspective." Nick's tempered approach to life and his undeniable honesty lend an authenticity to his observations. But as appealing as Nick is, as confident as the reader feels in the precision and verity of his account, the narrative structure of *The Great Gatsby* is only the framework for the novel. Its finish is provided by the creation of a poetic sensibility capable of rendering both the evanescent ethos of romance and the piercing disorder of psychic aggression. Both of these conditions are components of the mythic spirit of the American nation which Fitzgerald seeks to express. In an unusual demonstration of virtuosity, Fitzgerald has been able to use the language of the lyric poet in dealing with subject and circumstance not traditionally associated with a lyrical sensibility. Gatsby's car is not just an ostentatious display of wealth; it is a mobile realm. His drawer of unusual shirts is more than a display of buying power; it suggests the generosity of abundance. The Buchanans' mansion is not just an example of conspicuous consumption; it is a symbol of a limitless power almost like a natural force. Gatsby's gestures are not just calculated effects; they are manifestations of genuine aristocracy. Daisy's voice is not just "full of money"; it is an expression of the magic that stirs the senses.

Fitzgerald's images create the sensory vitality of *The Great Gatsby's* world while maintaining the tranquility crucial to understanding its significance. The necessary complement to the voice of the poet in rapture is the mind of the poet in contemplation. Nick's reflections establish a measure of value which calibrates the worth of action so as to enable an appreciation of Gatsby beyond his uses of wealth. The true poet must be a philosopher, and Fitzgerald, like his master John Keats, recognizes the consequences of transitory beauty on the human psyche. Fitzgerald has written an epic of American experience in lyric language, a unique fusion perhaps only he could achieve.

**Analysis: Related Titles / Adaptations**

There have been three films made from *The Great Gatsby*:

The silent version of 1926, starring Warner Baxter as Gatsby and Lois Wilson as Daisy, has been lost, but critics generally agree that the direction by Herbert Brenon was competent but uninspired. In addition, the film's subtitles were often wordy and inappropriate.

The 1949 production featured an interesting cast, including Alan Ladd as Gatsby, Barry Sullivan as Tom, Betty Field as Daisy, MacDonald Carey as Nick, and Shelley Winters as Myrtle Wilson. The film presents many powerful visual correlatives for Fitzgerald's prose but lacks the authority of a profound directoral vision.

The 1974 production of *The Great Gatsby* was an ambitious and expensive effort. Francis Ford Coppola wrote the screenplay and Jack Clayton directed, and the cast included Robert Redford as Gatsby, Mia Farrow as Daisy, Bruce Dem as Tom, Sam Waterston as Nick, and Karen Black as Myrtle. Despite some excellent
moments, the film is too slow paced and too long, and much of the production looks overwrought.

Analysis: Media Adaptations

- *The Great Gatsby* was first adapted as a film by Richard Maibaum as producer and Elliott Nugent as director. It stars Alan Ladd, Betty Field, Macdonald Carey, Barry Sullivan, and Shelley Winters, Paramount, 1949.
- The second film was produced by David Merrick, directed by Jack Clayton, and written for the screen by Francis Ford Coppola. The cast features Robert Redford, Mia Farrow, Bruce Dern, Sam Waterston, and Karen Black, Paramount, 1974; available from Paramount Home Video.
- The novel has been recorded twice, once by The Audio Partners, Listening Library. Three sound cassettes, unabridged, read by Alexander Scourby, 1985.
- The other sound recording is by Recorded books, Audiobooks. Three sound cassettes, unabridged, read by Frank Muller, 1984.

Bibliography: Bibliography and Further Reading

Sources


For Further Study

Bloom, Harold, ed. *Gatsby*, Major Literary Characters Series. Chelsea House, 1991. This comprehensive collection of articles focusing on the novel's “hero,” Gatsby, begins with 25 critical extracts on the character and the author from letters, reviews, and articles. Of particular interest is the article by Arnold Weinstein, “Fiction as Greatness: The Case of Gatsby” (1985), which reads the novel as being about making meaning, or creating belief. This includes both Gatsby's fiction of himself and Nick's story of this. The collection also includes an important early article on the time theme by R. W. Stallman, “Gatsby and the Hole in Time” (1955).


Crosland, A.T. *A Concordance to F. Scott Fitzgerald's 'The Great Gatsby'* . Gale, 1975. The concordance provides cross-referenced lists of every word in the novel, assisting in consideration of the use and frequency of certain words or word-groups (such as “eye,” “blind,” “see,” “blink,” “wink,” and the famous accidental use of “irises,” for example).

Donaldson, Scott, ed. *Critical Essays on F. Scott Fitzgerald's 'The Great Gatsby'* . G. K. Hall, 1984. This balanced survey of critical issues (21 essays with an introduction, and excerpts from letters to and from Fitzgerald about the novel) contains some of the now-classic articles or chapters from other books. It features treatments of sources for the novel, the novel's complicated revisions in its composition, and the historical aspect of the work.

Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*, edited by Matthew J. Bruccoli. Cambridge University Press, 1991. Bruccoli's critical edition of the novel contains the useful “apparatus” (notes keyed to page numbers in the novel) which had been published separately in 1974, when the novel was still under copyright protection. This edition now explains many of the novel's more obscure references, and points to some of its infamous inconsistencies (the age of Daisy Fay's daughter, for instance). Bruccoli himself is perhaps the most prolific of Fitzgerald's biographers and critics, and has also edited numerous editions of Fitzgerald's correspondence, manuscript facsimiles, notebooks, and even accounts ledgers.

*Fitzgerald-Hemingway Annual*, various years. This yearly periodical devotes itself to the works of F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway.

Kazin, Alfred. *F. Scott Fitzgerald: The Man and His Work*. Twayne, 1951. This collection of essays on the author's literature is considered to be one of the best single volumes of criticism on Fitzgerald. Arranged chronologically, the material ranges from early reviews of the first novel through other critical reactions to Fitzgerald.


Mellow, James R. *Invented Lives*. Houghton Mifflin, 1984. This is a full portrait of Fitzgerald, his hunger for fame, his destructive marriage, and a backward look to an era that continues to dazzle us with its variety and intrigue.


**Bibliography**


**Analysis: What Do I Read Next?**

- *The Twenties* by Edmund Wilson, one of Fitzgerald's friends at Princeton University and his entire life, is an interesting introduction to the decade and to the many cultural figures in America at that time. Another book by Wilson that chronicles the Twenties and Thirties is *The Shores of Light*, 1952. Personal impressions, sketches, letters, satires, and pieces on the classics of American literature are included in this book.
- *Heart of Darkness* (1899) by Joseph Conrad was a literary favorite of Fitzgerald, who used the Polish author's narrative technique in *The Great Gatsby*. The short novel is the story of the civilized Mr. Kurtz, who travels to the savage heart of Africa, only to find his evil soul.
- *Citizen Kane*, Orson Welles's legendary 1941 film, is about a mogul who acquires tremendous financial success but finds that the true source of his happiness is a childhood memory of “Rosebud.” Once again, the true values of gains and losses are examined in this well-known classic.
- *Six Tales of the Jazz Age and Other Stones* F. Scott Fitzgerald 1922. This is the author's second collection of short stories, the most notable of which is “The Diamond as Big as the Ritz.”
recurrent theme of fantasy and winning the top girl and financial success is central to this and other stories.

- **Great Expectations** (1861) by Charles Dickens tells of a grim childhood and an orphan's encounter with wealth and lost love in England during the Victorian era. In its realistic mode, one can find a number of differences between this story and Fitzgerald's, yet striking similarities as well, in regard to dreams and human relationships.

### Analysis: For Further Reference

Brucoli, Matthew Joseph. *Some Sort of Epic Grandeur: The Life of F. Scott Fitzgerald*. With a Genealogical Afterword by Scottie Fitzgerald Smith. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981. While believing that Fitzgerald's life was a quest for heroism and that the writer himself was heroic, Brucoli does much in his biography to revise the popular mythology surrounding Fitzgerald's life and to correct the factual errors of previous biographers. This study is the most carefully researched of the many books on Fitzgerald's life.


### Quotes: Important Quotations

- **Quote #1**
  ch. 1, p. 2 (based on Scribner paperback edition 2004; your page # may not correspond)
  [Narrator describes Jay Gatsby.]

  If personality is an unbroken series of successful gestures, then there was something gorgeous about him, some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life…. [Gatsby had] an extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness such as I have never found in any other person and which it is not likely I shall ever find again.
In the introduction to the story, narrator Nick Carraway describes Gatsby as he, retrospectively, perceives him. Immediately, Fitzgerald establishes Gatsby as an exceptionally romantic hero and a hopeful dreamer. The narrator tips his hand and reveals his favoritism for Gatsby. This quote is important because it not only establishes the essence of the Gatsby character but it also foreshadows the very nature of the story and its primary themes: idealism, aspiration, and loss.

**Quote #2**  
ch. 2, pp. 23-24  
[Establishes the domain of the working poor.]

This is a valley of ashes—a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens; where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and, finally, with a transcendent effort, of ash-gray men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air…. [And the eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg] brood on over the solemn dumping ground.

In this dramatic description, Fitzgerald sets the scene for the world of the working poor, where George and Myrtle Wilson live. The “valley of ashes” provides a sharp, poetic contrast to the cool, lush estates of East Egg. What would normally be signs of life—wheat fields and gardens—are merely forms in a smoldering, colorless landscape. Importantly, this scene immediately follows a genteel luncheon at the Buchanan mansion. Sea breezes are replaced by “rising smoke,” extensive green lawns by “grotesque gardens.”

This scene also establishes the class conflict that permeates the book, and is a foreboding allusion to the death that occurs here. We become aware for the first time of the symbolic eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg, who watches over this “solemn dumping ground” as a God-like witness to the despair and hopelessness that emanates from the place.

**Quote #3**  
ch. 3, p. 50  
[In the midst of his own party, Gatsby is alone.]

When the Jazz History of the World was over, girls where putting their heads on men’s shoulders … swooning backward playfully into men’s arms … but no one swooned backward on Gatsby, and no French bob touched Gatsby’s shoulder, and no singing quartets were formed with Gatsby’s head for one link.

This passage serves to capture a sense of Gatsby’s parties, as well as his place in them. Fitzgerald references a “sensational” piece of music of the day, describes the playful, affectionate nature of the guests, and casually notes the hairstyle that practically defined the “flapper.” In the middle of this scene, a scene that Gatsby himself created (he even requested the song), he stands alone, alienated from his own guests. We are reminded that this whole performance is just that—a show put on for everyone but himself.

**Quote #4**  
ch. 5, p. 92  
[Gatsby impresses Daisy with his shirt collection.]

[He] began throwing them, one by one, before us, shirts of sheer linen and thick silk and fine flannel…. While we admired he brought more and the soft rich heap mounted higher—shirts with stripes and scrolls and plaids in coral and apple-green and lavender and faint orange, with monograms of Indian blue. Suddenly … [Daisy] began to cry stormily.
“They’re such beautiful shirts,” she sobbed. “It makes me sad because I’ve never seen such—such beautiful shirts before.”

This quote, which comes at the climax of Gatsby’s tour of his mansion, highlights Daisy’s shallow, materialistic nature and Gatsby’s pathetic, transparent efforts to impress her. Gatsby has acquired the trappings of wealth and privilege to the point of absurdity. It’s clear that the shirts, like all of Gatsby’s possessions, exist for the sole purpose of convincing Daisy of his worth. Importantly, Daisy is not moved by the fact that Gatsby has dedicated his life since they parted to winning her back, that he has kept a constant vigil for their lost love. No, Daisy is crying because the shirts are beautiful.

• **Quote #5**
  ch. 6, p. 110
  [Exchange between Nick and Gatsby.]

  “You can’t repeat the past.”

  “Can’t repeat the past?” he cried incredulously. “Why of course you can!”

There is no end to Gatsby’s romantic idealism. He never matures, or moves beyond his seventeen-year-old conception of the world. He does not permit incidental facts, like the passage of time, to dampen his dreams. He honestly believe that he can return to the past and to his short-lived affair with Daisy.

• **Quote #6**
  ch. 7, p. 120
  [Gatsby describes Daisy’s voice.]

  “Her voice is full of money,” [Gatsby] said suddenly.

  That was it…. That was the inexhaustible charm that rose and fell in it, the jingle of it, the cymbal’s song of it….

Much is made throughout the book of Daisy’s voice, the musical quality of it, its allure, and its seductive power. At one point it is described as a “deathless song.” In this quote, Gatsby finally and simply captures the essence of it: money. Fitzgerald has succeeded in fully internalizing Daisy’s exalted position not only through her appearance and manners but also in the very sound of her voice. This also reinforces the strong musical theme that runs through the book.

• **Quote #7**
  ch. 8, p. 150
  [Gatsby idealizes wealth.]

  Gatsby was overwhelmingly aware of the youth and mystery that wealth imprisons and preserves, of the freshness of many clothes, and of Daisy, gleaming like silver, safe and proud above the hot struggles of the poor.

This quote is important for two reasons. First it demonstrates the idealization that Gatsby maintains of the rich. It’s a fantastic, fantasy view of money—pure imagination. And this concept of wealth, that Gatsby formed at an early age, has stayed with him throughout his life, unspoiled by life’s realities, including even war.

Second, this quote foreshadows what’s to come. Gatsby imagines Daisy, because of her position, to be above the struggles of the poor. In fact, she becomes a central player in these struggles when she accidentally kills Tom’s mistress, Myrtle Wilson, as Myrtle tries to escape her husband and her
miserable life.

- **Quote #8**
  ch. 8, p. 159
  [Wilson recognizes the eyes of “God”.

  Wilson: “God knows what you’ve been doing, everything you’ve been doing. You may fool me, but you can’t fool God!”

  Standing behind him, Michaelis saw with a shock that he was looking at the eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg, which had just emerged, pale and enormous, from the dissolving night.


  “That’s an advertisement,” Michaelis assured him.

This exchange between the distraught Wilson and Michaelis, a local restaurant owner, is important because it finally brings to light the full impact of the billboard, the eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg. At various points throughout the story, we are reminded that the watchful eyes of Dr. Eckleburg keep vigil over the sad happenings of the valley of ashes. Now the eyes are most explicitly equated with the eyes of God, the omniscient witness to the tragic incident that forms the novel’s climax.

- **Quote #9**
  ch. 9, p. 180
  [America is a vast land of possibility.

  Gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors’ eyes—a fresh, green breast of the new world.... For a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder.

Possibly, one of the most quoted passages in the book, Fitzgerald likens the hopes and dreams of the first European settlers to those of Gatsby. The virgin continent, with all of its untouched potential, is symbolic of the vast opportunity that continues to fuel the American dream. The “capacity for wonder” reminds us of Gatsby’s “extraordinary gift for hope.” We realize that Gatsby is not unique in his romantic idealism. We understand that so many of us are lured by the promise of something great, something equal to our ability to dream. And in many ways this quality is uniquely American.

- **Quote #10**
  ch. 9, p. 180
  [Gatsby believes in the future.

  Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us.... Tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther.... And one fine morning—

At the close of the book, Nick tries to describe the nature of Gatsby’s hope and draws the parallel to all of our hopes.
Essential Quotes: Essential Passage by Character: Nick Carraway

In my younger and more vulnerable years my father gave me some advice that I’ve been turning over in my mind ever since.

“Whenever you feel like criticizing any one,” he told me, “just remember that all the people in this world haven’t had the advantages that you’ve had.”

He didn’t say any more, but we’ve always been unusually communicative in a reserved way, and I understood that he meant a great deal more than that. In consequence, 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. Most of the confidences were unsought—frequently I have feigned sleep, preoccupation, or a hostile levity when I realized by some unmistakable sign that an intimate revelation was quivering on the horizon; for the intimate revelations of young men, or at least the terms in which they express them, are usually plagiaristic and marred by obvious suppressions. Reserving judgments is a matter of infinite hope.


**Summary**

Nick Carraway introduces himself as an open and honest individual. Through the guidance and influence of his father, Nick has learned to be tolerant of others because, as his father tells him, “…all the people in this world haven’t had the advantages that you’ve had.” Because Nick and his father can communicate openly (unlike other characters in the novel), Nick’s life has as its foundation a worldview based on compassion.

Nick admits that this level of tolerance has made him vulnerable to all sorts of people and their problems. While he is tolerant of all people, he does not necessarily find all people entertaining or even interesting on the same level. He feels that, in some way, his transparency has made him a homing beacon of the “abnormal mind,” opening him up to a wide range of individuals. This spectrum of acquaintances earned him the reputation of being a “politician” in college, a “politician” in a rather negative sense. He is privy to a variety of secret affairs, necessitating a certain level of diplomacy as well as power.

Nick confesses that his status as a confidant was unsought (and basically unwanted). He tried many times to avoid the situation, usually through deceptive means, pretending to be unavailable in some way or another. Yet he is always found and confided in.

Nick, because of his conventional upbringing, finds many of the “intimate revelations” rather too intimate. Moreover, these revelations are neither original nor genuine, but rather “plagiarized” as the youths seek out their individuality by engaging in the same activities everyone else does.

Yet Nick reserves judgment. Why? Because Nick is something of an optimist, and “reserving judgment is a matter of infinite hope.”

**Analysis**

In the novel, Nick Carraway functions not just as the first-person narrator: his role is also along the lines of a Greek chorus. He is “on the stage,” so to speak, yet in many ways he is outside of the main action of the story.
He receives the attentions of Gatsby, Daisy, Tom, and Jordan, yet they receive very little from him. Thus he can stand removed from the conflicts and provide commentary, serving almost as a backdrop against which the action is played. By being a first-person narrator in this way, he avoids the limitations usually imposed by such a viewpoint. He knows the actions, the conversations, and, to a certain extent, the thoughts of the major players, gaining the ability to reflect on them as a whole.

This ability, as the passage above shows, is due to his father’s statement. Nick stands on the moral high ground throughout the novel. In a certain way, one might even say that he, rather than the eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg, functions as the eyes of God. Having established an intimate relationship with each of the major characters, he has an insight into their behavior and their choices. He is not on anyone’s “side,” until the very end at Gatsby’s death. The only other acquaintance of Gatsby’s at the funeral is the "Owl-eyed Man," who himself functions in a limited way as an observer from above (thus his resemblance to the billboard of T. J. Eckleburg).

Nick states that it is his inclination to “reserve all judgments.” This practice does give him the moral high ground that enables his function as a chorus, and it also gives Nick an aura of honesty. As he states later in the novel, he is the only completely honest person he knows. Said without pride or deception, Nick is accurate in this perception of himself, and it is important if he is to function as a reliable narrator, which he does. He sees Gatsby, Daisy, Jordan, and Tom as they are, with all their flaws. For example, in a seeming contradiction, Nick states that Gatsby represents all he disapproves of, but he comes out all right in the end. Nick preserves a balanced view of each character. Rarely will he display any indications that he dislikes anyone, though he does occasionally hint at his disapproval of their actions and choices, simply because he is the moral standard of the novel.

One statement stands out as the foundation of truth on which Nick has built his personal philosophy: “Reserving judgment is a matter of infinite hope.” The profound wisdom of this statement expresses the motivation for Nick’s continued interaction with Gatsby to the very end. By being, as ever, the listening ear to all the gossip at Gatsby’s parties, Nick is well aware of the questionable nature of Gatsby’s past, especially in the procurement of his wealth. Not just unethical but downright illegal though some of these suggestion would be if true, Nick withholds judgment. He has, and continues to have even after Gatsby’s death, infinite hope—hope that the innate decency of Jay Gatsby, despite his wrong choices, still exists and, if given time, would have overtaken his obsessions. It is his infinite hope that this goodness will be seen by those who took advantage of Gatsby by attending his parties, drinking his champagne, eating his food. Perhaps all these people are not as selfish as they appear to be. Perhaps, after all, some of them will come to Gatsby’s funeral to honor him. Yet no one does, except the Owl-eyed Man, the man who had been impressed by the genuineness of Gatsby’s library.

Thus Nick’s introduction establishes him firmly as the standard by which all other characters will be measured. He represents the old morality, the one on which the American Dream had been founded, but which, with the onset of the 1920s, quickly faded away. That morality is, in his father’s eyes, the prime “advantage” that others have not been given. By his constant moral stance, Nick provides a counterpoint to the other characters who slip into various moral morasses by the novel’s end.

**Essential Quotes: Essential Passage by Theme: Deception and Delusion**

Wilson’s glazed eyes turned out to the ashheaps, where small gray clouds took on fantastic shape and scurried here and there in the faint dawn wind.
“I spoke to her,” he muttered, after a long silence. “I told her she might fool me but she couldn’t fool God. I took her to the window.”—with an effort he got up and walked to the rear window and leaned with his face pressed against it——” and I said ‘God knows what you’ve been doing, everything you’ve been doing. You may fool me, but you can’t fool God!’”

Standing behind him, Michaelis saw with a shock that he was looking at the eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg, which had just emerged, pale and enormous, from the dissolving night.


**Summary**

It is the morning after Myrtle Wilson has died, struck down by the automobile driven by Daisy Buchanan. To George Wilson, despite her unfaithfulness, she was all he had, and her loss is more than he can bear. His plan, once he suspected her infidelity, was to move from the area. Myrtle, unwilling to leave, was locked in her room by her husband until such time as he could acquire money enough to leave. Managing to escape her room, Myrtle ran out into the road, hoping to stop Gatsby, whose car she recognized. She was killed instantly and brought into Wilson’s shop. It is only recently that her body has at last been taken away, leaving blood stains on the bench as well as in the road for curious bystanders to gawk at.

George, as the new day dawns, manages to move past his grief to find his revenge. Not suspecting Tom Buchanan as Myrtle’s lover, he thinks only of the man in the yellow car. George intends to find out who he is and bring justice.

George looks out at the Valley of Ashes that is his home. The ashes are billowing up in the light wind, bespeaking change and action.

Michaelis, another dweller in the Valley of Ashes, has stayed throughout the night, since George evidently has no friend to stand vigil with him. Michaelis, unaware of George’s intentions or justifications, tries to convince him it was only an accident. Yet George insists it was murder. More than that, it was retribution brought on Myrtle for her unfaithfulness.

Looking out of the window, George sees once again the billboard with the eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg, the occultist whose bespectacled visage haunts the Valley of Ashes. This billboard has appeared many times throughout the novel, each character passing it as he or she goes from Long Island to New York. Those eyes seem to be inescapable to no one. To George, they are the eyes of God.

George tells Michaelis in a haunted voice how he had tried to warn Myrtle of the all-seeing nature of God: “I told her she might fool me but she couldn’t fool God.” He remembers taking her to the window and pointing out the eyes to her. ‘God knows what you’ve been doing, everything you’ve been doing. You may fool me, but you can’t fool God!’”

Michael, confused, looks out the window and sees the eyes of T. J. Eckleburg. George repeats, “God sees everything.”

**Analysis**

A strong thread of deception runs throughout the lives of Gatsby, Daisy, Tom, and Myrtle. No one is what he or she appears to be. Each is hiding some element of a past or a present in order to maintain a current relationship or status.
The eyes of T. J. Eckleburg have repeatedly appeared in the plot of the novel, each time that a character travels from Long Island to New York. Eckleburg's eyes symbolize the eyes of God, watching over everyone and seeing all that is hidden. As George says, “God sees everything.”

This symbolic representation of the concept of “what is done in secret will be shouted from the housetops” infiltrates the machinations of each character. Gatsby's past pokes its head up occasionally, but most often his dishonesty is revealed by his inconsistency in facts relating to his past. He cannot keep his details straight, and thus Nick, the narrator, begins to wonder what the truth is. It is only later, after Gatsby's death, that the truth is revealed.

Daisy’s past relationship with Gatsby has been hidden as well. This also is revealed as Gatsby reconnects with his past love. As the course of the story progresses, they sneak around, meeting in secret at Gatsby’s home, where he has dismissed all his previous servants to avoid gossip, surrounding himself with trusted, though equally dishonest, compatriots.

Tom as well has lived a life of deception through his affair with Myrtle. While he is ostensibly open with Nick concerning this, it still relegates him to the group of the dishonest. Myrtle as well hides her relationship from George, but the vast amount of her friends, who live away from the Valley of Ashes, are also aware of it.

Thus, as symbolized by the eyes of T. J. Eckleburg, what is hidden is known. God (and a few chosen individuals) sees everything.

Yet what is effectively hidden is not only the dishonesty but the self-delusion that many of the characters have. Gatsby above all has deluded himself into thinking that he is more than he is and that his humble beginnings were less than they were. He has convinced himself that he was born to the wrong family and thus must re-create himself. Yet in doing so, he betrays all that he truly could be. By deluding himself, he has thus deluded others. In Daisy his rewritten past plays a significant role. As Daisy has rejected him because of his lack of money and status, Gatsby believes that he can earn her love by attaining them, at whatever cost and by any means necessary. Through dishonesty and illegality, Gatsby has become what he had hoped to be and what he thought Daisy wanted him to be. Yet in the end, the truth (whatever it is in Daisy’s mind) is not enough to bring him the “grail” that he has been seeking for all those years.

George Wilson, in at last calling the eyes of T. J. Eckleburg the eyes of God, brings to the story the sense that there is a higher standard by which the characters are to be judged. It is a rejection of the delusion that money and power are justifications for any action. Written at a time of transition between the “old morality” of pre-World War I America to that of the “Roaring Twenties,” The Great Gatsby holds to account those individuals who believe that whatever one chooses to do is right. As George and Nick, the two who still hold to the old morality, can testify, divine or poetic justice will triumph, often in the most tragic ways.

**Critical Essays: Sample Essay Outlines**

**Sample Analytical Paper Topics**
The following paper topics are based on the entire book. Following each topic is a thesis and sample outline. Use these as a starting point for your paper.

- **Topic #1**
  Henry Steele Commager in The American Mind: An Interpretation of American Thought and Character Since the 1880s contends that “the tragedy is not that Gatsby lies dead, the rooms in his fabulous mansion silent—but that while he lived he realized all his ambitions.” Justify this contention.
Outline
I. Thesis Statement: Although Gatsby’s end was tragic, he was able to realize his ambitions.

II. He fulfilled the ambition of acquiring money.
A. By illegal means, he acquired massive amounts of money.

III. He fulfilled the ambition of experiencing love.
A. By determination, he experienced a physical relationship with Daisy.

IV. He fulfilled the ambition of gaining popularity.
A. Through generosity, he entertained hundreds of guests.

• Topic #2
How do literary devices add to the dimension of depth or texture to this novel?

Outline
I. Thesis Statement: Fitzgerald employs several devices, including color imagery, symbols, and descriptive tags, throughout the novel.

II. Color imagery conveys dual meanings.
A. Yellow is associated not only with bright, heavenly scenes, opulence, and wealth, but also with corruption and decay.

III. Symbols add meaning.
A. Cars symbolize restlessness, driving ambition, recklessness.
B. Eyes symbolize the presence or absence of God.

IV. Recurring “tags” of description characterize effectively.
A. Jordan’s “jauntiness” establishes her as atypical and yet representative of young women in the 1920s.

• Topic #3
Prove that Gatsby really is worth more than “the whole damn bunch put together.”

Outline
I. Thesis Statement: Nick’s assertion that Gatsby is worth more than “the whole damn bunch put together” is supported by Gatsby’s purer motives and actions.

II. Gatsby retains the American Dream in its purest form.
A. He has the quality of the original seekers of the dream—the pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness.

III. He adheres to the precept of accepting consequences.
A. Having “taken” Daisy that night in Louisville, he feels it is his responsibility to marry her.

IV. Gatsby possesses indefatigable hope.
A. He believes Daisy will do the right thing, will make the moral choice she failed to make five years before, especially now that he can provide for her needs materially.

• Topic #4
Show how literary techniques most effectively convey Fitzgerald’s theme of waste in the American Dream.

Outline
I. Thesis Statement: A primary theme of the novel is waste, which Fitzgerald conveys through not only
the narrative but with literary devices as well.

II. Symbols effectively convey wasted energy.
A. Cars, the green light, and the billboard of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg’s eyes convey waste on different levels.

III. Imagery effectively conveys wasted lives.
A. Color and heat images convey decadence.

IV. Naming effectively conveys wasted opportunity.
A. Name of the novel, names of characters, and names of places suggest a waste of ideals.

V. Other devices convey the same theme.
A. Settings
B. Contrasts

Critical Essays: Suggested Essay Topics

Chapter 1
1. Consider the references to people in literature or history in the chapter. What purpose(s) do they serve?

2. Write a character sketch of Daisy (or Tom or Jordan), focusing on the recurring “tag” used to describe them. Daisy leans forward and talks in a low voice; Tom is restless and hulking; Jordan balances something on her chin almost in an athletic stance. What is Fitzgerald’s purpose in thus describing them?

3. Explain how the first chapter of this novel is critically important in the development of plot, characters, and themes.

Chapter 2
1. Consider the possibilities of an agrarian society being the epitome of the American Dream. Find evidences of farming or pastoral scenes and diction in the first two chapters which suggest the belief that such a society fulfills the ideal American Dream.

2. Contrast the green light at the end of chapter 1 and the gray images in the Valley of Ashes in chapter 2. What thematic statement do the contrasting images reveal?

3. How can George Wilson be said to symbolize the American Dream? Consider the Horatio Alger (“rags-to-riches”) motif, as well as his undying desire to better his situation.

4. Write about Fitzgerald’s poetic style, focusing especially on the vivid metaphors and images, such as this description from Catherine: “Her eyebrows had been plucked and then drawn on again at a more rakish angle, but the efforts of nature toward the restoration of the old alignment gave a blurred air to her face.” How is Fitzgerald a disciplined writer with great control of his prose?

5. Research descriptions of archetypal heroes, including their mysterious beginnings associated with rumors and mythical power. Consider Gatsby as such a hero, based upon the rumors surrounding him.

Chapter 3
1. Trace references to music in the Jazz Age—specific songs, types of instruments, description of the sounds—and draw a conclusion about their purpose(s). Discuss the dominant musical types of the 1920s.
2. Find a list of the seven deadly sins and the seven cardinal virtues. Write a paper in which you analyze some or all of the characters in regard to these sins and virtues. Which vice or virtue does each manifest?

3. Study Nick as a symbol of honesty and Jordan as a symbol of dishonesty. Write a character sketch which reveals their likenesses and differences in terms of veracity and credibility.

**Chapter 4**

1. Show how the American Dream associated with America’s past has succumbed to mercenary, almost exclusively materialistic values, derived from get-rich-quick schemes. Find evidence of the historical basis in fact and corresponding evidence in the novel.

2. Elaborate on the epigram: “There are only the pursued, the pursuing, the busy, and the tired.” Show how it contributes to the development of plot, character, and theme in the novel. Give justification for its being the single most important line in the novel.

3. Determine where this chapter fits on the pyramid of dramatic structure: antecedent action (or what has taken place before the action of the novel begins), inciting moment (or the catalyst which creates interest in the actions and conflicts which follow), rising action (or the intensifying of interest and suspense), climax (or most intense moment from which there is no turning back for the protagonist), reversal (or falling action), and denouement (or tying up of loose ends). Defend your decision.

4. Select one or more of the names Nick lists on his timetable, and research to discover their stories and to comprehend Fitzgerald’s choice of those names. How were they involved in American history?

5. Research Montenegro and discern its role in World War I. Gauge Gatsby’s account of wartime activity by these historical findings.

**Chapter 5**

1. Consider ways in which Gatsby might be a counterpart to Don Quixote. Research the characteristics of this fictional Spanish dreamer, and write an essay in which you show their likenesses and, of course, differences.

2. Consider ways in which Tom Buchanan and George Wilson are alike, in that the wives of both men are capable of being lured away by another man. Therefore, both men, different as they are, are cuckolds (a Middle Ages term, defining men whose wives are unfaithful. In the legendary account, such husbands were said to grow horns, thus becoming monsters).

3. The reunion of Daisy and Gatsby, a rather sordid relationship, signals simultaneously the beginning and the end of Gatsby’s dream and of his success. Justify this statement.

**Chapter 6**

1. Study the various parties and guests at the parties in order to construct a thesis and arguments that typify America and Americans at play in the 1920s. What do the parties reveal about these guests?

2. Consider all the meanings of Daisy’s admiration for the movie director leaning over his wife. Does she see herself in that image? Is Fitzgerald simply magnifying film, a new medium in the 1920s?

3. Gatsby grew into adolescence after being introduced to a tawdry lifestyle on Dan Cody’s yacht. Show how the boy on the yacht was ironically more worldly and realistic than the unrealistic adult gazing longingly at the green light.

4. In what ways can Nick be said to be the real hero of the story? Prove your answer.
5. Select a line or a passage about time and show its thematic significance.

Chapter 7
1. Write an essay analyzing the Gatsby-Trimalchio connection and its importance. Compare Trimalchio, the hero or protagonist of The Satyricon, to Gatsby. Refer to William Rose Benét’s The Reader’s Encyclopedia for concise background information.

2. Trace the recurring image of eyes, and ascertain the purposes of those images. Consider blindness on any level as well as sight.

3. Compare the two passages below from T. S. Eliot’s The Waste Land with remarkably similar ones from The Great Gatsby. Better still, find a copy of the poem and discover other passages which correspond. What do the similarities suggest?

   “I think we are in rats’ alley
   Where the dead men lost their bones….”

   “‘What shall I do now? What shall I do?’
   ‘I shall rush out as I am, and walk the street
   ‘With my hair down, so, What shall we do tomorrow?’”

   and from Gatsby, chapter 2:

   “It seemed to me that the thing for Daisy to do was to rush out of the house, child in arms—but apparently there were no such intentions in her head.”

   and from chapter 7:

   “‘What’ll we do with ourselves this afternoon?’ cried Daisy, ‘and the day after that, and the next thirty years?’”

4. Explain the significance of the comments: “They weren’t happy … and yet they weren’t unhappy either. There was an unmistakable air of natural intimacy about the picture, and anybody would have said that they were conspiring together.”

Chapter 8
1. Some of the characters in the novel symbolize a production ethic; others symbolize a consumption ethic. Classify the characters accordingly, and draw a conclusion about the American Dream, as you understand it, from Fitzgerald.

2. Eyes and sight recur frequently in the novel. What is Fitzgerald’s statement about the ability to distinguish between illusion and reality?

3. How is this story an ironic inversion of a knightly quest for the grail?

Chapter 9
1. Why does Nick compare the Dutch sailors to Gatsby? How does the comparison help to state Fitzgerald’s conclusion?

2. How is the story an ironic twist of the American Dream? Consider Daisy and Gatsby, Daisy and Tom, Myrtle and George Wilson, Myrtle and Tom, Nick and Jordan.
3. Nick speaks of the “corruption” of Gatsby’s guests and Gatsby’s “incorruptible dream.” How do these phrases begin to pull all the threads of the story together?

4. How does Fitzgerald make statements about pseudo-intellectualism?

5. Fitzgerald demonstrates the power of proper names. Prove this statement.


**Critical Essays: Critical Evaluation**

Born on September 24, 1896, in St. Paul, Minnesota, to the daughter of a self-made Irish immigrant and an unsuccessful furniture salesman, F. Scott Fitzgerald was indoctrinated early with a belief in the American Dream. Later he was to pursue it with a ferocity that would take a devastating toll upon his life.

Published in 1925, Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* was to become his definitive work. In 1922, Fitzgerald declared, “I want to write something new—something extraordinary and beautiful and simple and intricately patterned.” With the publication of *The Great Gatsby* he achieved just that. Set in America’s Jazz Age, Fitzgerald creates a world of money, power, corruption, and murder.

Critics often assert that *The Great Gatsby* is a uniquely American novel that depicts American characters and themes. Indeed, Gatsby is the archetypal American character: He is self-made, a man who literally invents or reinvents himself. He believes in the American Dream “in the green light, the orgiastic future.” He believes that, in America, one can become anything. Like a young Benjamin Franklin, he maps out his resolves for future success and never wavers from his teenage conception of self. A seventeen-year-old James Gatz invents Jay Gatsby, and it is to this vision that he remains true. Ultimately, it is this vision that betrays him.

Gatsby represents the world of the ostentatious newly rich; however, he remains a romantic idealist. Right from the beginning, the reader learns of Gatsby’s “extraordinary gift for hope [and] a romantic readiness” that Nick has never before witnessed in another human being. He is a paradox: the innocent bootlegger.

Nick Carraway, the narrator, is an idealistic midwestern salesman of stocks and bonds, trying to make a go of it on Wall Street. The entire story is filtered through Nick and his vision of Gatsby. It is significant that Fitzgerald chooses to write *The Great Gatsby* in the past tense; indeed, the story is relayed entirely through memory, which is, of course, selective. The lines between truth and fiction are blurred, and, essentially, the reader must become a participant within the text; he or she must separate the lies from the truth in order to glean the true meaning. Illusion versus reality is a central theme throughout the novel.

Without a “past,” Gatsby himself becomes a “text” to be written, revised, and rewritten with each new “reader.” He reflects the fears, fantasies, and desires of his audience: “Somebody told me they thought he killed a man once.” Gatsby is a metaphor for the American experience; he is the product of a country without a past.

It is the past that Gatsby struggles to reinvent and reclaim. When Nick Carraway suggests that “you can’t repeat the past.” Gatsby maintains, “Why of course you can!” He remains unchanged, an innocent within a corrupt, disillusioned world. He fails to realize that the past is gone. In the end, it is this romantic idealism that destroys Gatsby; he refuses to relinquish the illusion that has propelled his life.
On one level, *The Great Gatsby* is about money: old, established wealth versus new currency. Gatsby can never hope to obtain Daisy because he doesn’t have the “right” kind of money. *The Great Gatsby* is Fitzgerald’s indictment of the American Dream. For Nick, Gatsby’s death represents the debasement of the dream. On another level, it employs American mythology based upon East and West. The East epitomizes the sophisticated realm of established wealth and privilege, while the West is the new frontier, the place of the pioneer without a past or identity. Nick becomes disillusioned with the East and returns to the Midwest, “the warm, center of the world.”

Fitzgerald clearly delineates class difference through his employment of setting. The valley of ashes is “nowhere,” a place to be driven through on the way to the “somewhere” by characters from both East and West Egg. It is here that Myrtle Wilson is “run down like a dog” by Daisy Buchanan.

Careless drivers become a metaphor for the demoralized world of wealth and privilege inhabited by people such as the Buchanans. Early on, Nick accuses Jordan Baker of being a “rotten driver,” two drunks get into an accident at one of Gatsby’s parties, and, finally, Daisy kills Myrtle with an automobile and leaves the scene of the crime.

Though *The Great Gatsby* is obviously a product of a post-World War I era, the novel still retains thematic significance. *The Great Gatsby* might be interpreted as a warning not only to Fitzgerald’s generation but to future generations as well. Beware of pursuing that “orgiastic future” with too much fervor; one might well be destroyed by it, just as Gatsby is.


First published in 1925, *THE GREAT GATSBY* was not a commercial success; both *THIS SIDE OF PARADISE* and *THE BEAUTIFUL AND THE DAMNED* outsold it by a margin of more than two to one during Fitzgerald’s lifetime. Initial reviews were mixed; a few critics—and some of Fitzgerald’s fellow-novelists—immediately appreciated what he had achieved. By the time of his death, in 1940, the novel was largely forgotten.

As sometimes happens in the curious business of literary reputations, Fitzgerald’s death prompted a revival of interest in his work. In 1941, *THE GREAT GATSBY* was reissued, bound in a single volume with the unfinished novel *THE LAST TYCOON*, which was being published for the first time. A year later, *THE GREAT GATSBY* was reissued on its own, and several reprints followed in the 1940’s. By the 1950’s, it was widely regarded as one of the major novels of its period.

Today, GATSBY is almost universally acknowledged as an American classic. It is one of those exceptional books that survive both inside and outside the classroom; it’s also a novel that writers continue to read with profit, as interviews with many contemporary American novelists attest.

All the more important, then, to have a text that is as accurate as possible. The term “critical edition” may suggest a volume so dense with textual apparatus as to be unreadable. In this instance, however, Matthew Bruccoli (an eminent bibliographer and biographer who has published extensively on Fitzgerald) has made readability a high priority. The volume begins with an introductory essay by Bruccoli, followed by a clean corrected text of the novel. The end matter includes not only a list of emendations and textual notes, of interest primarily to specialists, but also explanatory notes clearly intended for students—all this and more in a compact, well-designed volume.
Evaluation of the textual decisions made by Bruccoli and the late Fredson Bowers, who served as a consultant on the project, will have to await the considered judgment of scholars. The underlying philosophy of the edition—to make the fruits of textual scholarship available to the widest possible readership—is only to be applauded.

Bibliography:


**Critical Essays: The Great Gatsby (Critical Survey of Contemporary Fiction)**

The narrator of the story is Nick Carraway, who has moved to New York from the Midwest. He rents a house in the town of West Egg, Long Island. Across the bay, in the more respectable East Egg, live his cousin Daisy and her wealthy, overbearing husband Tom Buchanan, whom Nick knew at Yale.

The most interesting character he meets, however, is his next-door neighbor, a mysterious rich man known as Jay Gatsby. After attending a lavish but ostentatious party at Gatsby’s estate, Nick slowly becomes his one true friend. He discovers that Gatsby has long loved Daisy, and that he has dedicated his life to winning her from Tom. Gatsby (ne Gatz) has tried to make himself into the kind of sophisticated man he feels Daisy deserves, but his money has come from gambling and other underworld activities.

Nick recognizes the impossibility of Gatsby’s dream but admires the inspired romantic imagination that has thus reshaped his life. Following the inevitable failure of Gatsby’s quest, Nick returns to the Midwest, appalled at the sordidness and waste found beneath the alluring surface of the good life.
A perfectly constructed book, the novel is a masterpiece of narrative style. Nick reflects Fitzgerald’s conflicting attitudes toward the wealthy, whom he found both glamorous and destructive. The book is also a testament to the power of the creative will to overcome, at least for the moment, the despair of everyday life.

Bibliography:


Critical Essays: Critical Overview

Just before *The Great Gatsby* was to appear—with a publication date of April 10, 1925—the Fitzgeralds were in the south of France. Fitzgerald was waiting for news from Max Perkins, his publisher, and cabled him to request “Any News.” The 29-year-old author had won critical acclaim for his first novel, *This Side of Paradise*, but had faltered with the less-than-perfect *The Beautiful and the Damned*. He was earnest about being considered one of the top American writers of his time, and needed the boost that his third novel might give him to achieve that status.

During his lifetime, Fitzgerald was generally praised for *The Great Gatsby*; it is usually considered to be his finest accomplishment and the one most analyzed by literary critics. The established opinion, according to biographer Arthur Mizener in *The Far Side of Paradise*, is best represented by renowned critic Lionel Trilling: “Except once, Fitzgerald did not fully realize his powers…. But [his] quality was a great one and on one occasion, in *The Great Gatsby*, it was as finely crystallized in art as it deserved to be.” *Saturday Review* critic William Rose Benét said that the book “revealed matured craftsmanship.” Even harsh critics like Ernest Hemingway and H. L. Mencken praised the writer, as quoted by Mizener. Said the notoriously abrasive Mencken in a letter to the author: “I think it is incomparably the best piece of work you have done.” Nevertheless, he qualified this compliment with a complaint that the basic story was “somewhat trivial, that it reduces itself, in the end, to a sort of anecdote.” Ring Lardner liked it “enormously” but his praise was too
thin, for Fitzgerald's tastes: "The plot held my interest … and I found no tedious moments. Altogether I think it's the best thing you've done since Paradise." Some of the initial reviews in newspapers called the book unsubstantial, since Fitzgerald dealt with unattractive characters in a superficially glittery setting. His friend, Edmund Wilson, called it "the best thing you have done—the best planned, the best sustained, the best written.” All reviews, good and bad, affected Fitzgerald deeply.

From an artistic perspective, Fitzgerald's third novel was as close to a triumph as he would ever get. Financially, however, the book was a failure since he was over $6200 in debt to Scribner's, his publisher, and sales of the book did not cover this by October of 1925. By February, a few more books were sold and then sales leveled out. The summer of 1925 for Fitzgerald was one of “1000 parties and no work.” His drinking continued to affect his work. For the rest of his life, nothing he wrote quite measured up to Gatsby. In fact, when he walked into a book shop in Los Angeles and requested one of his books, he discovered they were out of print.

In the early 1950s, Fitzgerald's works began to enjoy a revival; in addition to Gatsby, Tender Is the Night, with its psychological bent, appealed to readers. Critics found similarities between Fitzgerald and English poet John Keats and novelist Joseph Conrad. Joseph N. Riddel and James Tuttleton analyzed American-born novelist Henry James's impact on Fitzgerald, since both men wrote about the manners of a particular culture. Gatsby was compared to T. S. Eliot's poem The Waste Land and to Ernest Hemingway's novel The Sun Also Rises. The mythic elements of the novel have been studied by Douglas Taylor, Robert Stallman, and briefly by Richard Chase in The American Novel and Its Tradition.

Symbolism in Gatsby focuses on Dr. T. J. Eckleburg's eyes, the Wasteland motif, and the color symbolism. Gatsby has ironically been likened to Christ, and Nick Carraway, the storyteller, to Nicodemus, in a Christian interpretation of the novel. Relatively speaking, most of Fitzgerald's short stories have been sorely neglected by critics, though a steady stream of critical comment appears every year. It has been difficult for critics to detach Fitzgerald the writer from Fitzgerald the legend. Sociological, historical, and biographical approaches to teaching literature have predominated in past decades. Now, more attention is being given to a close reading of Gatsby for its artistry.

**Essays and Criticism: Three Themes in The Great Gatsby**

Whilst The Great Gatsby explores a number of themes, none is more prevalent than that of the corruption of the American dream. The American dream is the concept that, in America, any person can be successful as long he or she is prepared to work hard and use his natural gifts.

Gatsby appears to be the embodiment of this dream—he has risen from being a poor farm boy with no prospects to being rich, having a big house, servants, and a large social circle attending his numerous functions. He has achieved all this in only a few short years, having returned from the war penniless.

On the surface, Fitzgerald appears to be suggesting that, whilst wealth and all its trappings are attainable, status and position are not. Whilst Gatsby has money and possessions, he is unable to find happiness. Those who come to his home do not genuinely like Gatsby—they come for the parties, the food, the drink and the company, not for Gatsby. Furthermore, they seem to despise Gatsby, taking every opportunity to gossip about him. Many come and go without even taking the time to meet and few ever thank him for his hospitality. Even Daisy appears unable to cope with the reality of Gatsby’s lower class background. Gatsby is never truly one of the elite—his dream is just a façade.

However, Fitzgerald explores much more than the failure of the American dream—he is more deeply concerned with its total corruption. Gatsby has not achieved his wealth through honest hard work, but through
bootlegging and crime. His money is not simply ‘new’ money—it is dirty money, earned through dishonesty and crime. His wealthy lifestyle is little more than a façade, as is the whole person Jay Gatsby. Gatsby has been created from the dreams of the boy James Gatz. It is not only Gatsby who is corrupt. Nick repeatedly says that he is the only honest person he knows. The story is full of lying and cheating. Even Nick is involved in this deception, helping Gatsby and Daisy in their deceit and later concealing the truth about Myrtle’s death. The society in which the novel takes place is one of moral decadence. Whether their money is inherited or earned, its inhabitant are morally decadent, living life in quest of cheap thrills and with no seeming moral purpose to their lives. Any person who attempts to move up through the social classes becomes corrupt in the process. In Gatsby’s case this corruption involves illegal activities, for Myrtle it is an abandonment of others of her own background.

A parallel theme of the book is that of love and its fleetingness. There are no stable relationships in the book. Daisy and Tom’s marriage has been damaged by affairs from early in its life. Soon after their honeymoon Tom has been caught out, when a hotel chambermaid is injured in a car crash where he is the driver. By the time the novel begins, Daisy is well aware of Tom’s regular affairs, seeming to suffer in silence until Gatsby offers her a way out. Myrtle’s relationship with Tom is no stronger, obviously based on a physical attraction, especially on the part of Tom, who has little time for Myrtle outside the bedroom. Myrtle appears to be loved by Wilson, but is unhappy in this relationship, apparently because he is unable to provide materially for her, although his actions in the latter part of the book suggest his love may be oppressive, causing her to seek escape even before the last events.

Other characters in the book are no more successful in relationships. Nick, the narrator, is unable to make commitments in his relationships. One of his reasons for coming East has been to escape a potential engagement. He has a brief affair in New York, which he ends when there are signs of commitment, and he cannot commit to Jordan either. Jordan herself has had no lasting relationship, discarding men when she has no further use for them—Nick’s rejection of her provides her with ‘a new experience.’ Partygoers are seen fighting with spouses or else attend with mistresses or lovers.

Only Gatsby seems capable of lasting love—his love for Daisy is unshaken till the end. Yet this love is unrealistic—based not only on a relationship started on a lie, but also needing a turning back of time to make it complete. At times even Gatsby himself seems to realize that the reality is not as good as his dream has been.

In the end we meet the only person capable of true love in the final chapter. It is Mr Gatz, Gatsby’s father, who has an unshaken love for his son, believing in him to the end, and blind to his failings as only a parent can be.

A third theme in the novel is that of optimism. It is Gatsby’s almost unwavering optimism that guides him through life. His belief that dreams can true has been with him since a lad, and the dream represented by the green light on Daisy’s dock holds incredible promise for him. Even when the dream starts to unravel, when Daisy’s feelings have wavered as his past is revealed, Gatsby remains optimistic. He does not take his chance to leave the area, certain that Daisy will come back to him. In this way his untimely death is merciful—his life has so long been based on a dream that Daisy’s desertion would have been crippling to him. In closing, Nick realizes that what Gatsby did not see was that his dream was already behind him—his opportunity had been missed and could not be recaptured.

**Essays and Criticism: Major and Minor Characters in The Great Gatsby**
Daisy Buchanon

Daisy was born Daisy Fay in Louisville, Kentucky, a daughter of Louisville society and Nick Carraway’s cousin. Like the flower for which she is named, Daisy is delicate and lovely. She also shows a certain weakness that simultaneously attracts men to her and causes her to be easily swayed. Daisy’s weakness influences the major points of the story, and she is responsible, if not intentionally, for the novel’s tragic ending.

Daisy first met Jay Gatsby in 1917, when he was stationed at Camp Taylor in Louisville. The two fell in love quickly, and Daisy promised to remain loyal to Gatsby when he shipped out to join the fighting. Two years later, she married Tom Buchanon because he bought her an expensive necklace, with the promise of a life of similar extravagance. Daisy is definitely distracted by wealth and power, and despite her husband’s unfaithfulness, she insists she still loves him because of his influence.

Gatsby is another matter entirely. Although she left him because he couldn’t provide for her the way Tom could, she retained some glimmer of emotional connection to him. When Gatsby finally professes his love over tea, she responds positively. But is she renewing an old love, or manipulating Gatsby? The novel doesn’t give us any clear idea.

Daisy is described in glowing terms in the novel, although her value seems to be connected to monetary value. In chapter 7, for example, Nick and Gatsby have the following famous exchange:

“‘She’s got an indiscreet voice,’” I remarked. “‘It’s full of —’” I hesitated.

“Her voice is full of money,” he said suddenly.

That was it. I’d never understood before. It was full of money—that was the inexhaustible charm that rose and fell in it, the jingle of it, the cymbals' song of it…. High in a white palace the king’s daughter, the golden girl…. (120)

Daisy is an ideal, and Fitzgerald gives her the qualities to not only live up to that ideal but to also bring it crashing down around her. Daisy’s myth is as big as Gatsby’s, at least in Gatsby’s mind; like him, she took the necessary opportunities to make herself what she wanted to be. Tom takes good care of her financially and is even jealous when he realizes, in chapter 7, that Gatsby is in love with his wife. Later, Nick clears up at least part of the mystery Daisy presents: “She was the first ‘nice’ girl he’d ever known” (148; ch. 8). Nick’s use of quotes for the term “nice” shows that Daisy hardly fits the ideal image Gatsby invests her with.

Like money, Daisy promises far more than she is capable of providing. She is perfect but flawed, better as an image than as a flesh-and-blood person. Daisy was in large part based on Fitzgerald’s wife, Zelda, who he both worshipped and distrusted. Daisy’s money is her protection, her power, and her defense against any accusation that might come her way.

When Myrtle Wilson is killed by Daisy’s careless driving, she hides behind both money (in the form of Tom and Gatsby) and Gatsby’s love. Gatsby is the only true witness, but he takes the blame for her. Rather than renew their month-long affair, Daisy disappears into her opulent house, retreating into the only security she knows. She continues her almost ghostly existence, leaving the men in her life to clean up the mess.

Daisy’s confused sense of loyalty is evident in her disappearance before Gatsby’s funeral—she and Tom move away almost immediately, leaving no forwarding address for Nick or anyone else. An even bigger insight is Daisy’s infrequent mentions of her own daughter, who is only briefly discussed in the first chapter and in chapter 7. The child is nothing more than an afterthought, as she is unable to give Daisy anything but love, which she has in abundance. Daisy is incapable of caring for her infant—one assumes a governess or...
nanny takes care of her—any more than she is able to truly love Tom or Gatsby. She doesn’t love them as men, it seems, but as sources of revenue.

Daisy is capable of affection. She seems to have some loyalty to Tom, and even a certain devotion to Gatsby, or at least to the memory of their earlier time together. However, like money, Daisy is elusive and hard to hold onto. This may explain why Tom and Gatsby fight over her in chapter 7 as if she were an object:

“Your wife doesn't love you,” said Gatsby. “She's never loved you. She loves me.”

“You must be crazy!” exclaimed Tom automatically.

Gatsby sprang to his feet, vivid with excitement. “She never loved you, do you hear?” he cried. “She only married you because I was poor and she was tired of waiting for me. It was a terrible mistake, but in her heart she never loved any one except me!” …

“Sit down, Daisy,” Tom's voice groped unsuccessfully for the paternal note. (130-131)

The tone of the argument seems almost like that of two men fighting over the pot in a poker game. Daisy is a prize, and she seems to see herself in those terms. In this sense, Daisy is far from what one would call a “feminist” character; rather, she is a symbol of shallow beauty, and of the amoral worlds of both East and West Egg.

Jay Gatsby
In the first two chapters of the novel, its title character is a mystery—a wealthy, fun-loving local celebrity with a shady past who throws lavish weekly parties. On the surface, Gatsby is an example of the American Dream in the 1920s, the desire for wealth, love and power.

As the novel progresses, we see Gatsby more as a man than a mythical figure, and we discover that the myth of the “Great Gatsby” (as in the “Great Houdini,” an escape artist of the time) is created by Gatsby himself. He is truly a “self-made man, a fiction whose past and obsessions finally destroy him.

Jay Gatsby was born James Gatz, the son of a poor farmer in North Dakota. From an early age, Gatz was aware of his family’s poverty, and he swore he would attain the wealth and sophistication his childhood lacked (including, apparently, a fake British accent). Once out of high school, Gatz changed his name to Jay Gatsby and attended St. Olaf’s College to begin his climb to the distinction he craved. Unfortunately, Gatsby had to take a janitor’s job to pay his tuition; he left St. Olaf’s in disgust after two weeks.

Gatsby’s true education came at the hands of Dan Cody, an older man who teaches him the ways of the world in 5 years aboard Cody’s boat, the Tuolomee, on Lake Superior. Cody, a hard drinker and womanizer, was Gatsby’s role model more in teaching him what not to do. Gatsby rarely drinks, and is distant at his own lavish parties. He wants the success Cody achieved without the destructive habits that success afforded him.

After Cody died at the hands of a mistress, Gatsby joined the army and World War I. While stationed in Louisville, Kentucky, in 1917, Gatsby met a young Daisy Fay, a daughter of Louisville society. Gatsby fell in love with Daisy, lied about his background, and vowed to someday be good enough to win her heart. Gatsby believed Daisy’s promise to wait for him, but he returned to Louisville as she and Tom were on their honeymoon. Devastated, Gatsby went to Oxford in English for the education that would complete his transformation from poor farm boy to famous (or infamous) socialite.

Gatsby’s only true dream is Daisy’s love; the parties he gives at his lavish West Egg mansion are purely to lure her to him the way he stares at the green light from her dock late at night. He begs Nick to set up a
rendezvous with Daisy for him, which Nick does. Their love rekindles for a short time, and Gatsby’s unrealistic view of Daisy as the picture of perfection is renewed. It is this view that eventually causes Gatsby’s death.

In a confrontation at the Plaza Hotel, Tom openly accuses Gatsby of criminal activities, including bootlegging. Tom knows about Gatsby and Wolfsheim’s “drugstores” that sell illegal grain alcohol, as well as other, more mysterious crimes. Gatsby handles the accusation with cool calm, but is devastated by Daisy’s assertion that she does indeed love her husband.

In a last-ditch effort to prove his love to Daisy, Gatsby takes the blame when she accidentally hits Myrtle Wilson in Gatsby’s car. Tom Buchanon tells Myrtle’s husband, George, that Gatsby was driving the car, hinting that the two may have been having an affair. At this point, the Gatsby myth returns full force, as an enraged, jealous Wilson shoots Gatsby dead, then kills himself.

Jay Gatsby dies that night, and James Gatz along with him, anonymous and alone. Gatsby’s obsession with Daisy causes him to lie his way to his standing in the community, lie about his life, and lie to protect Daisy from a fate that is transferred to him. Despite all that Jay Gatsby does, James Gatz lies just beneath the surface, simply wanting to be loved. The other activities are meaningless compared to the month he spends as Daisy’s lover. An authentic Jay Gatsby might be too detached, too crafty, to get caught up in Myrtle Wilson’s death, but James Gatz can’t hope to distance himself from one last charitable act—trying to protect the woman he loves. Gatsby can easily be seen as a negative character—a liar, a cheat, a criminal—but Fitzgerald makes certain we see the soul of James Gatz behind the myth of Jay Gatsby.

Gatsby/Gatz is in fact a tragic character motivated by love. He is also hopelessly flawed, a shadow that is incapable of a life without Daisy, even if she’s only living across the lake.

Fitzgerald ties Gatsby up with the American Dream, a dream of individualism and success with a purpose. Like the America of the 1920s, Gatsby loses sight of his original dream and replaces it with an unhealthy obsession—for the country, the pursuit of wealth for its own sake; for Gatsby, a sense of control over Daisy as evidence by both him and Tom in the Plaza Hotel. Gatsby is symbolic of a nation whose great wealth and power has blinded it to more human concerns.

Gatsby’s Romantic idealism, which Nick calls “some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life” (2; ch. 1), is all that drives him, and no enterprise that enables him to get what he craves is too extreme. In this sense, Gatsby could be considered more amoral than immoral—morality simply has no meaning for him so long as he makes his dream come true. Everything is simply a means to an end, and Gatsby represents those for whom the end is the only thing that is important.

**Nick Carraway**

Nick is the narrator of the novel; the story is told in his voice and through his perceptions. It has also been suggested that Nick may be the character F. Scott Fitzgerald based most closely on himself. In a sense, then, Nick may show Fitzgerald’s own opinions of wealthy, immoral characters like Gatsby.

Nick is a good Midwestern boy who attended Yale and moved to New York in 1922 to work in the bond market. He is well-positioned to narrate this story—he is Daisy Buchanan’s cousin, went to Yale with Tom Buchanan, and rents the house next door to Gatsby’s. From his vantage point, Nick can see everything that goes on. What’s more, he’s the kind of guy that people want to tell their stories—and their secrets—to.

Nick tells us in the first chapter that his father cautioned him about judging people: “‘Whenever you feel like criticizing any one,’ he told me, ‘just remember that all the people in this world haven’t had the advantages that you’ve had’” (1). Nick tries to follow his father’s advice; he acts as a sounding board for the other
characters, particularly Gatsby, and as they confide in him, we learn more about their lives.

There is debate over whether Nick is a Reliable Narrator—this is, if he tells us the whole truth about what he sees, hears, and experiences. In the beginning of the novel, Nick certainly seems reliable. But as he says, tolerance of others “has a limit” (2, ch. 1). Gatsby represents everything Nick hates about the East, with its emphasis on money and status and its lack of morality. For some reason—perhaps because he’s fascinated by Gatsby in the beginning, then friends with him despite Gatsby’s crimes—Nick extends his limit, learning more about both the East and himself in the process.

As much as Nick hates about the East, he experiences internal conflict about the things he does like. The fast pace of New York and the focus on having fun intrigues him; as a Midwesterner, he knows his limits, unlike those surrounding him. He is driven to have fun at Gatsby’s weekly parties and to “burn his candle at both ends,” but he also wants to maintain the organized, simple lifestyle he knows from back home.

His relationship with Jordan Baker also couldn’t happen anywhere but in New York. When he meets her in chapter 1, Nick remembers “some story of her too, a critical, unpleasant story, but what it was I had forgotten long ago” (18). His forgetfulness seems to come from his close attention to her—“I enjoyed looking at her. She was a slender, small-breasted girl, with an erect carriage, which she accentuated by throwing her body backward at the shoulders like a young cadet” (11). He goes on to describe the last rays of daylight “deserting her with lingering regret” (14) and the “autumn-leaf yellow of her hair” (17). The atmosphere of West Egg enables Nick to forget whatever he’s heard about Jordan when he watches her and listens to her frank opinions. He becomes infatuated quickly.

Daisy determines to fix Nick and Jordan up, and tells Jordan Nick will look after her. Nick doesn’t protest. It’s at this point that we hear about Nick’s fractured romance out West—or so Daisy believes. Nick tells us that he dated a friend and that the rumors of their marriage drove him to leave. Nick is careful about revealing personal details of his past, a bit like Fitzgerald himself. He does let us know he is disgusted and touched at the same time that Daisy would even care about his failed relationship.

In chapter 3, Jordan becomes Nick’s “date” for a party after he drinks too much in embarrassment over asking where Gatsby is (which is, apparently, not a good idea, even at Gatsby’s party). They wander the grounds, chatting with other party guests (including Jordan’s real date, an anonymous undergraduate) until “the scene had changed before my eyes into something significant, elemental, and profound” (47). This night also marks the first time Nick meets Gatsby. It seems that Nick equates Jordan and Gatsby in his mind; in a sense, his farewell to Gatsby the night of the broken wheel could be a “kiss goodnight” from Jordan.

Later in the chapter, Nick sees Jordan again, after she has become a golf champion. He admits that “I wasn’t actually in love, but I felt a sort of tender curiosity” (57). He follows that observation with another—“She was incurably dishonest” (58). We will discover along with Nick later in the novel that Gatsby is also “incurably dishonest”; however, these characters are the ones Nick feels drawn to. Nick says, “I am one of the few honest people that I have ever known” (59), almost as if honesty is a failing compared to Jordan and Gatsby.

Nick grows closer and closer to Gatsby as the novel progresses. He learns, first through Jordan then from Gatsby himself, that Gatsby’s only goal in life is to be reunited with Daisy. Nick then finds himself in the same position Daisy claims she is in with Jordan and himself—except in this case, the matchmaking is meant to be serious. This makes Nick understandably uncomfortable, as his Midwestern upbringing taught him marriage was sacred; also, knowing Gatsby as well as he does, he doesn’t seem sure that he’d want Gatsby marrying his cousin.

Gatsby does gallantly take the blame for Daisy’s car accident, causing more internal conflict for Nick. Tom lies to Wilson, which results in Gatsby’s death. Nick is surrounded by deceit and violence, and he is disgusted
by it. He determines that Gatsby, for all his faults, may be the only person he knows with any character at all. This, too, throws Nick into confusion. He arranges a small funeral for Gatsby and ends his relationship with Jordan; in a sense, Nick can’t have a relationship with someone he associates so closely with his friend.

At the novel’s end, Nick moves back to the Midwest to escape the disgust he feels for the people surrounding Gatsby’s life and for the emptiness and moral decay of life among the wealthy on the East Coast. He comes to a realization about that life: “I see now that this has been a story of the West, after all—Tom and Gatsby, Daisy and Jordan and I, were all Westerners, and perhaps we possessed some deficiency in common which made us subtly unadaptable to Eastern life” (176).

This is the point where Fitzgerald and his opinions speak the most clearly through Nick. Just as Gatsby's dream of Daisy was corrupted by money and deceit, the American dream of happiness and individualism has fallen apart, replaced by the mere pursuit of wealth. Nick, who was in awe of Gatsby's power to transform his dreams into reality, realizes that the dream—for Gatsby and for America—is over, and no power in the world can bring it back.

Nick’s character develops from a relatively objective observer to a full participant in the action of the novel, both physically and emotionally. As a result, perhaps his reliability as a narrator changes as well. How much of the other characters’ actions and reactions are just observed, and how much is filtered through Nick’s perceptions of them? His promise to his father at the beginning is compromised by the reality around him. The “advantages [he’s] had” were the simple adherence to a code that doesn’t apply to New York or to the world of Jay Gatsby. When he loses those advantages, Nick returns to find what he has lost.

**Tom Buchanan**

Unlike Gatsby, who is a sort of tragic figure, Tom Buchanan is just a bully. He played football at Yale, where he attended with Nick Carraway, and he also comes from a wealthy Midwestern family. Tom is a big brute of a man who uses both his physical and financial “superiority” to get what he wants.

Tom’s sense of fragile superiority is evident from chapter 1, in which he mentions a book he has read called “Rise of the Colored Empires.” Tom says, “‘The idea is if we don’t look out the white race will be—will be utterly submerged. It’s all scientific stuff; it’s been proved!’” (12-13). Tom’s life is comfortable and secure as long as he remains in control. Anything he doesn’t control is a potential threat to his power.

Tom is having an ongoing affair with Myrtle Wilson, whose husband George runs a garage in the Valley of Ashes. Tom maintains an apartment for Myrtle in New York City (he takes Nick to the apartment in chapter 2), but he is also physically abusive. Ironically, although Tom is having an open affair, he becomes enraged when he discovers that Daisy and Gatsby have renewed their love affair.

In typical fashion, Tom brings his wife’s affair with Gatsby out in the open at the Plaza Hotel by asking “What kind of row are you trying to cause in my house anyway?” The fact that he is himself having an affair is unimportant; Gatsby is causing trouble in his house, with his wife—essentially, his property. Tom verbally beats down both Gatsby and Daisy until his wife acknowledges she loves him. It doesn’t matter whether Daisy loves him; Tom simply must be the victor. He is what we might call an “Alpha Male” today—a man who must be in charge at all times, and who jealously guards his “possessions,” including his wife and mistress.

Fitzgerald consciously makes Tom—the Antagonist of the novel—without one redeeming quality. Tom’s outright evil helps make Gatsby a more sympathetic character despite his actions. Gatsby has committed crimes, but he has a good heart; Tom is a “model citizen,” but he has no heart to speak of. Fitzgerald forces us to ask ourselves, which is worse? Tom represents the decadence of 20th Century America for Fitzgerald—pure, unadulterated power tempered by nothing.
Tom seems to show no sadness at all when his mistress is killed, by his wife of all people. He takes Myrtle’s death as an opportunity to get back at Gatsby once and for all by telling George Wilson Gatsby was driving the car that killed his wife, and that he was the one having an affair with Myrtle. Tom “wins,” but at what price? He whisked Daisy off to an unknown location, leaving Nick to clean up the mess they’ve made. He even bullies Nick into shaking his hand and considering the possibility that Tom’s behavior could be justified.

Tom’s hypocrisy is his calling card. Fitzgerald seems to be sarcastically celebrating Tom in a way as a new “antihero” who has no interest in Romanticism or morality, only in cold, hard cash. Most of the characters in West Egg could be considered amoral—they simply have no place for traditional morality in their lives or activities. Tom is an exception; he is immoral, in the sense that he looks morality in the eye and rejects it. He is aware of his cruelty, and he seems to revel in it.

Tom is a pivotal character in the novel not only in his direct opposition to Gatsby but also in his relationship with Nick. Nick sees Tom for what he is, but like everyone else, he is too intimidated to do anything about it. Tom’s actions, particularly at the end, prompt Nick to return to the Midwest to the values he grew up with.

Minor Characters
Each of the minor characters in The Great Gatsby has a specific role to play in the unfolding of the story and in the relationships between the main characters; many offer symbolic touchstones to “fill out” Fitzgerald’s symbolic landscape:

Jordan Baker
Jordan functions as the opposite of Daisy Buchanan—she is a fully liberated woman of the 20s. A professional golfer, Jordan has a brief affair with Nick, which seems to go nowhere. Jordan is presented as a dishonest person who will do anything to win, including alleged cheating in a golf tournament. Jordan’s amorality is a bit more cynical than the other West Eggers’; she adopts whatever morals seem to fit her current situation.

Jordan’s most important role in the novel is that of a go-between; she introduces Nick to Gatsby, and as Daisy’s close friend, she fills in gaps in Nick’s (and our own) knowledge of Daisy. Fitzgerald (through Nick) refers to Nick’s relationship with Jordan in only the briefest of terms. This seems to serve two functions: to show how shallow relationships in West Egg are, and to provide a cool comparison to the affair between Gatsby and Daisy.

Myrtle Wilson
Myrtle, who Fitzgerald describes as “sensuous” and “vital,” is Tom Buchanan’s mistress. She is married, unhappily, to George Wilson, who owns a garage in the Valley of Ashes. Myrtle functions as an emotional foil for Daisy (Myrtle is far more emotional, and more willing to show it) and as a catalyst for the novel’s ending. After a fight with George over his suspicion of an affair, Myrtle runs into the street, only to be hit and killed by Gatsby’s car, with Daisy at the wheel.

George Wilson
George Wilson is a mechanic who expects little, especially from his wife Myrtle. He is content with his simple life (as content as his wife is not content) until he suspects Myrtle of having an affair, possibly with Tom. George’s primary function in the novel is to kill Gatsby; when Tom Buchanan suggests that Myrtle is having an affair with Gatsby and that Gatsby was driving the car that kills her, George kills Gatsby, then commits suicide.

Meyer Wolfsheim
Wolfsheim is a “business associate” of Jay Gatsby’s, and a well-known Mafioso. He is an allusion to Al Capone and other 20s gangsters, a mixture of criminal activity and refinement. In addition to allegedly
“fixing” the 1919 World Series, Wolfsheim owns a number of “drugstores” with Gatsby that are actually fronts for bootleg grain alcohol. Ironically, he is one of the few characters who knew Gatsby to express regret upon Gatsby’s death.

**Henry Gatz**
Henry Gatz is the father of James Gatz (aka Jay Gatsby), an elderly man who has been dependent on Gatsby for his livelihood. Gatz appears briefly in the novel to show Gatsby’s compassionate side, and his dedication to improving himself and his life.

**Dan Cody**
Cody takes on a young James Gatz and shows him what “the other side of life” is all about. Gatz takes on the name “Jay Gatsby” when he meets Cody, and uses Cody’s example, both positive and negative, in forming his new identity.

**Michaelis**
Michaelis puts the “Minor” in “Minor Characters.” He is a Greek neighbor of the Wilsons who tries to console Wilson after Myrtle’s death. He runs the coffee shop beside the ash heaps and is the principal witness at the inquest.

**Catherine**
Catherine is Myrtle Wilson’s sister. She lives in New York City and receives a visit from Nick, Tom and Myrtle. She appears after her sister’s death very drunk and says nothing, which seems to be uncharacteristic for her.

**The McKees**
The McKees are Catherine’s neighbors in New York. He is in “the art game”; They are fixated on social status and fashion, and they provide Nick with a glimpse into the Myth of Jay Gatsby.

**Ewing Klipspringer**
Ewing Klipspringer is Gatsby’s boarder, who appears briefly.

**Owl Eyes**
“Owl Eyes” is a guest at Gatsby’s regular parties who wrecks his car in a ditch, a foreshadowing of the novel’s ending. He is one of the few who attend Gatsby’s funeral. He seems to be a longtime acquaintance of Gatsby’s, perhaps knowing more about him than the others.

**Party Guests**
The guests, none of whom have names, are identified by their clothing or their social status. They function as “human scenery” to develop the environment of Gatsby’s parties.

**Dr. T. J. Eckelburg**
Dr. Eckelburg, or rather his eyes on a billboard, appear as a sort of observer to the events of the novel, perhaps in contrast to Nick as he becomes more and more of a participant than an observer.

---

**Work Cited**

---

**Essays and Criticism: Critique of American Upper Class Values**
The Great Gatsby is known as the quintessential novel of the Jazz age. It accurately portrays the lifestyle of the rich during the booming 1920s. Readers live vicariously through the lavish parties and on the elegant estates. Romantics relate to Gatsby’s unrelenting commitment to Daisy, the love of his life. But beneath all the decadence and romance, The Great Gatsby is a severe criticism of American upper class values.

Fitzgerald uses the book’s central conflict between Tom Buchanan and Jay Gatsby to illustrate his critique. Tom is the incarnation of the upper class, Gatsby the nouveau riche. The contrast between them demonstrates the differences between the values of their respective classes. In this essay we will examine the upper class myths of lineage, institutional education, manners, and wealth. One by one, Fitzgerald strips away the illusion of superiority to reveal the ugly truth behind the glittering façade of the rich.

**Myth #1: The Importance of Lineage**
For the “old” (inherited) money crowd, family lineage is often the first, and perhaps most important, indicator of class rank. This theme runs through the entire novel. Tom’s old Chicago family is “enormously wealthy.” In fact, “his position” was what attracted Daisy to him. And he adamantly argues his racial superiority during the opening scene. But his lineage does not translate into anything worthwhile. The Buchanans never see their families. The core of their own family, their marriage, is a shambles—Tom cheats and Daisy’s miserable. And their daughter seems irrelevant to their lives.

Gatsby, on the other hand, is of unknown background. Rumors circulate that he is related to everyone from the Kaiser to Satan. Eventually we learn that Gatsby comes from a humble, midwestern family. He grew up poor. Ironically, the Gatsby (or Gatz) family provides the only examples of familial love. We learn that Gatsby bought his father a house, and his father cannot hide his emotion, his affection, and his admiration for his son in the final chapter.

**Myth #2: The Importance of Institutional Education**
Institutional education—where you go to school—holds an important place in class structure. Nick points out that he, his father, and Tom Buchanan attended New Haven, the discreet name for Yale, an institution that ranked with Harvard and Princeton as the school of the elite. However, Tom’s attendance at one of the nation’s finest universities does little to develop his “simple mind.” At one point he even admits to being “pretty dumb.” His crude attempts at intellectualism, for example his “scientific” explanation of the decline of civilization caused by “The Rise of the Colored Empires,” only serve to reveal a dangerously thin understanding of the world.

By contrast, Gatsby’s claim to institutional learning is sketchy. Whether or not Gatsby is a true “Oxford man” recurs throughout the story as a source of controversy. In fact, Tom considers a major victory Gatsby’s revelation that his affiliation with the prestigious English school was only temporary. But despite his lack of formal education, we understand Gatsby to have a focused, intelligent mind. He literally pulls himself up from poverty to the heights of wealth through discipline and brains.

**Myth #3: The Importance of Manners**
Savoir faire, knowing what to do, and good manners, are qualities often attributed to the upper class. In fact, some elitists believe that this is how well-bred people distinguish themselves from others. Ironically, the most “well-bred” characters in the novel are often the worst behaved. Tom is the best example. Despite his breeding, he is abrupt, constantly rude, and even violent. In Chapter 2, he breaks his lover’s nose when she annoys him—an impolite action even in the most philistine circles.

Here again, manners highlight the difference between the classes. The low-born and self-made Gatsby is always the perfect gentleman. Even when his rival, Tom, stops by with his two snooty friends, he maintains his impeccable hosting ethic. And while his manners may come off as too stiff and formal, he is nonetheless portrayed as kind and considerate throughout. The narrator, Nick, goes so far as to call his gestures
“gorgeous.”

**Myth #4: The Importance of Wealth**
The fourth myth associated with the upper class involves the preeminence of wealth. Fitzgerald goes to great lengths to describe Tom’s tremendous wealth, his estate, his cars, his polo ponies. But Tom’s wealth comes off as worthless. He is mean and stingy, and we never see him share his unearned fortune. In fact, it’s just the opposite. He denies the impoverished George Wilson one of his extra cars, despite Wilson’s desperate pleas.

On the contrary, the newly rich Gatsby spends his money freely. Stories of Gatsby’s generosity abound. He provides food, drinks, entertainment, and even shelter to hundreds of people, even those he did not invite. In one instance, he replaced a guest’s expensive evening gown that she accidentally tore at one his parties. And unlike Tom, who receives money from his family, Gatsby generously gives money to his aging father.

By establishing the conflict between Tom and Gatsby, Fitzgerald mirrors the conflict between the upper and upwardly-aspiring classes in America. Fitzgerald’s characterizations and the narrator’s commentary criticize the rich throughout the book. Tom Buchanan, with his lineage, education, breeding and wealth, epitomizes the upper class. But by the end of the story, we realize that these qualities are empty. In one sweeping condemnation, Nick proclaims to Gatsby, “They’re a rotten crowd…. You’re worth the whole bunch put together” (154, ch. 8). Fitzgerald finally and skillfully destroys the upper class claim to superiority.

**Work Cited**

**Essays and Criticism: Fitzgerald's Use of the Color Green**

It is arguable that Jay Gatsby values two things above all others—love (particularly his love for Daisy Buchanon) and money (the means by which he hopes to win Daisy’s heart). The two motivations converge in Fitzgerald’s use of the color green, a symbol that represents both love and money as well as Gatsby’s ultimate goal—a spring-like renewal that would put his past behind him and plant the seeds for a future with Daisy. Fitzgerald shows green in its many incarnations, from the promise of a new bud to the decay of a stagnant pond, as Gatsby’s dream progresses from a dim light in the distance to the reality of lovely illusions left in ruins.

Our first glimpse of green in the novel comes in the first chapter, as Nick stumbles upon Gatsby with his arms outstretched toward “a single green light, minute and far away, that might have been the end of a dock” (21). The light marks the end of the Buchanons’ pier, and the beginning of Gatsby’s green hope. He stands, stares and reaches out to the light as if reaching out to Daisy herself. At this point, even with all the money and power at his disposal, he can’t directly address the object of his affection; the light represents what could have been and what could be.

By chapter 4, green takes the recognizable form of money, or at least the things money can buy. As described by Nick, the car is cream-colored and bright. The upholstery, however, the car’s center and the point at which is connects with the people inside, is a deep green, “a sort of green leather conservatory” (64). What better than a “green leather conservatory” for watching stars, particularly the bright green star across the bay? Even Gatsby’s car is a reminder of Daisy, and of her place in his universe. He buys the car to impress her if he can, and the green leather interior is a nod to decadent consumption as well as a symbol of the evolution Gatsby must undergo to make his dream a reality.

The color green’s connection to nature, growth and renewal first appears in chapter 5 as Nick prepares for Gatsby and Daisy’s rendezvous at his house. Gatsby not only sends flowers to impress Daisy, he has a
“greenhouse” shipped in (84). The word “greenhouse” suggests incubation, like the love Gatsby has let incubate as he built his fortune. Having convinced Daisy to meet with him, Gatsby wants her surrounded with fresh greenery to symbolize the renewed love he hopes their interlude will inspire.

A few pages later, as Gatsby dazzles Daisy with his freshly laundered seasonal shirts, Fitzgerald slips in an apple-green one. This lighter green foreshadows a crucial light green later in the novel, and alludes to the Adam and Eve story in the Bible. Perhaps Fitzgerald wants us to see Daisy as an Eve figure, tempting Gatsby back in Louisville to bite the apple that led to his criminal activities, opening him up to decadence and deceit in the name of love. Also, the green of money (the expensive shirts), the green of renewal (the apple), and the green promise at the end of Daisy’s pier coincide in this brief but important scene. (92)

Immediately following the apple reference, Gatsby tells Daisy that he has been watching the light at the end of the dock. He has Daisy in his hands, literally, and he reconsiders his attachment to the light. From here the color green begins to take on a different cast as Fitzgerald shows us the underside of love, money and renewal. Compared to the physical presence of Daisy,

Possibly it had occurred to him that the colossal significance of that light had now vanished forever…. It had seemed as close as a star to the moon. Now it was again a green light on a dock. His count of enchanted objects had diminished by one. (93)

Green is no longer an enchanted color for Gatsby, and Fitzgerald’s references change accordingly. “Now it was again a green light on a dock” today might read, “Now it was nothing more than a green light on a dock.” Reality shows itself, and for that moment, the reality is what Gatsby has been seeking since his own transformation years earlier.

A flashback shows James Gatz in “a torn green jersey and a pair of canvas pants” (98; ch. 6), just prior to beginning his life as Jay Gatsby. The jersey is significant both because it symbolizes the green renewal Gatz experiences and because it is torn; Gatsby will pay dearly for the rebirth and wealth he seeks. From the moment his transformation takes place, the die is cast for Gatsby’s fall. Fitzgerald allows his green references to wither as well, parallel to Gatsby’s own slow demise. The cynicism typical of the Jazz Age also intrudes; the idealism that led Gatsby to remake himself for such a simple dream can’t be allowed in a world with no place for idealism, where green means only money, and the more, the better.

Tom accompanies Daisy to one of Gatsby’s parties in chapter 6. Daisy’s attitude has already changed; she tells Nick she is passing out green cards for kisses. Why are the cards green? Perhaps to celebrate her own small renewal—the beginning of a new relationship with Jay Gatsby and his fortune. Green cards suggest green paper—dollars, perhaps—and Fitzgerald seems to be saying that Daisy may be willing to trade her love for money. In the end, after all, she chooses the stability of Tom’s “old money” to Gatsby’s “new money,” in a sense preferring the security of a more comfortable faded green than the possibility of a brighter, more ambitious green.

The birth of love and the death of love can both be represented by the color green, and Fitzgerald seems to be suggesting that they are intertwined as he moves toward the end of the novel. In a brief reference in chapter 7, George Wilson, suffering from both the heat and from suspicion of his wife’s infidelity, gasses up Tom’s car. Fitzgerald tells us, “In the sunlight his face was green” (123). Wilson is literally sickened by his situation, and the destruction of his marriage cascades into the novel’s other relationships. By the end of the book, everyone’s face is figuratively as green as George’s.

George’s wife Myrtle is killed later in chapter 7, and the first thing Michaelis, the Wilsons’ neighbor, tells the police is that the “death car” is light green. Later reports suggest a blue or yellow car. Just as yellow and blue make green, Myrtle’s blood mingles with the dust in the Valley of Ashes (137).
Fitzgerald breaks green down into its component colors cleverly, possibly suggesting that the other couplings in the novel are as tainted as Myrtle’s blood in the road. This blurring takes the pinpoint of green light in chapter 1 and stretches it into a world that has no place for it, one in which the purity suggested by the light must coexist with darker forces. By Fitzgerald’s reckoning, there is no purity in the world of the Jazz Age; the green light is a symbol not only of the past, but of a past that may never have existed, both in Gatsby’s life and in American life in general.

By the novel’s final chapter, both Myrtle and Gatsby are dead, the Buchanons and Jordan have disappeared, and Nick prepares to leave as well. Before leaving, he returns to “that huge incoherent failure of a house once more” (179). He considers the place and its once-proud heritage: “I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors’ eyes—a fresh, green breast of the new world” (180).

Green has become a sad color for Nick and for Fitzgerald; long before Gatsby, the verdant land of Long Island represented something new and fresh, a true renewal. Once the desire for other “green,” particularly money, came into the mix, Fitzgerald suggests the possibility for purity and rebirth, and finally love, prove unattainable.

In the last paragraph of the novel, as in chapter 1, the green light appears, bringing the symbolism full circle. Nick says Gatsby “believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us” (180). With the events of the novel behind him, Nick reiterates the fact that the light Gatsby counted on and followed was, as Gatsby saw in chapter 5, no more than a green light. Gatsby invests a great deal of hope and love in the color green throughout the novel; at the end green is simply green, as magical and powerful as Gatsby’s apple-green shirts, which can’t hold Daisy’s interest long enough to make her stay.

Fitzgerald’s use of the color green in The Great Gatsby reflects the arc of Gatsby’s dream—in the beginning it is fresh, bursting with desire and imagination as if his dream were a newly blossoming flower. As reality sets in—the irritants of attitude and deceit and the collision of damaged lives—the green fades, or it weathers like a sick face. Finally, the same bright green of the past becomes no more than a memory, and not necessarily a clear one.

Gatsby’s green hope rests on the light at the end of Daisy’s dock more than the reality of Daisy, past or present. She proves herself to be not the fulfillment of his dream, but as elusive and uncertain as the flickering green glow barely visible across an expanse of water. Gatsby dies pursuing that light, blinding himself to the other colors that exist all around him.

Work Cited

Essays and Criticism: Romance and Cynicism in The Great Gatsby

On one level, The Great Gatsby is a romantic novel, or at least romance-driven. The central story of Jay Gatsby’s undying hope for the love for Daisy Buchanon, offers a romantic ideal, and the couple’s brief affair almost reads like a fairytale romance.

The secondary relationship between Nick Carraway and Jordan Baker takes on a “Boy Meets Girl” quality—Nick is fascinated by Jordan, and he certainly catches her attention. On the surface, Gatsby and Nick seek a perfect love; in Fitzgerald’s Jazz Age world, both men’s desires are hopelessly bound up in the cynicism fostered by the rapid changes taking place in American society. As such, both men’s romances are doomed to fail in the face of cynicism.
From the moment he meets a young Daisy Fay, Jay Gatsby is in love. The only glimpse the author gives us of the couple’s interaction is through the voice of Jordan Baker, who sees Daisy and Gatsby sitting together in Daisy’s car: “The officer looked at Daisy while she was speaking, in a way that every young girl wants to be looked at some time, and because it seemed romantic to me I have remembered the incident ever since” (75; ch. 4)

We get no details of the romance between the two, but there must have been quite a romance; Jordan relates Daisy’s insistence on going to New York to “say good-by to a soldier” (75; ch. 4), alienating her family and leaving her trapped at home. Also, Jordan helps a very drunk Daisy sober up before her wedding after a letter (presumably from Gatsby) causes her to “‘change’ her mine” (76; ch. 4).

Flash-forward to the green light on Daisy’s dock; even five years of distance and a soggy, unanswered letter haven’t cooled Gatsby’s love for Daisy, or his desire to be worthy of her love. But as genuine as Gatsby’s desire may be, he takes shortcuts to get to the top and earn Daisy’s attention. Fitzgerald layers his main character’s supposedly pure love with cynicism toward the world and toward his own potential. This cynicism threatens to taint Gatsby’s love even as he fights to acquire his lovely prize.

Gatsby becomes a criminal and concocts an elaborate cover, hiding in plain sight at his regular, lavish parties. The parties also provide an elaborate lure for Daisy, who now lives just across the Sound. Gatsby has no faith in his ability to win Daisy on the strength of their younger love; the cynicism of the 1920s has set in, and he can’t trust Daisy’s motivations or his own.

Even after Nick arranges a secret meeting for the two at his house, Gatsby is furtive and terrified. It’s difficult, perhaps, to believe that a love based on a false identity can survive, much less be rekindled. He is frightened, uncertain, embarrassed, and cynical about the possible outcome of his trust. Only when Nick criticizes him for “‘acting like a little boy’” (88; ch. 5) does Gatsby decide to act on his true feelings.

Gatsby’s gamble seems to pay off—although we are again not privy to the conversation between himself and Daisy, its conclusion is obvious. Gatsby “literally glowed” (89, ch. 5), as if believing his romantic intentions toward Daisy could defeat the cynicism all around them, not to mention her marriage and his criminal past.

Nick and Jordan’s romance begins as casually as Gatsby and Daisy’s must have back in 1917. When they first meet, Nick “enjoyed looking at her” (11; ch. 1), then describes her as a potential lover would. Daisy encourages them twice—the first time she tells them “‘it’s very romantic outdoors’” (15; ch. 1), as if motioning for them to enjoy the romantic night. The second time (the same evening at the Buchanons’ house) Daisy seems to be pushing the romance of the outdoors on them:

“In fact, I think I’ll arrange a marriage. Come over often, Nick, and I’ll sort of—oh—fling you together…. Her family is one aunt about a thousand years old. Besides, Nick’s going to look after her, aren’t you, Nick?” (18; ch. 1)

This playful exchange comes after what may be the most honest thing Daisy says the entire evening: “‘I’ve had a very bad time, Nick, and I’m pretty cynical about everything’” (16; ch. 1).

Daisy puts the constant tension between romantic ideal and cynical reality into words without even realizing it; then again, her worldview places the two on an equal footing. Fitzgerald seems to suggest that Daisy’s attitude is a common one in both East and West Egg. As such, neither can truly exist without the influence of the other, inevitably leading to disaster.

Romance surfaces again, as, even after an argument over Jordan’s reckless driving, she reveals what she knows about Gatsby. Nick is attracted to Jordan, but his attraction may be because of what she represents to
him—a Midwesterner who has internalized the cynical nature of the scene:

Suddenly I wasn’t thinking of Daisy and Gatsby any more, but of this clean, hard, limited person, who dealt in universal skepticism, and who leaned back jauntily just within the circle of my arm. A phrase began to beat in my ears with a sort of heady excitement: “There are only the pursued, the pursuing, the busy, and the tired.” (79; ch. 4)

They kiss amidst Fitzgerald’s skillful trick of making cynicism romantic, acceptable, even sexy.

Nick’s initial attraction shifts from the possibility of romance in the traditional sense to the cynic’s resignation to a “good match.” Like very character in the novel except Gatsby, Nick seems incapable of the emotional depth required for true romantic love; to compensate, he accepts the first substitute that presents itself.

In chapter 7, Fitzgerald illustrates the inevitable consequence of the marriage between the romantic and the cynical. The Plaza Hotel suite unravels any romance the group might have hoped for. Tom and Gatsby argue over Daisy as if she were a polo pony rather than the object of romantic desire:

“She never loved you, do you hear?” [Gatsby] cried. “She only married you because I was poor and she was tired of waiting for me. It was a terrible mistake, but in her heart she never loved anyone except me!” (130)

Gatsby appeals to Daisy’s romantic side, the girl from Louisville with dreams of a perfect life; Tom appeals to her sense of reality, the cynical reality that would enable Daisy to live in the manner to which she had become accustomed. Daisy succumbs to the lure of reality; her heart, after all, is far less important than security in a world that values security and success above all else.

The same day, Nick turns 30, but he can only see his relationship with Jordan in terms of earlier events: “There was Jordan beside me, who, unlike Daisy, was too wise ever to carry well-forgotten dreams from age to age” (135; ch. 7).

Now Nick, so naïve and full of romantic hope in the beginning of the novel, equates Jordan’s cynicism and skepticism with wisdom. Dreams like Gatsby’s longtime dream for love are part of the “well-forgotten” past of a world in which dreams have little of no value. Cynicism in Gatsby’s world is a mix of practicality, skepticism and distrust that governs everyone’s actions in their pursuit of success to the exclusion of any other motivation.

Nick’s desire for Jordan cools, and after Myrtle’s death he avoids her along with the rest of the group. Finally they talk, and Jordan reveals that she is engaged. Unemotional about the announcement, Nick isn’t sure that he believes her, but he acknowledges he is “half in love with her” (177; ch. 9) as he leaves her. To save face, Jordan claims that she was wrong about Nick’s honesty. Nick responds, “‘I’m thirty…. I’m five years too old to lie to myself and call it honor’” (177; ch. 9).

Jordan’s cynicism is thus validated—she believed Nick was too good to be true, and that turned into a self-fulfilling prophecy. Nick’s response is at once an acknowledgement of his failure to escape the cynicism of his surroundings and an expression of his desire to return to the more naïve, romantic world of the Midwest.

Fitzgerald presents romanticism and cynicism in the Jazz Age as two sides of the same coin, and as two forces that can never be reconciled. The Buchanons and Jordan never seemed to have had dreams beyond attaining success and status; Gatsby’s dreams prove to be his undoing; and Nick’s dream of success in New York dissolves into a cynical mess he can only escape by leaving.
Through these lives, Fitzgerald seems to be telling us that romantic ideals are impossible in early 20th-Century America, that they are a relic of a bygone era. He also appears to mourn that era, throwing all his characters into a world where no one can trust anyone else and no good deed goes unpunished.

Work Cited

**Essays and Criticism: Fitzgerald's Distinctly American Style of Writing**

One of the simplest yet most profound reasons *The Great Gatsby* is considered an American classic is its use of language, more particularly the emerging “American Idiom.” Writers of the 20s and beyond sought to find a way of using English that was more than simply a rehash of the great British writers, a style of writing that was distinctly American. Fitzgerald not only tapped into the “American Idiom,” influencing writers to come, but elevated the language above street slang and regional distinctions into a truly artistic form that reflects the high and low of American society. The beginning and ending passages of the novel clearly illustrate the way Fitzgerald creates a uniquely American expression from the basic building blocks of the English language.

The beginning of the novel sets the bar immediately, as Fitzgerald speaks with Nick’s voice, a “typical Midwesterner” with, one would assume, a typically Midwestern accent:

> In my younger and more vulnerable years my father gave me some advice that I’ve been turning over in my mind ever since.

> “Whenever you feel like criticizing any one,” he told me, “just remember that all the people in this world haven’t had the advantages that you’ve had.”

> He didn’t say any more, but we’ve always been unusually communicative in a reserved way, and I understood that he meant a great deal more than that. In consequence, 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. Most of the confidences were unsought—frequently I have feigned sleep, preoccupation, or a hostile levity when I realized by some unmistakable sign that an intimate revelation was quivering on the horizon; for the intimate revelations of young men, or at least the terms in which they express them, are usually plagiaristic and marred by obvious suppressions. Reserving judgments is a matter of infinite hope. (1-2)

One of the first features that stands out in this passage is Nick’s almost conversational tone. Fitzgerald freely uses contractions and independent clauses separated by commas and articles like “and so” and “because.” Here, the sentences retain much of the length common in the British novel, but what may be the most resonant sentence in the first chapter—“Reserving judgments is a matter of infinite hope”—is remarkably short in comparison. The short sentences that characterize the work of Hemingway and generations to follow weave into *Gatsby*, usually to set off particular ideas as important ones.

Fitzgerald’s figurative language in the opening passage is similarly reserved, but equally telling. Nick is faced with “veteran bores,” and “privy to the secret griefs of wild, unknown men,” and he is aware of “intimate revelation[s] quivering on the horizon.” And of course, one of the central themes of the novel revolves around the idea of “infinite hope.” The notion of “reserving judgment” is skewered as well in Nick’s comparison...
between “normal” and “abnormal” minds; in fact, the entire section devoted to reserving judgment passes judgment on “wild, unknown men” by describing them in figurative terms.

Fitzgerald opens the novel strongly, asserting Nick’s unique voice through his informality and hints that he is hardly as fair-minded as he would like to be. Through language alone, Fitzgerald is able to establish Nick as an unreliable narrator. In essence, Nick betrays himself before the novel even begins.

As one might expect, the ending passage of The Great Gatsby builds on the language—voice, tone, figurative devices—used throughout the novel. It also expands on them as the story expands beyond the confines of Long Island. Just before Nick boards the train to return to the Midwest, he visits the beach at Gatsby’s house one last time:

Most of the big shore places were closed now and there were hardly any lights except the shadowy, moving glow of a ferryboat across the Sound. And as the moon rose higher the inessential houses began to melt away until gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors’ eyes—a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby's house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder.

And as I sat there brooding on the old, unknown world, I thought of Gatsby's wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of Daisy's dock. He had come a long way to this blue lawn, and his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night.

Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter – to-morrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther…. And one fine morning—

So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past. (180)

In this long passage, Fitzgerald develops a much broader metaphor, one that is perhaps appropriate to the major characters of The Great Gatsby and their experiences. The Midwestern transplants themselves are “Dutch sailors” of a sort, and their experience of New York was undoubtedly as magical when they first arrived. Their wonder, coupled with a focus on the “inessential houses … melt[ing] away,” provide an excellent, sly recap of the novel’s themes—the Dutch sailors’ wonder is substituted for Gatsby’s wonder at the green light on Daisy’s dock, and (in a nice bit of juxtaposition) Gatsby’s dream is as dead and long-past as the trees that the sailors enjoyed, and which were cut down to build Gatsby’s house. In a sense, Gatsby was the architect of his own demise, as are we all. Fitzgerald expertly builds comparison upon comparison to make this point.

As in the opening of the novel, this passage makes extensive use of independent clauses connected by commas and articles, but additional punctuation—dashes and ellipses—added to the mix. Like Emily Dickinson in Poetry, Fitzgerald allows his punctuation to make the piece “breathe.” The result is the illusion of shorter, more distinctive sentences, which inevitably leads to others’ use of the shortest sentences possible. Fitzgerald opens a door for writers to experiment with sentence length, and with the possibilities of different rhythms that could in retrospect be called American.
The language in the conclusion is actually elevated beyond that used in the introduction. The passage itself is longer and more dramatic, the scene is wispy and almost unreal, and Fitzgerald’s language choices allow a shift from a more conversational tone to a more refined, almost poetic expression. The conversational tone had been used in the writings of Mark Twain; in using it, Fitzgerald was merely adopting popular nineteenth century American style. However, by elevating the language at the end, by appealing to something more, he leaves us hanging on his last words. Indeed, the last sentence—in fact one long sentence “chopped up” by punctuation as described above—is one of the best-known sentences in American literature.

Fitzgerald used The Great Gatsby as a vehicle for his ideas on social change and corruption; along the way he changed the way Americans write novels. By using genuine American language, he was able to truly show American life and its concerns even in a story that could best be described as a sort of twentieth-century allegory. Fitzgerald’s experiments in the music of American language worked, and his literary descendants continue to explore the linguistic ground he laid at the beginning of the century.

Work Cited

Essays and Criticism: The Jazz Age

The Great Gatsby’s most obvious reference to “The Jazz Age” revolution taking place in American Arts in the 1920s occurs in the party scene in chapter 3:

“Ladies and gentlemen,” [the orchestra leader] cried. “At the request of Mr. Gatsby we are going to play for you Mr. Vladimir Tostoff’s latest work … Vladimir Tostoff’s Jazz History of the World.” (Fitzgerald 49)

Gatsby’s request for a work that defies tradition, and certainly defeats the purpose of having a full symphony-sized orchestra on the grounds, is in fitting with his character. He himself has defied tradition, becoming a “self-made man” regardless of his methods; is it any wonder his choice of music would reflect both the “newness” of his money and the means by which he came to it?

The spirit of recreation and renewed vision echoes through the art of the period, particularly in its music. It makes sense that such music would provide a background for Gatsby’s story. Like Jay Gatsby, composers and musicians of the 1920s charted new territory for themselves, changing the American musical landscape as drastically as Gatsby’s transition from the starkness of North Dakota farmland to the glitz of a West Egg mansion.

Fitzgerald experienced a similar transition just spending time around the burgeoning New York Jazz Scene, according to Arnold Shaw: “Riding down Fifth Avenue one day in the 1920s F. Scott Fitzgerald ‘bawled’ because, he later said, ‘I had everything I wanted and knew I would never be so happy again’” (Shaw 3). He and his wife Zelda were fixtures in Jazz Age social circles, and Fitzgerald was well-qualified to talk about not only the new music of the time but also the decadence that often accompanied it.

Prior to the 1920s, mainstream American music mostly consisted of folk tunes—nothing less tame than Scott Joplin’s Ragtime piano pieces. The emphasis was on everyday people learning to play for themselves and their families and friends at home. By the twenties, the humble (and recent) tradition of the Mississippi Delta bluesmen had begun to filter through the “hot towns” of Chicago and Kansas City, producing a potent music not everyone could play. The relatively new phonograph and radio allowed previously regional music like the blues to be heard nationwide, creating the first Jazz Age stars. The bands of Bix Beiderbecke, Tom Brown, and Joe “King” Oliver introduced the hybrid music to young New York society, who immediately embraced
it. As the music grew more popular, jazzmen like Louis Armstrong and Jellyroll Morton became household names.

The big band, as it came to be known in the 1930s and 40s, also began during this period, under the direction of Fletcher Henderson, Duke Ellington, Paul Whiteman, and others. The big band differed from its large ensemble predecessors by playing complex arrangements of familiar tunes, displaying the talents of not only the entire band but also of fiery soloists like Armstrong, Coleman Hawkins and Benny Carter.

Had jazz stayed in bars and dance clubs, it may have disappeared as ragtime and the other styles of music that preceded it; thanks to Paul Whiteman’s foresight, the music would endure through the efforts of a young composer named George Gershwin. Whiteman staged a show on February 12, 1924, that featured the premiere of Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue* with the composer himself on piano. Both the jazz and “serious music” camps sat up and took notice. By successfully merging traditional symphonic themes and instrumentation with the energy and familiar American quality of jazz, Gershwin had made jazz into a serious art form, and its influence spread even further (Shaw 47-53).

As Gershwin was merging the worlds of jazz and orchestral music (possibly the source for Fitzgerald’s “Jazz History of the World”), musicians and writers in Harlem, New York, were emerging as important fixtures in American artistic life and history. Writers Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, Jean Toomer, and their peers injected their work with the new strains of blues and jazz; Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown experimented with blues lyric forms in their poetry. Harlem was the place to be, and both black and white artists from all art forms were influenced by its energy, derived from a proximity to jazz.

Change was in the air, and the Broadway stage was not immune. Out of the decadence and protofeminism of the time (Think Jordan Baker from *Gatsby*) came the revues of Florenz Ziegfeld and his contemporaries. The revues were not story-driven, but contained a variety of entertainment forms—music, comedy, and particularly half- or mostly nude women, for which Ziegfeld became famous. Ziegfeld’s Folies revived and “elevated” the earlier Vaudeville theatre and provided a showcase for legendary figures like composer Irving Berlin (“A Pretty Girl is Like a Melody,” 1919), comedian Eddie Cantor, and singers like Fannie Brice (Shaw 232-35).

George White and John Murray Anderson’s shows aspired to the level of sophistication Ziegfeld had mastered. White’s *Scandals* ran successfully into the 1930s; Anderson is perhaps best known for employing Cole Porter before Porter became a star in his own right (Shaw 236-39).

Irving Berlin was a triple threat—he wrote both music and lyrics, and after breaking away from Flo Ziegfeld, he became a producer himself. His Music Boxes produced such hits as “Say It With Music,” “Everybody Step,” “What’ll I Do,” and the ubiquitous “Yes, We Have No Bananas.”

Richard Rodgers and Moss Hart, along with Berlin and Jerome Kern, carried the changes begun in their revues well beyond the decade. Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II’s *Show Boat*, Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *Oklahoma!* and *Annie Get Your Gun* all originated in the atmosphere created in the Jazz Age (Shaw 254-56).

Vincent Youmans’ name might be absent from an accounting of the Jazz Age if not for his singular hit *No! No! Nanette* and its centerpiece “Tea for Two.” *Nanette*, the only true “flapper” musical, best captures the spirit of the 1920s with its decadent nature, vibrant atmosphere, and changing roles for men and women. *Nanette* is still performed today, keeping a small part of the Jazz Age alive onstage.

Fitzgerald’s exposure to the music of his time fuels not only Gatsby’s parties, but the general feel of the novel. Mayer Wolfsheim recalls the growl of Louis Armstrong and hard Chicago Jazz; *Gatsby* is a cross between a plaintive blues and an elaborate big band arrangement; Jordan is the embodiment of *Nanette* in the play of the
same name, and Tom and Daisy conduct their lives as if they are part of an ongoing musical theatre piece. Nick is the emcee, or even an old-style troubadour, commenting on the “acts” and observing their behavior as Fitzgerald did from his convertible. Like Fitzgerald, Nick becomes caught up in the music of the time and his rendering of it seems accurate but flawed.

*The Great Gatsby* works on a number of levels. On one level, it is a jukebox of 1920s hit songs and themes. In this sense, Fitzgerald’s commentary also preserves his music in the unmistakable flavorings of both story and style. On another level, the Jazz Age influences Fitzgerald’s storytelling to a point at which his objectivity is brought into question. This heavy influence is one of the novel’s saving graces; in its refusal to be totally “objective,” the novel shows the 1920s, and America, as it really is.

**Works Cited**


**Essays and Criticism: The Theme of Time in The Great Gatsby**

Time is one of the most pervasive themes in *The Great Gatsby*, weaving between characters and situations, slowing and speeding the action until the entire novel seems almost dreamlike. Fitzgerald not only manipulates time in the novel, he refers to time repeatedly to reinforce the idea that time is a driving force not only for the 1920s, a period of great change, but for America itself. We will see Fitzgerald also turns a critical eye to the American concept of time, in effect warning us all to avoid becoming trapped in time.

**The Past**

Fitzgerald strongly connects time in the novel with location, as if time were an entire setting in itself. Fitzgerald tips his hand early; after Nick provides a description of himself and what we assume are his motives in coming to New York, he makes an immediately important time reference: “Across the courtesy bay the white palaces of fashionable East Egg glittered along the water, and the history of the summer really begins on the evening I drove over there to have dinner with the Tom Buchanans” (5; ch. 1)

Nick wants to relate the “history” of the summer, not its events, its characters, or “just” a story. This is to be a history, events frozen in time and examined and re-examined. Nick sets the stage for the novel’s treatment of time—despite the often frivolous characters and situations, this story bears more than a superficial reading. The Eggs gain enough historical importance to rival New York City itself. Fitzgerald shrinks his focus to a geographical area while simultaneously expanding its meaning in time.

The past plays a major role, perhaps the most major role, in the concept of time presented in *Gatsby*. Tom was a “Big Man on Campus” in the past, while Gatsby was both a poor farm boy and Daisy’s lover; Daisy was a flighty socialite with no family to tie her down; all of them were naïve Midwesterners whose lives, they now believe, were far better in a past they can’t help but romanticize. It is precisely this romanticizing of the past that enables Fitzgerald to write such a powerful novel—in allowing his characters to wallow around in their pasts, he reminds later generations of readers that neither the 20s nor his books should be romanticized. They should be taken for what they are, and made relative to the present day. The (possibly unintentional) consequence of this attitude is an audience that extends beyond the twentieth century.

**Characters**

Fitzgerald’s characters are not only obsessed with time, they seem to embody it. Tom Buchanan is obsessed with history, reading books like “The Rise of the Colored Empires” that offer historical explanations for his
inability to rise above the life he lives. Tom is Old Money, hopelessly stuck in the past, trying to live up to his ancestors’ wealth by amassing his own. He can never recapture his youth, so he seeks to recreate the excitement of those days by having a mistress on the side.

Daisy, too, is stuck in the past, a pre-feminist remnant of an age in which women were expected to act “a certain way.” She tolerates Tom’s affair, and stands out in stark contrast to Jordan Baker’s contemporary “flapper” persona. Daisy is as confined as Jordan is liberated, and she can’t live a life without a man to run it for her. Her true complication comes when two opposite aspects of her past—Tom and Gatsby—compete for her affection. In each, she sees qualities lacking in the other. For a woman who is defined by men, her own definition of herself comes into question.

Myrtle Wilson seems to have a fairly solid definition of herself, and she and her husband George are fully in the present. Living in the Valley of Ashes, they can’t help but see the world as it is, as it goes by the windows of their garage. Myrtle is usually willing to put up with the complications of seeing a married man in exchange for the material possessions George can’t give her. However, when she complains in her “secret” apartment in the city, the past literally smacks her in the face. Presumably, George would never do that to her, devoted as he is. That devotion, and the reality of his situation, causes George to snap at the end of the novel.

Gatsby, of course, the victim of George’s misplaced rage, represents the future. His past is colorless and best forgotten; James Gatz got to where he is in the beginning of the novel by focusing on the future and building toward it, by any means necessary. He desperately wants to make Daisy part of his future (He is, after all, building it to share with her, which hopelessly entangles his past with his future.), but she can’t commit to his far-reaching vision. Gatsby’s world falls apart when he realizes the future he envisions simply can’t happen.

Nick’s progression as a narrator provides a yardstick by which the other characters’ relationships to time can be measured. In the beginning, he is purely a product of his Midwestern past; by the time he acclimates himself to New York and meets Myrtle Wilson, he is very much in the present. At the end of the novel, Nick must reconcile his own future by returning to the site of his naïve past a wiser, more jaded person. Nick, in this sense, shares all the other characters’ perspectives of time, allowing us to watch time unfold.

**Images**

Fitzgerald uses a number of repeated images to represent time in *Gatsby*; one of the most telling is the clock in chapter 5. Gatsby and Daisy are meeting at Nick’s house for the first time, and the three are sharing an awkward conversation:

> Gatsby, his hands still in his pockets, was reclining against the mantelpiece in a strained counterfeit of perfect ease, even of boredom. His head leaned back so far that it rested against the face of a defunct mantelpiece clock, and from this position his distraught eyes stared down at Daisy, who was sitting, frightened but graceful, on the edge of a stiff chair.

> “We've met before,” muttered Gatsby. His eyes glanced momentarily at me, and his lips parted with an abortive attempt at a laugh. Luckily the clock took this moment to tilt dangerously at the pressure of his head, whereupon he turned and caught it with trembling fingers, and set it back in place. Then he sat down, rigidly, his elbow on the arm of the sofa and his chin in his hand.

> “I'm sorry about the clock,” he said.

> My own face had now assumed a deep tropical burn. I couldn't muster up a single commonplace out of the thousand in my head.
“It's an old clock,” I told them idiotically.

I think we all believed for a moment that it had smashed in pieces on the floor. (86-87)

The clock is a symbol of many things—Gatsby’s dream of having Daisy for himself, Daisy’s hope for a better life, Nick’s desire for the dramatic change that never comes, or even just their lives slowly ticking away. When Gatsby almost breaks it, the moment is shattered. None of the three characters will be the same again after the clock drops. Gatsby becomes uncharacteristically clumsy around Daisy, who has no idea what to say or do. Nick, too, is at a loss, coming up with something “idiotic” to say just to keep the conversation moving. The last line, though, foreshadows the ending of the novel: “I think we all believed for a moment that it had smashed in pieces on the floor.” In this one moment, past, present and future all seem to meet and crash together in an impossible explosion of emotion and loss. From here, all is downhill.

In a very important sense, The Great Gatsby is all about time—its effects on people, its importance in our lives, and most particularly its status in the American consciousness. We see time in a linear fashion—broken up into discrete units for appointments, life plans, meetings and goals. Fitzgerald shows us lives all along that line, perhaps suggesting that the most successful American life is one that should see time in more flexible terms. As such, Nick may be seen as the only true successful character in the novel, as he is able to move across the various timelines, interact with the characters who inhabit them, and retain his sense of self in the end. Nick, as it turns out, is not a slave to time. Fitzgerald seems to be encouraging his readers to break their own chains and take the time to enjoy the lives they have while they have them.

Work Cited

Essays and Criticism: Jordan Baker, a Soldier in the Culture War

From a modern-day perspective, The Great Gatsby’s Jordan Baker seems a bit ordinary—a typical modern woman. To the novel’s original audience, however, Jordan’s behavior and attitude place her one step away from scandal. In 1926, many parts of the United States were relatively unaffected by the changes occurring in large urban centers like New York City; Fitzgerald’s main characters are displaced “Midwesterners” for precisely this reason. Publication of The Great Gatsby brought the changes in the air in the twenties to the rest of the nation, through their own eyes. Jordan represents one of the most extreme examples of these changes—the proto-feminist known as a flapper.

“Women’s Suffrage,” as early women’s movements were known, had been around since the nineteenth century. When the Nineteenth Amendment, giving women the right to vote, was passed in 1920, activists moved into other arenas to fight for full recognition by American society. One of the arenas was the social arena. Flappers could hardly be called “activists,” as their activities and attitudes were more mainstream than politically radical. In changing fashion and the way a woman’s morality was perceived, flappers had more influence on society than their more radical sisters.

Birkbeck College of London feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey has studied flappers as depicted in 1920s silent films. According to her, flappers were “shocking to the conventional and conformist” and “an integral part of the culture wars” of the decade. Characterized by short haircuts, short skirts, and feathers in their hair, flappers nevertheless “raised serious questions about women living independently, about sex and the right to be able to control your own body” (Mulvey). Jordan Baker is very similar to silent films’ “It Girl,” Clara Bow, and may have been based on her.
When Nick first meets Jordan, he knows she is different:

She was extended full length at her end of the divan, completely motionless, and with her chin raised a little, as if she were balancing something on it which was quite likely to fall…. I was almost surprised into murmuring an apology for having disturbed her by coming in…. Miss Baker's lips fluttered, she nodded at me almost imperceptibly…. Again a sort of apology arose to my lips. Almost any exhibition of complete self-sufficiency draws a stunned tribute from me. (Fitzgerald 8-9)

Jordan is confident and intimidating; Nick has never met such a girl. He discovers she’s a professional golfer, and they begin an odd, detached relationship that is heavily overshadowed by that between Gatsby and Daisy. Their detachment (at least “on-screen”), and Jordan’s independence, is truly realized when the couple parts in the novel’s final chapter. Jordan informs Nick that she’s engaged to another man, then ensures that he understands she is still very much in charge of the situation:

“Nevertheless you did throw me over,” said Jordan suddenly. “You threw me over on the telephone. I don’t give a damn about you now, but it was a new experience for me, and I felt a little dizzy for a while.” (Fitzgerald 177)

We see very little detail of Nick and Jordan’s relationship, save a passionate kiss at the end of chapter 4, but Fitzgerald seems to suggest that the two are more than casual friends. But, in stark contrast to Daisy, Jordan isn’t interested in being a man’s inferior. Her independence both attracts and intimidates Nick, an impossible conflict he is unwilling to resolve any other way than by leaving.

In creating Jordan Baker, Fitzgerald presents a “soldier” in the “culture war” of the 1920s. She and others like her began by influencing fashion and defying social norms against smoking, drinking and sex, then grew to influence women’s attitudes and ideas nationwide. By exposing American women to the flapper in the person of Jordan Baker, Fitzgerald helped influence generations of women readers to aspire to more than Daisy Buchanan’s quiet surrender.

Works Cited


Essays and Criticism: George and Myrtle Wilson

George and Myrtle Wilson are generally considered minor characters in The Great Gatsby, as they have less “screen time” than any of the major characters. However, both characters are pivotal to the events of the novel; without them, the major characters’ interactions would read like a soap opera, and not a very interesting one. The Wilsons add an additional layer of substance by placing the major characters into perspective, by showing the lows to which both the upper and lower classes can sink.

Myrtle Wilson immediately distinguishes herself from both Daisy and Jordan, at least through Nick’s eyes: “She was in the middle thirties, and faintly stout, but she carried her surplus flesh sensuously as some women can. Her face, above a spotted dress of dark blue crêpe-de-chine, contained no facet or gleam of beauty, but there was an immediately perceptible vitality about her as if the nerves of her body were continually
smouldering” (25; ch. 2).

If Daisy personifies upper-class delicacy and Jordan represents the detached, hedonistic flapper, Myrtle is the lower-class Earth Mother, soft and alluring— forbidden fruit for an elitist like Tom Buchanan. She offers Tom entry into a world he would otherwise be unable to enter, a world that is far more real than his own, and he offers her a fantasy in return, as evidence by the apartment in New York.

It is Tom, though, who acts in a “lower class” fashion in the apartment, bloodying Myrtle’s nose for even mentioning Daisy’s name. He, in effect, switches classes because his carefully-constructed fantasy world is threatened by the intrusion of the real. Myrtle is a catalyst, influencing Tom’s actions even when she is absent because of her allure and her audacity, qualities that would be completely foreign to his wife.

Myrtle’s death is the climax of the novel, in the sense that her death triggers the events that lead to the novel’s conclusion with lives changed, ruined, and ended. Tom reacts by disavowing all knowledge of her existence and lying about the hit-and-run driver’s true identity, Daisy by deferring to her husband, and Jordan by simply disappearing. Nick reacts with horror, but it is a horror mingled with the detachment of a good man who has been jaded by his proximity to the other characters.

George Wilson reacts by committing the only intentionally cruel act depicted in the novel—he kills Gatsby, believing that Gatsby was not only the man driving the car that killed Myrtle, but Myrtle’s lover as well. Overcome with rage and grief, George turns the gun on himself. Nick’s narration of the final scene is telling—“It was after we started with Gatsby toward the house that the gardener saw Wilson's body a little way off in the grass, and the holocaust was complete” (162; ch. 8).

Nick uses the word “Holocaust” to describe George’s actions for a reason. He remembers the man who he had earlier described as “a blonde, spiritless man” (25; ch. 2); the man who, discovering Myrtle was having an affair, shouted, “‘You may fool me but you can’t fool God!’” (159; ch. 8); the man who literally hunted Gatsby down and shot him in cold blood by the swimming pool. The word “holocaust” can refer to a burned offering, a sacrifice; George sacrifices his spirit, his belief, and finally himself for his wife and their life together. It is no coincidence that a man who lives in the Valley of Ashes would bring so many burnt offerings into the lives of all concerned.

George Wilson’s emotion, like his wife’s, is genuine throughout the novel. Like Myrtle, George is simple and passionate, with a genuineness that comes from being a member of the lower classes. George can’t afford to “put on airs” as the other men in the novel do. Unlike Myrtle, George has no desire to join any other societal class; he simply wants to do the best he can in his own class. This is obviously not enough for Myrtle, whose constant browbeating and disappointment weigh on George heavily. His decision to hunt and kill Gatsby, mistaken or not, marks a significant change in his character as he forces himself into the “upper crust” mentality that allowed Daisy to run Myrtle down with her car without facing the consequences. After the murder, George is reminded of his place in society, and he has no choice but to take his own life.

Together, the Wilsons illustrate what the “major characters” in The Great Gatsby seek to avoid, but simultaneously aspire to. As vehicles for change in the story, they are as vital as the “major characters,” if not more so. By showing just how different the Eggers are from “ordinary folk,” Myrtle and George highlight the weaknesses not only in the upper classes but in all classes.

Work Cited
Essays and Criticism: The Paradoxical Role of Women

Women play a paradoxical role in Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, a novel dominated by the eponymous hero and the enigmatic narrator, Nick Carraway. With the background of Gatsby’s continual and lavish parties, women seem to have been transformed into “flappers,” supposedly the incarnation of independence following World War I.

After all, Daisy Fay, obviously modeled on Fitzgerald’s free-spirited wife, Zelda Sayre, is hardly portrayed as the proper southern belle. Her friend, Jordan Baker, seems openly sarcastic when speaking of their “white girlhood”—referring to their youth spent in Louisville, Kentucky. As Fitzgerald conveys through a series of flashbacks, Daisy has been flirtatious, even at one point discovered packing her bag to travel alone to New York City in order to say good bye to a sailor. But her rather scandalous behavior does not sully her at all in the eyes of the smitten Gatsby. Indeed, as Nick comments, “It excited him … that many men had already loved Daisy—it increased her value in his eyes.” (149; ch. 8)

So on one level, these characters appear to be free-spirited, scorning norms of what the nineteenth century would have considered proper female behavior. It’s worth investigating, however, just how independent they really are. Ultimately, their “place” may be indicated most exactly by using the title from a pioneering book of feminist criticism by Francoise Basch: *Relative Creatures*. Daisy, Jordan, and Myrtle exist in relationship to their husbands, lovers, or boyfriends, and none undergoes a significant change during the course of the narrative. Thus, according to the most common definitions of flat versus round characters in literature, none of the women can be considered “round” or multidimensional characters. Each functions—at least for a time—as the cynosure of Gatsby, Nick and Tom Buchanan. Perhaps the ultimately pathetic condition of women is most accurately conveyed in a conversation between Nick and Daisy in which Daisy discusses the birth of her daughter:

“Well, she was less than an hour old and Tom was God knows where. I woke up out of the ether with an utterly abandoned feeling, and asked the nurse right away if it was a boy or a girl. She told me it was a girl, and so I turned my head away and wept. ‘All right,’ I said, ‘I’m glad it’s a girl. And I hope she’ll be a fool—that’s the best thing a girl can be in this world, a beautiful little fool.’” (16-17; ch. 1)

Beyond the glittering, upper class world of East Egg, inhabited by Daisy and Tom Buchanan and Jordan Baker, is the squalid area Fitzgerald refers to as the “Valley of Ashes,” where George and Myrtle Wilson live. Myrtle, obviously bent on escaping this Waste Land where George ekes out a living as a mechanic, has become Tom’s mistress. Fitzgerald portrays her unflatteringly as crass, tasteless, overweight, and ostentatious.

At a drunken party in New York City when Myrtle oversteps one of Tom’s dubious moral lines by mentioning Daisy, he hits his mistress, breaking her nose. Later in the novel, she is imprisoned in the garage when her pathetic and obtuse husband finally realizes that she has been having an affair with someone. Significantly, however, Tom Buchanan walks away unscathed from this affair, while Myrtle dies in the Waste Land, mingling “her thick dark blood with the dust” (137; ch. 7). Myrtle’s executioner is the “careless” Daisy who has been driving Gatsby’s expensive gold car.
With Myrtle’s death her “tremendous vitality” is extinguished. While she differs from both Jordan and Daisy because of her socioeconomic class, this vitality is also a crucial point of difference, for Fitzgerald has pointedly characterized both young women by their profound ennui, their vacillation, and their carelessness. The discussions between Daisy and Jordan parallel passages from T. S. Eliot’s The Waste Land where the spiritually bankrupt representatives of all social classes wonder forlornly: “‘What shall we do … / What shall we ever do?’” (133-134); Jordan and Daisy, spiritually and physically enervated, differ drastically from Myrtle “straining at the garage pump with panting vitality.” (68; ch. 4)

In their own ways, each woman functions as “proof” of her husband’s or lover’s success. At several points in the novel, Gatsby is described by Nick as a knight. Traditionally, knights go off on a quest; often their “price is the hand of a king’s daughter in marriage. Gatsby’s quest during his life has been to recapture the past, those moments in World War I when it seemed to him that Daisy, the wealthy, sought-after belle of Louisville, would agree to be his wife. Daisy, however, hardly constant, is swept off her feet by another suitor, Tom Buchanan. But Gatsby clings to his peculiar notion of the American Dream: if he achieves monetary success, he will regain Daisy. Thus, Gatsby constructs his ostentatious house in West Egg, directly across the Bay from Tom and Daisy’s more sedate mansion. Nick warns him, “‘You can’t repeat the past,’” but Gatsby, incredulous, states “‘Why of course you can!’” (110; ch. 6)

It would be ingenuous to ignore the parallels between the F. Scott Fitzgerald/Zelda Sayre marriage and the relationship of Daisy and Gatsby. Both Daisy and Zelda were considered “belles” of southern cities; Zelda was the youngest daughter of a judge in Montgomery, Alabama. Fitzgerald courted Zelda, but she broke her engagement because of Fitzgerald’s lack of funds. As Matthew J. Bruccoli points out in A Brief Life of Fitzgerald, writing his first successful novel, This Side of Paradise (originally called the Romantic Egoist), was part of Fitzgerald’s own quest to obtain Zelda’s hand in marriage. The fictional Gatsby was less successful with Daisy, though it is difficult to conclude that the real life union was much of an improvement with Fitzgerald practically drinking himself to death and Zelda languishing in a variety of mental hospitals.

In assessing Fitzgerald’s three principal female characters, the reader must keep in mind that all appraisals are filtered through the eyes of Nick Carraway. Thus, the question of whether he is a reliable narrator assumes paramount importance. Nick of course, boldly asserts, “I am one of the few honest people that I have ever known.” (59; ch.3)

But Nick seems to embody a double standard in his judgments of the behavior of men and women as feminist critic, Judith Fetterley, demonstrates in The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction. Nick castigates Jordan for relatively minor dishonesties but accepts with equanimity the massive dishonesty that has characterized Gatsby’s entire life. Fetterly concludes that the female characters in The Great Gatsby function as symbols—not persons.

If Gatsby is a love story, it is one centered in hostility toward women. Gatsby thinks of Daisy in relation to the objects with which she is surrounded. Her value for him is increased by the fact that she has been desired by so many men. Indeed, Tom’s gift of a string of pearls valued at $350, 000 the night before the two are to be wed only increases his estimation of her worth. One might ask if indeed there is an actual emotional relation between Gatsby and Daisy, or if Daisy has become for Gatsby simply an “unutterable vision.”

Work Cited

Essays and Criticism: The American Dream
The ideal of the American Dream is based on the fantasy that an individual can achieve success regardless of family history, race, or religion simply by working hard enough. Frequently, “success” is equated with the fortune that the independent, self-reliant individual can win. In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald examines and critiques Jay Gatsby’s particular vision of the 1920s American Dream. Though Fitzgerald himself is associated with the excesses of the “Roaring Twenties,” he is also an astute social critic whose novel does more to detail society’s failure to fulfill its potential than it does to glamorize the “Jazz Age.”

As a self-proclaimed “tale of the West,” the novel explores questions about America and the varieties of the American Dream. In this respect, *The Great Gatsby* is perhaps that legendary opus, the “Great American Novel”—following in the footsteps of Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* and Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*. As a novel that has much to say about faith, belief, and illusion, it merits being considered alongside works like T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, which explores the “hollowness” lying below the surface of modern life. It is possible to regard Gatsby as an archetypal tragic figure, the epitome of idealism and innocence who strives for order, purpose and meaning in a chaotic world. Fitzgerald introduces the theme of underlying chaos early in the novel when the violent Tom Buchanan declares, “‘Civilization’s going to pieces’” (12; ch. 1).

Although Fitzgerald is sketchy about the details of Gatsby’s meteoric rise, the reader does know that he was a poor boy from the midwest without inherited wealth or family connections who succeeded in obtaining an elaborate house in West Egg from where he stages lavish, catered parties for people he doesn’t know. With wealth comes the opportunity to reinvent his identity, inspired primarily by a “single green light, minute and far away” (21; ch. 1): this is the house of Daisy Fay Buchanan, the very wealthy, former Louisville belle whom Gatsby had loved before the war but who marries the immensely wealthy Tom Buchanan of Chicago.

All that matters for Gatsby is the future: achieving his goal of reclaiming Daisy. That is part of the power of the American Dream—the irrelevance of the past. A fabricated history is just as useful as a truthful history. So Gatsby constructs grandiose lies that he doesn’t even bother to cloak in a shred of reality. For instance, when he decides to convince Nick Carraway, the novel’s narrator, that he isn’t a “nobody,” Gatsby casually mentions that he’s the “‘son of some wealthy people in the Middle West … but educated at Oxford, because all my ancestors have been educated there for many years’” (65; ch. 4).

When Nick, who is indeed from the Middle West, inquires “‘What part?’” Gatsby is reduced to the geographically hysterical lie: “‘San Francisco.’” Later in the novel, the reader learns that far from being educated at Oxford as part of a family tradition, Gatsby’s brief stint there was part of a program for American soldiers following World War I. As Nick observes, Gatsby gives new meaning to the phrase “the self-made man”: “The truth was that Jay Gatsby of West Egg, Long Island, sprang from his Platonic conception of himself” (98; ch. 6).

The idealism evident in Gatsby’s constant aspirations helps define what Fitzgerald saw as the basis for the American Character. Certainly Gatsby is a firm believer in the American Dream of self-made success: he has not only self-promoted an entire new persona for himself, but he has also succeeded both financially and, at least ostensibly, socially. Yet the Dream which offers Gatsby the chance to “suck on the pap of life” (110; ch. 6) forces him to climb to a solitary place, isolated and alienated from the rest of society. In the midst of the drunken revelers at his party, Gatsby is “standing alone on the marble steps and looking from one group to another with approving eyes” (50; ch. 3) At the end of the novel, Gatsby will also be practically alone at his own funeral.

Gatsby’s primary ideological shortcoming is that he makes Daisy Buchanan the sole focus of his belief in the orgastic future. His previously varied aspirations (evidenced by the book Gatsby’s father shows Nick detailing his son’s resolutions to improved himself) are sacrificed to Gatsby’s single-minded obsession with Daisy. Even Gatsby realized when he first kissed Daisy that once he “forever wed his unutterable visions to her perishable breath, his mind would never romp again like the mind of God” (110; ch. 6). Finally five years
later, Gatsby reunites with Daisy, takes her on a tour of his ostentatious mansion, and pathetically displays his collection of British-made shirts. Significantly, that much longed-for afternoon produces not bliss but disappointment.

As Nick observes:

As I went over to say good-by I saw that the expression of bewilderment had come back into Gatsby’s face, as though a faint doubt had occurred to him as to the quality of his present happiness. Almost five years! There must have been moments even that afternoon when Daisy tumbled short of his dreams—not through her own fault, but because of the colossal vitality of his illusion. (95; ch. 5)

As the novel unfolds, Gatsby seems to realize that—as he did with his own persona—he has created an ideal for Daisy to live up to. He remains firmly committed to her, even after her careless driving has caused Myrtle Wilson’s death. Only his own needless death at the hands of the distraught Mr. Wilson (led by Tom Buchanan to believe that Gatsby has killed Myrtle) ends Gatsby’s obsession with Daisy.

What Fitzgerald seems to be criticizing in The Great Gatsby is not the American Dream itself but the corruption of the American Dream. What was once for leaders like Thomas Jefferson a belief in self-reliance and hard work has become what Nick Carraway calls “the service of a vast, vulgar, and meretricious beauty” (98; ch. 6). The energy that might have gone into the pursuit of noble goals has been channeled into the pursuit of power and pleasure, and a very showy, but ultimately empty, form of success.

Gatsby’s dream can be identified with America herself with its emphasis on the inherent goodness within people, youth, vitality, and a magnanimous openness to life itself. With the destruction of Gatsby, we witness a possible destiny of America herself. Critic Matthew J. Bruccoli, writing in Fitzgerald: A Life in Letters, quotes a letter written by Fitzgerald while composing Gatsby: “That’s the whole burden of this novel—the loss of those illusions that give such color to the world so that you don’t care whether things are true or false as long as they partake of the magical glory.”

Work Cited

Essays and Criticism: A Modernist Masterwork

The Great Gatsby, the first truly Modernist novel to find success in the United States, set the tone for the movement that defined American literature well into the present day. In Modernism Fitzgerald found a way to define his world that would have been impossible in the nineteenth-century Victorian style that still dominated American writing. In his style, portrayal of American morality and treatment of his characters, Fitzgerald left the Victorian era behind, creating a Modernist masterwork that still serves as a model for American fiction.

The gritty realism of William James and his contemporaries, and even the light-hearted tone of Mark Twain’s Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn, was too limited to allow Fitzgerald to portray the Jazz Age, a period in which dark fantasy reigned. Modernism offered a broader palette, a self-consciously surreal landscape in which life is viewed more metaphorically than meticulously detailed. Only through this lens could a central theme of the novel emerge:

Twenty miles from the city a pair of enormous eggs, identical in contour and separated only by a courtesy bay, jut out into the most domesticated body of salt water in the Western hemisphere, the great wet barnyard of Long Island Sound. (4-5; ch. 1)
The eggs are more a product of Nick’s imagination than a realistic geographical description; by mixing in metaphor, Fitzgerald not only described the setting of his novel, but alludes to the area as a breeding ground for the events to come without revealing what will “hatch.”

The darker side of New York, which Victorian writers would render as dirty and ugly as Dickensian London, becomes softer and more vague in Fitzgerald’s description:

A fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens; where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and, finally, with a transcendent effort, of men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air.

(23; ch. 2)

The image, although of the underbelly of society, is still oddly beautiful. Fitzgerald creates a fantasy world in which anything is possible, an approach later used by writers ranging from Hemingway and Joseph Conrad to John Barth and Raymond Carver. By removing his narrative from pure reality, Fitzgerald is able to take a more impressionistic approach to New York, effectively making the Eggs and the Valley of Ashes characters in their own right.

In such an unreal setting, the old rules no longer apply; some can be bent, others broken. The nineteenth-century’s insistence on accountability and adherence to moral guidelines in its fiction had begun eroding before Gatsby was written—Fitzgerald completed the process with his portrayal of a world that is less immoral than amoral—less rebelling against moral codes than having no concept of them.

Change was, after all, in the air. Jay Gatsby dies, not as a result of his criminal activities, but from being at the wrong place at the wrong time. Myrtle Wilson dies, not from a jealous wife’s rage over her adultery, but from that wife’s drunken incompetence. Tom and Daisy, responsibly for both deaths, simply leave the Eggs—Nick’s later meeting with Tom suggests they have no remorse. Jordan drifts away, never revealed as a cheater on the pro tour. Only Nick seems to have retained a conscience from their shared Midwestern heritage, but it is tempered by his exposure to Gatsby’s world:

One night I did hear a material car [at Gatsby’s house], and saw its lights stop at his front steps. But I didn’t investigate. Probably it was some final guest who had been away at the ends of the earth and didn’t know that the party was over. (179; ch. 9)

Nick will carry what he has seen at the parties, culminating in the fateful “party” at the Plaza Hotel, with him forever.

Gatsby’s parties themselves set the stage for the amoral activities to follow. Again, the definition is important—nothing immoral seems to go on at the parties in detail. What Fitzgerald gives us is a glamorous sheen of decadence. Note the lack of specific detail in Nick’s account of the aftermath of one party:

Most of the remaining women were now having fights with men said to be their husbands…. One of the men was talking with curious intensity to a young actress, and his wife, after attempting to laugh at the situation in a dignified and indifferent way, broke down entirely and resorted to flank attacks—at intervals she appeared suddenly at his side like an angry diamond, and hissed: “You promised!” into his ear. (51, ch. 3)

All we see of the husband is his “curious intensity,” with no description of what physical form that intensity might take; all we see of the wife is her “angry diamond” attack style, another metaphor for wealth, but no obvious description of drunkenness or any other condition that might have escalated her anger. We see nothing of the actress’s response to any of this. Is she flattered? Sexually interested? Plotting a way to take
advantage of any money the man might have? Fitzgerald doesn’t tell us. The scene is portrayed as if it is a normal course of events for the sad, insecure, amoral crowd that parties at Jay Gatsby’s house.

Of course, the party guests are merely sketches compared to the full-blown main characters of the novel—or would “caricatures” be a more appropriate term? Using characters as symbols of human behavior is as old as literature itself, but nineteenth-century American writers tended toward more individual character studies and deeper character development. “Minimalizing” a step further than Mark Twain Fitzgerald brings a European allegorical feel to his Gatsby characters, prompting later Modernists from William Faulkner to Philip Roth to do the same.

Fitzgerald’s cross-fertilization of traditionally American and traditionally English elements, specifically in characterization, allows him to distill his characters to their core qualities—Nick the innocent, Gatsby the ambitious, Daisy the beautiful fool, Tom the ruthless capitalist, Jordan the unscrupulous socialite—and to make locations like the Eggs, the Valley of Ashes, even the Eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg into characters in their own right.

Those who criticize Wolfsheim and Gatsby’s father as under-developed characters miss the point; both are merely aspects of Gatsby he leaves behind when he dies. Neither criminal ambition (Wolfsheim) nor pure love (Mr. Gatsby) can die; as a combination of these qualities, all this is lost of Gatsby is the body in which Fitzgerald placed him. This is fitting, considering that Fitzgerald uses his characters to criticize elements of his society that are also deathless.

Open social criticism is another Modernist hallmark Fitzgerald exploits to its fullest in his characters. In the nineteenth century, essayist and poet Henry David Thoreau advocated Civil Disobedience from jail; Fitzgerald’s response is a near-parody of 1920s American urban life. His world is close enough to the real world to be recognizable, yet it is blurred enough to serve his purposes. All of Gatsby’s characters, human and nonhuman, participate in Modernism’s open examination of such American institutions as industry, power and class and their by-products. Gatsby’s open critique, already in use by poets of the time, is the most blatant yet, beginning an almost century-long tradition of social commentary in American literature.

The Great Gatsby set the tone for literature to come in its blending of various post-nineteenth century ideas into what would become known as Modernism and its offshoot, Postmodernism. Fitzgerald, influenced by the social and artistic changes going on all around him, developed a vision that has persisted into fiction of the twenty-first century; his concerns are our concerns, and American life has changed little from Modern to Postmodern. Only the terms have changed. In defining what fiction could become, Gatsby is as important today as in 1926 as an example of what Modernist literature can, and still does, accomplish.

Work Cited

Essays and Criticism: Major Characters, Time, Ambiguity and Tragedy

Published in 1925, The Great Gatsby became an immediate classic and propelled its young author to a fame he never again equalled. The novel captured the spirit of the "Jazz Age," a post-World War I era in upper-class America that Fitzgerald himself gave this name to, and the flamboyance of the author and his wife Zelda as they moved about Europe with other American expatriate writers (such as Ernest Hemingway). However, Gatsby expresses more than the exuberance of the times. It depicts the restlessness of what Gertrude Stein (another expatriate modernist writer) called a "lost generation." Recalling T. S. Eliot's landmark poem "The Wasteland" (1922), then, Gatsby also has its own "valley of ashes" or wasteland where men move about
obscurely in the dust, and this imagery of decay, death, and corruption pervades the novel and "infects" the story and its hero too. Because the novel is not just about one man, James Gatz or Jay Gatsby, but about aspects of the human condition of an era, and themes that transcend time altogether, it is the stuff of myth. Gatsby's attempts to attain an ideal of himself and then to put this ideal to the service of another ideal, romantic love, are attempts to rise above corruption in all its forms. It is this quality in him that Nick Carraway, the novel's narrator, attempts to portray, and in so doing the novel, like its hero, attains a form of enduring greatness.

The novel is narrated in retrospect; Nick is writing the account two years after the events of the summer he describes, and this introduces a critical distance and perspective which is conveyed through occasional comments about the story he is telling and how it must appear to a reader. The time scheme of the novel is further complicated as "the history of that summer" of 1922 contains within it the story of another summer, five years before this one, when Gatsby and Daisy first courted. This is the story that Jordan tells Nick. As that earlier summer ended with Gatsby's departure for the war in the fall, so the summer of Nick's experience of the East ends with the crisis on the last hot day (the day of mint juleps in the hotel and Myrtle Wilson's death) and is followed by Gatsby's murder by George Wilson on the first day of fall. This seasonal calendar is more than just a parallel, however. It is a metaphor for the blooming and blasting of love and of hope, like the flowers so often mentioned. Similarly, the novel's elaborate use of light and dark imagery (light, darkness, sunshine, and shadow, and the in-between changes of twilight) symbolizes emotional states as well.

In-between time (like the popular song Klipspringer plays on Gatsby's piano: In the meantime / In between time / Ain't we got fun?) is described by Nick as the time of profound human change. While this can describe Daisy's change between her affair with Gatsby and the couples' reunion, it may also characterize the general sense of restlessness and profound changes happening in these first years after World War One. Daisy (the days-eye, or the sun) is dressed in white and is associated with light and sunshine throughout the novel, and she is very much a seasonal creature. It is impossible, then, for Gatsby to catch this light and fix it in one place or one time. Daisy's constant quality is like the light in the novel, she is always changing. Gatsby's own devotion to her has a permanence that Daisy cannot live up to, yet Gatsby seems committed to an idea of Daisy that he has created rather than to the real woman she is. Daisy's changeability is not at fault in Gatsby's failure. Although she is careless in the way that people like Tom are careless in their wealth and treatment of other people, Daisy is naturally not able to renounce time itself in the way Gatsby does in order to meet him again in the past.

Gatsby is gorgeous and creates a sense of wonder in Nick for the daring nature of his impossible but incorruptible dream. It is the attempt itself and the firm belief that he can achieve the impossible that makes Gatsby more than the sum of his (somewhat shabby) reality. As a seventeen-year-old he transformed himself from plain James Gatz, to Jay Gatsby for whom anything is possible. As he rowed out to Dan Cody's sumptuous yacht off the shore of Lake Superior, he was crossing towards opportunity, and a Platonic conception of himself (based on the Greek philosopher Platos' theory of perfect forms, which interprets everything on earth as a better or worse copy of these forms, as well as the conception of a new self-identity). Gatsby conforms to an ideal of himself that transforms reality into possibility. This audacity and disregard for ties binding him to his own past is his apprenticeship for loving Daisy. In defiance of the class difference separating them, he aspires high to this girl in a golden tower, the "king's" daughter, whose voice is full of money. Gatsby does not seem to realize that his idea of Daisy, whom he weds with a kiss one summer night has as little bearing on reality as Jay Gatsby does.

Gatsby is a romantic, but he is also made up of romantic stories by other people who speculate and rumor about his unknown past. Nick takes it upon himself to tell the story and thus to tell Gatsby's story as he pieced it together from different sources, and Nick characterizes himself as someone who understands Gatsby better, who wants to set the record straight, and who sides with Gatsby against the world that made him up and then deserted him. It is Nick alone who arranges Gatsby's funeral and meets with his father, and the bitterness of
the lesson about humanity that Nick learns from this experience affects the way he tells the story. Certainly, Nick is also romanticizing Gatsby. He contrasts the wondrous hope which Gatsby embodied against the corruptness of his bootlegging business (Gatsby's fortune in fact came from illegal alcohol sales) and against the more corrupt society which preyed on Gatsby. Against the background of the times and of upper-class society like that represented at his parties, Gatsby's extraordinary gift for hope and his romantic readiness stand out as transcendent.

Nick's own role in the novel shares much of the nature of paradox and ambiguity which characterizes the whole. The novel is as much about Nick as it is about Gatsby and his colossal dream of Daisy. Nick is an involved outsider, privileged or burdened with the role of witness and recorder of events. While he protests often of his unwillingness to participate in other's embroilments and is frequently irritated or exasperated by them, he participates nevertheless. He is implicated in Tom's relationship with Myrtle by virtue of his presence with them (and the uncomfortable period he spends in the living room of the lovers' apartment while they are in the bedroom together implicates him further as a passive accomplice) while he retains his sense of distance through moral superiority. Similarly, Nick performs the service of go-between (or pander) for Gatsby and Daisy; the couple reunite in his house, and he invites Daisy there for this purpose. At Gatsby's party he acts as lookout, keeping a watchful eye for Tom while the couple slip over to sit on Nick's own porch. This ambivalence in his character undermines his statements about himself as being one of the few honest people that he has ever known, and has led to many critics considering him a kind of smug voyeur. However, Nick's own sense of being both enchanted and repelled by his experiences is at the source of the novel's larger depiction of a meretricious society both enchanting and repelling, and it is this quality which enables Nick to find Gatsby both the representative of everything for which he has an unaffected scorn, and at the same time the embodiment of gorgeous hope. In this way, a story often marked by sordid dealings and dismissed by Nick in one breath (writing two years later) as the abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men can also be a holocaust or fully developed tragedy.

In considering the novel as tragedy, the role of fate (or fortune in its other sense) figures large. The novel is conspicuous in its lack of a religious belief system, God is absent from the skies over East and West Egg. Part of the restlessness of a postwar generation may describe the quest for a belief that can fill the void created by this loss, or the results of a hedonistic lifestyle that will distract people from it altogether. Nick clings to his declared preference for honesty and being a careful driver in a world of metaphorically careless drivers. Daisy is one who lives for the moment, and for whom glimpses of tomorrow and the day after that and the day after that are terrifying lapses of a willful blindness to such matters (and blindness is one of the novel's themes). Gatsby has his own willful blindness in the form of his enduring ideals and the dreams these ideals have created. In classical mythology, which the novel draws on heavily, the goddess Fortune is also blind in that she favors no one (she is often figured with one eye open and one eye closed, winking like Daisy herself) as she turns her wheel about, thereby deciding the fates of human beings. One question of the novel, then, is who (or what) is at the wheel? The blind eyes that watch over the world of the novel are those of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg on an old billboard in the valley of ashes. After Myrtle's death, her husband George is looking at these when he says God sees everything. Nothing seems able to intervene in Gatsby's own inexorable fate, as Wilson tracks him down to murder him in the mistaken belief that Gatsby was driving the death car that killed Myrtle. This sense of predetermined destiny contributes to the novel as tragedy.

For all characters, the relationship between the past and the future is at issue, as well as personal responsibility for the choices they make in navigating the present between these. Nick appears to believe that being careful will keep him out of harm, but he is more of a careless driver than he realizes, as Jordan comments to him after Gatsby's death and after their affair is over. Gatsby himself recalls another careless driver. In Greek mythology Phaeton tried to harness his chariot to the sun and suffered for his presumption. Similarly, Gatsby tries with his yellow car (and all that it symbolizes) to catch Daisy, and fails just as surely The many echoes of classical mythology recall to the novel a much more distant past (and a mythical kind of narrative) in order to make sense of the New World of America The novel ends by uniting Gatsby's dream born from his past with
the American dream from another past, a dream that is as incorruptible and unreal, indicating the way in which the future of this story may be found in the past: "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past."

Source: Casie E. Hermanson, in an essay for Novels for Students, Gale, 1997. Hermanson is a doctoral candidate at the University of Toronto.

Essays and Criticism: The Greatness of Gatsby

[The Great Gatsby's] fundamental achievement is a triumph of language.

I do not speak merely of the "flowers," the famous passages: Nick's description of Gatsby yearning toward the green light on Daisy's dock, Gatsby's remark that the Buchanans' love is "only personal," the book's last page. Throughout, The Great Gatsby has the precision and splendor of a lyric poem, yet well-wrought prose is merely one of its triumphs. Fitzgerald's distinction in this novel is to have made language celebrate itself. Among other things, The Great Gatsby is about the power of art.

This celebration of literary art is inseparable from the novel's second great achievement—its management of point of view, the creation of Nick. With his persona, Fitzgerald obtained more than objectivity and concentration of effect. Nick describes more than the experience which he witnesses; he describes the act and consequences of telling about it. The persona is—as critics have been seeing—a character, but he is more than that: he is a character engaged in a significant action.

Nick is writing a book. He is recording Gatsby's experience; in the act of recording Gatsby's experience he discovers himself.

Though his prose has all along been creating for us Gatsby's "romantic readiness," almost until the very end Nick insists that he deplores Gatsby's "appalling sentimentality." This is not a reasoned judgment. Nick disapproves because he cannot yet affirm. He is a Jamesian spectator, a fastidious intelligence ill-suited to profound engagement of life. But writing does profoundly engage life. In writing about Gatsby, Nick alters his attitude toward his subject and ultimately toward his own life. As his book nears completion his identification with Gatsby grows. His final affirmation is his sympathetic understanding of Gatsby and the book which gives his sympathy form: both are a celebration of life; each is a gift of language. This refinement on James's use of the persona might be the cause of Eliot's assertion that The Great Gatsby represented the first advance which the American novel had made since James.

In Nick's opening words we find an uncompleted personality. There are contradictions and perplexities which (when we first read the passage) are easily ignored, because of the characteristic suavity of his prose. He begins the chronicle, whose purpose is an act of judgment and whose title is an evaluation, by declaring an inclination "to reserve all judgments." The words are scarcely digested when we find him judging:

The abnormal mind is quick to detect and attach itself to this quality [tolerance] 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.

The tone is unmistakable—a combination of moral censure, self-protectiveness, and final saving sympathy that marks Nick as an outsider who is nonetheless drawn to the life he is afraid to enter. So when he tells us a little later in the passage that "Reserving judgments is a matter of infinite hope," we know that this and not the noblesse oblige he earlier advanced explains his fear of judging. Nick cannot help judging, but he fears a world in which he is constantly beset by objects worthy of rejection. He is "a little afraid of missing
something”; that is why he hears the promise in Daisy's voice, half-heartedly entertains the idea of loving Jordan Baker, and becomes involved with the infinite hope of Jay Gatsby—"Gatsby, who represented everything for which [Nick had] an unaffected scorn."

When Nick begins the book he feels the same ambivalence toward Gatsby that characterizes his attitude toward life: a simultaneous enchantment and revulsion which places him "within and without." When he has finished, he has become united with Gatsby, and he judges Gatsby great. Finally he has something to admire; contemplating Gatsby redeems him from the "foul dust [which had] temporarily closed out [his] interest in the abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men."

The economy with which Fitzgerald presents those sorrows and short-winded elations is another of the book's major achievements. In The Great Gatsby Fitzgerald contrived to develop a story by means of symbols while at the same time investing those symbols with vivid actuality. Everything in the book is symbolic, from Gatsby's ersatz mansion to the wild and aimless parties which he gives there, yet everything seems so "true to life" that some critics continue to see that novel primarily as a recreation of the 20's. The Great Gatsby is about the 20's only in the sense that Moby Dick is about whaling or that The Scarlet Letter is about Puritan Boston. Comparing the liveliness of Fitzgerald's book with Melville's or, better still, with Hawthorne's (which resembles its tight dramatic structure and concentration), you have a good indication of the peculiar distinction in Fitzgerald's work.

Of the novel's symbols, only the setting exists without regard to verisimilitude, purely to project meaning. The Great Gatsby has four locales: East Egg, home of the rich Buchanans and their ultra-traditional Georgian Colonial mansion; West Egg where the once-rich and the parvenus live and where Gatsby apes the splendor of the Old World; the wasteland of the average man; and New York, where Nick labors, ironically, at the "Probity Trust." East and West Egg are "crushed flat at the contact end"; they represent the collision of dream and dreamer which is dramatized when Gatsby tries to establish his "universe of ineffable gaudiness" through the crass materials of the real world. The wasteland is a valley of ashes in which George Wilson dispenses gasoline to the irresponsible drivers from East and West Egg, eventually yielding his wife to their casual lust and cowardly violence.

Fitzgerald's world represents iconographically a sterile, immoral society. Over this world brood the blind eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg: the sign for an oculist's business which was never opened, the symbol of a blindness which can never be corrected. Like other objects in the book to which value might be attached, the eyes of Dr. Eckleburg are a cheat. They are not a sign of God, as Wilson thinks, but only an advertisement—like the false promise of Daisy's moneyed voice, or the green light on her dock, which is invisible in the mist.

These monstrous eyes are the novel's major symbol. The book's chief characters are blind, and they behave blindly. Gatsby does not see Daisy's vicious emptiness, and Daisy, deluded, thinks she will reward her gold-hatted lover until he tries to force from her an affirmation she is too weak to make. Tom is blind to his hypocrisy, with "a short deft movement" he breaks Myrtle's nose for daring to mention the name of the wife she is helping him to deceive. Before her death, Myrtle mistakes Jordan for Daisy. Just as she had always mistaken Tom for salvation from the ash-heap, she blindly rushes for his car in her need to escape her lately informed husband, and is struck down. Moreover, Daisy is driving the car; and the man with her is Gatsby, not Tom. The final act of blindness is specifically associated with Dr. Eckleburg's eyes. Wilson sees them as a sign of righteous judgment and rightly proceeds to work God's judgment on earth. He kills Gatsby, but Gatsby is the wrong man. In the whole novel, only Nick sees. And his vision comes slowly, in the act of writing the book.

The act of writing the book is, as I have said, an act of judgment. Nick wants to know why Gatsby "turned out all right in the end," despite all the phoniness and crime which fill his story, and why Gatsby was the only one who turned out all right. For, in writing about the others, Nick discovers the near ubiquity of folly and despair.
The novel's people are exemplary types of the debasement of life which is Fitzgerald's subject. Daisy, Tom, and Jordan lack the inner resources to enjoy what their wealth can give them. They show the peculiar folly of the American dream. At the pinnacle, life palls. Daisy is almost unreal. When Nick first sees her she seems to be floating in midair. Her famous protestation of grief ("I'm sophisticated God, I'm sophisticated") is accompanied by an "absolute smirk." Her extravagant love for Gatsby is a sham, less real than the unhappy but fleshly bond with Tom which finally turns them into "conspirators." Her beauty is a snare. Like Tom's physical prowess, it neither pleases her nor insures her pleasure in others. Tom forsakes Daisy for Myrtle and both for "stale ideas." Jordan's balancing act is a trick; like her sporting reputation, a precarious lie. They are all rich and beautiful—and unhappy.

Yearning toward them are Myrtle and Gatsby. Like Gatsby, Myrtle desires "the youth and mystery that wealth imprisons and preserves … gleaming … above the hot struggles of the poor." Unlike him, her "panting vitality" is wholly physical, merely pathetic; whereas Gatsby's quest is spiritual and tragic. Myrtle is maimed and victimized by Daisy's selfish fear of injury (Daisy could have crashed into another car but, at the last minute, loses heart and runs Myrtle down); Gatsby's death is but the final stage of disillusionment, and he suffers voluntarily.

Gatsby is, of course, one of the major achievements I have been noting. Although we see little of him and scarcely ever hear him speak, his presence is continually with us; and he exists, as characters in fiction seldom do, as a life force. He recalls the everlasting yea of Carlyle, as well as the metaphysical rebellion of Camus. His "heightened sensitivity to the promise of life" is but one half of his energy; the other being a passionate denial of life's limitations. Gatsby's devotion to Daisy is an implicit assault on the human condition. His passion would defy time and decay to make the glorious first moment of wonder, which is past, eternally present. His passion is supra-sexual, even super-personal. In his famous remark to Nick about Daisy's love for Tom, he is making two assertions: that the "things between Daisy and Tom [which Tom insists] he'll never know" are merely mundane and that the Daisy which he loves is not the Daisy which Tom had carried down from the Punch Bowl but the Daisy who "blossomed for him like a flower," incarnating his dream, the moment he kissed her. Gatsby's love for life is finally an indictment of the life he loves. Life does not reward such devotion, nor, for that reason, does it deserve it. Gatsby is great for having paid life the compliment of believing its promise.

When Hamlet dies amidst the carnage of his bloody quest for justice, he takes with him the promise that seeming will coincide with being and the hope that man can strike a blow for truth and save a remnant of the universe. When Ahab dies a victim to his own harpoon, he kills the promise that man may know his life and the hope that knowledge will absolve him. When Gatsby dies, more innocently than they (since, though a "criminal," he lacks utterly their taste for destruction), he kills a promise more poignant and perhaps more precious, certainly more inclusive than theirs: Gatsby kills the promise that desire can ever be gratified.


Essays and Criticism: A Note on Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby

F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby is certainly more than an impression of the Jazz Age, more than a novel of manners. Serious critics have by no means settled upon what that "more" might be, but one hypothesis recurs quite regularly. It is the view that Fitzgerald was writing about the superannuation of traditional American belief, the obsolescence of accepted folklore. The Great Gatsby is about many things, but it is inescapably a general critique of the "American dream" and also of the "agrarian myth"—a powerful demonstration of their invalidity for Americans of Fitzgerald's generation and after.
The American dream consisted of the belief (sometimes thought of as a promise) that people of talent in this land of opportunity and plenty could reasonably aspire to material success if they adhered to a fairly well-defined set of behavioral rules—rules set forth in a relatively comprehensive form as long ago as the eighteenth century by Benjamin Franklin. In addition, Americans easily assumed that spiritual satisfaction would automatically accompany material success. The dream was to be realized in an agrarian civilization, a way of life presumed better—far better—than the urban alternative. Thomas Jefferson firmly established the myth of the garden—the concept of agrarian virtue and the urban vice—in American minds. During the turbulent era of westward expansion the myth gained increasing stature.

James Gatz of North Dakota had dreamed a special version of the American dream. Fitzgerald tells us that it constituted "a promise that the rock of the world was founded securely on a fairy's wing." When Gatz lay dead, his father told Nick Carraway that "Jimmy was bound to get ahead." As a child, Gatz set about preparing to realize his dream. He early decided that he could contemplate future glory so long as he scheduled his life properly and adhered to a set of general resolves—resolves quite obviously derivative from Poor Richard. "No smokeing [sic] or chewing." "Bath every other day." "Be better to parents." Yes, James Gatz was bound to get ahead, bound as securely to his goal as was Captain Ahab to the pursuit of the white whale. The Great Gatsby is the chronicle of what happened when James Gatz attempted to realize the promise of his dream.

Gatz thought himself different—very different—from the common run of mankind. We learn that his parents were "shiftless and unsuccessful"—and that "his imagination had never really accepted them as his parents at all." He possessed a "Platonic conception of himself. He was a son of God." As a son of God—God's boy—he "must be about His Father's business." What was that business? It was "the service of a vast, vulgar, and meretricious beauty." Gatz plainly imagined himself a Christ—one of the anointed—born of earthly parents but actually a son of God. This is what Fitzgerald sought to convey in establishing that "Jay Gatsby of West Egg, Long Island, sprang from his Platonic conception of himself." That conception moved him to seek out goodness and beauty—certainly a prostituted goodness and beauty, but goodness and beauty nevertheless.

When his moment came—at seventeen—James Gatz changed his name. The question of the name change has not received the attention it deserves. Some believe that Fitzgerald derived "Gatsby" from the slang term for pistol current during the Jazz Age—gat. Others see in the act of changing names an intimation of "Jewishness" in the hero, a view supported by the frequency of the name "Jay" among the Jews. Jay Gould comes immediately to mind as do Jay Cooke and J. P. Morgan. Also, it is known that the inspiration for the novel came from Fitzgerald's chance encounter with a Jewish bootlegger.

It is, of course, conceivable that Fitzgerald had some or even all of these things in mind, and it is also possible that he had still another thought. Could it be, however unlikely, that he was rendering the literal "Jesus, God's boy" in the name of Jay Gatsby? (In ordinary pronunciation, the 't' easily changes to "d" as in "Gad").) This conjecture might appear hopelessly far-fetched, were it not for Fitzgerald's discussion of Gatz's "Platonic conception of himself," and his direct use of the phrase "son of God." In any case, Gatsby began his pursuit of goodness and beauty when he changed his name, and that pursuit ultimately ended in tragedy.

Fitzgerald develops the tragedy of Jay Gatsby as the consequence of his quixotic quest for Daisy Buchanan. Daisy represents that "vast, vulgar, and meretricious beauty" to which Gatsby aspired When Jay met Daisy, he realized that he had "forever wed his unutterable visions to her perishable breath." He knew that "his mind would never romp again like the mind of God." When he kissed her, "she blossomed for him like a flower and the incarnation was complete." What was the incarnation? In Daisy, Gatsby's meretricious dream was made flesh. He sought ever after to realize his dream in union with her.

The trouble with Gatsby's quest was that Daisy was completely incapable of playing the role assigned to her. She was as shallow as the other hollow people who inhabited Fitzgerald's Long Island. She could never
become a legitimate actualization of Gatsby's illegitimate dream. Gatsby was himself culpable. He was not truly God's boy perhaps, but he possessed a certain grandeur, an incredible ability to live in terms of his misguided dream. Nick Carraway understood this, telling Gatsby at one point that he was "worth the whole damned crowd put together."

Both Gatsby and Tom Buchanan, Daisy's husband, possessed wealth. Gatsby at least used his wealth to seek out beauty and claim it for himself. Buchanan the lecher lacked any larger goals. In the end, Daisy chooses to remain with Buchanan, and Gatsby is murdered by the deranged husband of Myrtle Wilson, Buchanan's mistress, who had been accidently run down and killed by Daisy. Buchanan serves as Gatsby's executioner; he allows George Wilson to believe that Gatsby had killed Myrtle.

Gatsby was as alone in death as he had been in life. Of all the hordes who had accepted his largesse when alive, only one—an unnamed "owl-eyed man" who had admired Gatsby's books—appeared at the funeral. He delivered a pathetic epitaph: "The poor son-of-a-bitch."

The tragedy is over; Fitzgerald speculates on its meaning through the narrator, Nick Carraway. Carraway notes that Jay and the others—Nick himself, his sometime girl friend Jordan Baker, Daisy, and Tom—all were from the Middle West. It was not the Middle West of popular imagination, of the lost agrarian past, but rather the cities of the middle border. "That's my Middle West," muses Carraway, "not the wheat or the prairies or the lost Swede towns, but the thrilling returning trains of my youth, and the street lamps and sleigh bells in the frosty dark and the shadows of holly wreaths thrown by lighted windows on the snow." Carraway continues: Gatsby and his friends "were all Westerners, and perhaps we possessed some deficiency in common which made us subtly unadaptable to Eastern life." The East held many attractions, but the expatriate Westerner lived there at his peril. So Carraway went home. He could at least survive, though he might not prosper, in prairie cities.

Why had Gatsby failed? It was because the time for dreaming as Gatsby dreamed had passed. In what must be, in its implications, one of the most moving passages in American literature, Fitzgerald completes his commentary on Jay Gatsby: "His dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know it was already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity behind the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night."

The future to which Gatsby aspired is indeed in the past. His dream—the American dream—had been nurtured in the agrarian past that was no more. Fitzgerald's symbolism is never more ingenious than in his depiction of the bankruptcy of the old agrarian myth. This task he accomplishes through the most haunting and mysterious of the symbols which appear in the book—the eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg. Here is one of the cruelest caricatures in the American novel. For Dr. T. J. Eckleburg is none other than a devitalized Thomas Jefferson, the pre-eminent purveyor of the agrarian myth.

What is it that Dr. Eckleburg's eyes survey? It is the valley of democracy turned to ashes—the garden defiled: "This is a valley of ashes—a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens; where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and, finally, with a transcendent effort, of men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air. Occasionally a line of gray cars crawls along an invisible track, gives out a ghastly creak, and comes to rest, and immediately the ash-gray men swarm up with leaden spades and stir up an impenetrable cloud, which screens their obscure operations from your sight … [Dr. Eckleburg's] eyes, dimmed a little by many paintless days under sun and rain, brood on over the solemn dumping ground." Fitzgerald thus presents a remarkably evocative description of the corruption that had befallen Jefferson's garden.

At the very end of the novel, Fitzgerald betrays his affection for the myth of the garden, despite his awareness that it could no longer serve Americans. His narrator Carraway once again serves as the vehicle for his
thoughts: "And as the moon rose higher the inessential houses began to melt away until gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailor's eyes—a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby's house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder."

Alas, poor Jay Gatsby! "Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter—tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther…. And one fine morning—" Alas, all of us! The novel ends on a desperately somber note: "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past."

American writers in the Twenties were an entirely new breed—divorced from the literary tradition which had matured between the Civil War and World War I. That tradition culminated in the literary Establishment presided over by William Dean Howells in the last years before the outbreak of the Great War. Henry F. May has summarized the basic tenets of Howells and his minions in The End of American Innocence: Howells "had always insisted that real truth and moral goodness were identical, and he had always held that politics and literature were both amenable to moral judgment. He had always believed that American civilization was treading a sure path, whatever the momentary failures, toward moral and material improvement."

What had outmoded Howells? It was the realization, anticipated before the Great War but complete only in the Twenties, that America had been transformed—transformed by the onset of an overwhelming process of industrialization and urbanization which had superannuated traditional American beliefs—beliefs nurtured in the bosom of the agrarian past.

In these circumstances, a revolution in manners and morals was inevitable. World War I augmented rather than inaugurated the trend. Postwar writers undertook a comprehensive critique of traditional faith. Some abhorred the change; others welcomed it. In any case, almost all of the great writers of the Twenties accepted the fact of the intellectual and emotional revolution deriving from the obsolescence of prewar standards. They launched a comprehensive critique of traditional faiths, and for their efforts they received much public notice and approbation.

What accounts for the success of these literary revolutionists? The answer resides in the fact that America was generally "new" in the Twenties. George Mowry and other recent historians have effectively documented the distinctive "modernity" of America in the wake of World War I—a modernity discernible in the mass culture as well as among the elite. The transitional years had passed; the change from the rural-agricultural past to the urban-industrial future was relatively complete, and readers as well as writers responded to this reality. To be sure, the defenders of the old America ensconced behind crumbling barricades in the Old South and the farther Middle West fought extensive rearguard actions—fundamentalist assaults on evolution, prohibitionist bans on spurious liquors, and racist campaigns for the preservation of white Anglo-Saxon Protestant America—but these were last desperate attempts to postpone the inevitable. The most important fact about reaction in the Twenties was that it failed. In each instance "modernity" ultimately triumphed over tradition.

Significant writers in the Twenties were above all dedicated to the imposing task of pointing out the error of living in terms of obsolete values—however useful those values might have been in the past. This effort is perhaps most obvious in the novels of Ernest Hemingway. In The Sun Also Rises Hemingway wastes little time investigating the reasons why Jake Barnes, Lady Brett, Robert Conn, and other characters in the novel must live differently than before. Hemingway's emphasis is on method—on how to live in the revolutionized context. Scott Fitzgerald dealt with the other side of the coin—the bankruptcy of the old way. Jay Gatsby's dream was patently absurd—however noble, however "American." Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson were unsound guides to life in the modernity of the vast eastern Urbana, the East of West Egg, Long
Island—and also for life in the new Midwest to which the chastened Carraway returned. The final irony of the novel is that Fitzgerald could discern no beauty in the city to compare with the beauty, however meretricious, inherent in Gatsby's Platonic conception of himself.

**Source:** David F. Trask, "A Note on Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby,*" in *University Review,* Vol. XXXIII, No. 3, March, 1967, pp. 197-202

---

**The Great Gatsby, F. Scott Fitzgerald: Introduction**

*The Great Gatsby* F. Scott Fitzgerald

(Full name Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald) American novelist, short story writer, essayist, screenwriter, and playwright.

The following entry provides criticism on Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) from 1984 through 2001. See also, F. Scott Fitzgerald Criticism and "Babylon Revisited" Criticism.

Critics have generally agreed that *The Great Gatsby,* published in 1925, is the crowning achievement of Fitzgerald's literary career. It evokes not only the ambiance of the jazz-age search for the American dream of wealth and happiness, but also the larger questions of fading traditional values in the face of increasing materialism and cynicism.

**Plot and Major Characters**

Fitzgerald frames his plot as a story within a story, as the narrator, Nick Carraway, relates his version of Jay Gatsby's life. Nick, seeking freedom from his constricted Midwestern existence, takes a job in New York City and rents a bungalow in West Egg, Long Island, next door to the lavish mansion of the mysterious Jay Gatsby. Nick's wealthy cousin, Daisy Buchanan, and her husband Tom, invite Nick to dinner with the attractive but flighty Jordan Baker at their luxurious home on the neighboring island of East Egg. Unsettled by the Buchanans' seemingly purposeless lives, Nick returns home and notices his neighbor Gatsby staring longingly at a green light across the bay coming from the Buchanans' property. Tom later persuades Nick to accompany him to a place he calls the Valley of Ashes and introduces him to his blowsy mistress, Myrtle Wilson. Tom, Myrtle, and Nick end up at an apartment in New York, where a wild party ensues, and in a violent outburst, Tom strikes Myrtle and breaks her nose. Later in the month, Gatsby sends Nick an invitation to come to a sumptuous party at his estate, where Nick meets his neighbor for the first time. This is the first of many parties Nick attends at the Gatsby mansion in the company of many of the rich and famous. When Gatsby later takes Nick to New York for lunch, he regales him with tales of his war medals and his Oxford education. The other guest at lunch is the notorious gangster Meyer Wolfsheim, who reportedly fixed the World Series in 1918. Nick, befuddled by Gatsby's questionable associations, is also taken aback when Jordan asks him on Gatsby's behalf to invite Daisy to lunch at Nick's bungalow. He does so even though he now knows that Daisy and Gatsby were in love prior to her marriage to Tom. The two ill-fated lovers meet, and Gatsby takes Daisy to his mansion and invites her to his next party. Daisy agrees, but when she disapproves of some of his guests, Gatsby stops entertaining altogether. He eventually tells Nick of his truly humble Midwest origins, noting that his name is really Gatz, that he did not graduate from Oxford, and that he has made his fortune in bootlegging and other nefarious ventures. One day Gatsby, the Buchanans, Jordan, and Nick drive to New York. On the way, they stop at the garage of George Wilson, husband of Myrtle, who tries to get money from Tom and announces that he and Myrtle are leaving town. At a hotel in New York, Tom accuses Gatsby of trying to steal his wife, and a fierce argument ensues. Daisy heads home with Gatsby, and shortly thereafter Tom and Jordan stop at Wilson's garage to find that Myrtle has been killed by a hit-and-run driver of a yellow car. Tom blames the death on Gatsby though the real driver at the time was Daisy, whom Gatsby seeks to protect. George
Wilson, thinking Gatsby was the driver, goes to Gatsby's estate, shoots him, and then kills himself. Only Gatsby's father, who thinks his son was a great man, attends his funeral. Nick later learns that Tom had a part in Gatsby's death, having convinced Wilson that Myrtle and Gatsby were lovers. Disillusioned with the Buchanans and their ilk, Nick decides to return to the Midwest.

### Major Themes

Echoes of the American Dream pervade the novel, which contrasts the supposed innocence and moral sense of the “Western” characters with the sophistication and materialism of the “Eastern” characters. Gatsby's lavish existence in the nouveau riche Long Island community of West Egg, moreover, cannot ever compensate for his lack of the more pedigreed wealth of East Egg. He remains an “innocent” in his single-minded pursuit of Daisy despite his association with underworld characters and ill-begotten money. The Valley of Ashes and the sign with the blank eyes of Dr. Eckleburg indicate a moral wasteland and an absent God—as well as the emptiness of the new commercial culture. Gatsby's pursuit of his dream takes on a mythic quality, mirroring the dream which led Americans to conquer the frontier. Gatsby's “frontier,” however, is an ill- advised pursuit of a vacuous young woman not worthy of his love. Initially, Nick, the Midwestern moral arbiter, disdains Gatsby's values, but he eventually comes to see something heroic in Gatsby's vision, which reflects America's own loss of innocence in the face of the crass materialism of the 1920s.

### Critical Reception

Early reviews of Gatsby were mixed, and relatively few copies actually had sold before Fitzgerald's death in 1940. Many critics, most notably Ernest Hemingway, were put off by the fact that Fitzgerald had been known as a writer of stories for popular magazines like The Saturday Evening Post. It was not until a revival of Fitzgerald's works in the 1950s that the novel began to attract serious criticism. For the five ensuing decades, Gatsby has continued to attract critical attention and reappraisal. Critics have praised Fitzgerald's tightly woven narrative, and many have focused on the position of the narrator, Nick Carraway, and the subjective limitations of his observations of Gatsby's saga. Although Gatsby was for many years called “a novel of the Jazz Age” (a term which Fitzgerald coined), critics have agreed that it has a much more universal meaning, not the least of which is a trenchant critique of materialist American society much like T. S. Eliot's The Waste Land. The appearance of at least four biographies in the 1990s and early 2000s is an indication that interest in Fitzgerald's novels remains unabated. Earlier critics of Gatsby emphasized biographical and cultural influences on the novel, and formalist approaches dealt with the novel's structure, point of view, symbols, use of language, and the like. By the 1980s through the early 2000s, a variety of approaches, both heavily theoretical and non-theoretical, have been evident in critics' commentaries. While many have continued to explore biographical influences or comparisons with other authors, or to use New Critical analyses, others have increasingly employed such techniques as deconstruction, feminist criticism, and discourse analysis to uncover hidden meanings in the text.

### The Great Gatsby, F. Scott Fitzgerald: Principal Works

*Flappers and Philosophers* (short stories) 1920

*This Side of Paradise* (novel) 1920

*The Beautiful and Damned* (novel) 1922

*Tales of the Jazz Age* (short stories) 1922

*The Vegetable; or, From President to Postman* (play) 1923
The Great Gatsby (novel) 1925

All the Sad Young Men (short stories) 1926

Tender Is the Night (novel) 1934

Taps at Reveille (short stories) 1935

The Last Tycoon (unfinished novel) 1941

The Crack-Up (essays, notebooks, and letters) 1945

Afternoon of an Author (short stories and essays) 1957

The Pat Hobby Stories (short stories) 1962

The Letters of F. Scott Fitzgerald (letters) 1963

Dear Scott/Dear Max: The Fitzgerald-Perkins Correspondence (letters) 1971

As Ever, Scott Fitz: Letters Between F. Scott Fitzgerald and His Literary Agent Harold Ober, 1919-1940 (letters) 1972

The Basil and Josephine Stories (short stories) 1973

Bits of Paradise [with Zelda Fitzgerald] (short stories) 1973

The Notebooks of F. Scott Fitzgerald (notebooks) 1978

The Price Was High (short stories) 1979

The Fantasy and Mystery Stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald (short stories) 1991

Jazz Age Stories [with Thomas Hardy] (short stories) 1998

Dear Scott, Dearest Zelda (letters) 2002

**Criticism: Kent Cartwright (essay date spring 1984)**


[In the following essay, Cartwright discusses ways in which Nick Carraway is sometimes a confused or misleading narrator.]

While I have met individuals whom I might describe as more Gatsby than Carraway, I have seldom met a critic I would so describe. As critics, we seem to cherish our disillusionment. Indeed, serious interest in *The Great Gatsby*, according to Richard Foster, was launched by a generation of neoclassical and formalist critics who tended to believe in the final, tough truth of existence imaged in the thinning possibility and thinning joy of Nick’s lugubrious moral retreat. As a consequence, traditional estimates of *The Great Gatsby* have grown
up around the dual assumptions that Nick speaks for his author and that the novel's mission is an essentially straightforward criticism of the American Dream. Furthermore, because something about Nick's "midwesternism" seems deeply personal to Fitzgerald, critics have tended not to distinguish between either the narrator and his author or the narrator and his novel. Nick's vision, however, is not identical to Fitzgerald's, or at least to the novel's, for Nick is capable of being an unreliable narrator at moments that are crucial to the story's development. Indeed, in exactly the same ways that Nick may be a flawed character, he is also sometimes a confused, misleading, or inaccurate teller of his tale.

In the last two decades, critical acceptance of Nick's judgments has yielded to some disenchantment with the narrator and his moral actions. His detractors have described him variously (and perhaps excessively) as a defunct archpriest, panderer, prig, spiritual bankrupt, hypocrite, and "moral eunuch"—a man capable of neither assertive action nor self-knowledge. Even those congenial to Carraway's views speak of his "inhibitions and lack of boldness," his failure of self-awareness, and his fear of commitment. To many readers, moreover, the hopelessness of Nick's final vision seems somehow to betray his story. Part of that dissatisfaction arises from Nick's moral withdrawal to the Middle West of his past, while a related response argues that the dream lives beyond Gatsby's death and that a "gleam of hope" is left the reader at the end, a hope perhaps inspired by the very limitations of Nick's consciousness.

Recent critics, that is, have begun to see Gatsby's story differently from the way Nick would have us see it. To pose such possibilities, however, is to tamper with accepted notions about the novel's integrity, for some defenders of Nick have argued that "the book makes no sense—if Carraway is repudiated." Yet the limitations of Nick's character do have narrative consequences, for Nick sometimes sees only part of a meaning that a scene carries, sometimes shifts ground perplexingly, and sometimes even strains "judgments" out of inconclusive evidence. To accuse Nick of such faults might sound idiosyncratic and even churlish. After all, Nick is the novel's lone moral consciousness; only he sees the richness of meaning—the ineffable dream and its foul wake—in the events on Long Island that summer. But some readers argue that Nick's vision is "limited" and that Fitzgerald intended no simple identification either between the narrator and himself or the narrator and his reader; others have begun to discover differing, sometimes conflicting narrative "voices" in Nick.

In addition, Nick develops a peculiar rigidity during the course of the novel. Concurrently, as Nick reveals a growing determination to perceive events in a fixed way, his flights of responsive imagination diminish. After chapter 6 the novel darkens. One explanation for this is that the romantic and mythic context gives way to the social and economic. The darkening tone, then, proceeds in part from Nick's evolving consciousness, a staking out of his moral terrain of lost possibility. The two narrative movements are simultaneous: Nick's emerging weaknesses as a narrator parallel his progressively constricted vision, as if the truths Nick affirms are not exactly the truths of his fable. Nick's final disillusionment, that is, derives as much from his own moral dimness, his passivity, and his exaggerated gentility as it does from the facts of Gatsby's life; correspondingly, those qualities sometimes compromise the narration, altering, even from moment to moment, the response—empathy or removal, acceptance or doubt—that his telling draws from the reader. Such a view of Nick's weaknesses must challenge the traditional assumption that Nick generally doubles for Fitzgerald. It might, indeed, reveal that Nick's closing asceticism is more a preference than an imperative, that his assessment of the dream is not conclusive, and that the novel is far more open-ended than some critics have suggested.

Almost from the beginning, the narration invites readers to feel subtle distinctions between representation and explanation. This divergence is a characteristic of the novel's narrative style and is repeated variously throughout the story. The technique has the advantage of economy; it gives readers two types of impressions: one created through descriptions of places, things, and events, and another created by Nick's responses and reflections. The pattern exhibits itself, for example, in Daisy's story of the butler's nose and her comparison of Nick to an absolute rose.
“I’ll tell you a family secret,” she whispered enthusiastically. “It’s about the butler's nose. Do you want to hear about the butler's nose? … Well, he wasn't always a butler; he used to be the silver polisher for some people in New York that had a silver service for two hundred people. He had to polish it from morning till night, until finally it began to affect his nose.”

“I love to see you at my table, Nick. You remind me of a—of a rose, an absolute rose. Doesn't he?” She turned to Miss Baker for confirmation: “An absolute rose?”

In the first instance, Daisy's anecdote is trivial and insipid, clearly anticlimactic to the preparation she makes; in the second her comparison is ridiculous and insincere, camouflaging her real preoccupation. But in both cases, Nick is captivated by Daisy's vibrant beauty: “For a moment the last sunshine fell with romantic affection upon her glowing face; her voice compelled me forward breathlessly as I listened” (14); “She was only extemporizing, but a stirring warmth flowed from her, as if her heart was trying to come out to you concealed in one of those breathless, thrilling words” (15). In each example, the narration creates two effects, the first through the structure of incidents—such as the thrown napkin and abrupt departure with which Daisy disposes of her interest in absolute roses—and the second through Nick's mesmerization before her shining face and the feverish modulations of her voice. But the two effects judge Daisy oppositely: the one with distance, the other with engagement. This is not to say that Nick fails to recognize that Daisy is as childish as she is womanly, rather that the response he emphasizes reveals only one-half the way the scene dramatizes her. To acknowledge such distinctions is already to put the reader at some critical remove from the narrator.

An example of Nick's inordinate responses occurs in chapter 4 during his automobile ride with Gatsby to New York (64-69). Fitzgerald's aim in this scene is to create that ambivalence fundamental to the novel by deepening our fascination with the mystery of Gatsby, even though Gatsby teeters on the edge of the ridiculous. One technique Fitzgerald employs is to preserve a kernel of actual or even metaphoric truth in each of Gatsby's falsehoods: he was educated, at least for a few months, at Oxford; he did inherit a “good deal of money” from his spiritual father, Dan Cody, though he was cheated of it; he was a genuine war hero, even if a copy of Sergeant York. Another, more subtle technique is to distance the reader from Carraway's judgment, just as Nick is distanced from Gatsby. Through the episode we see Nick's initial, cool skepticism toppling before his sensual imagination—responses disproportionate in either extreme—which leave the reader's more balanced impressions at odds with the narrator's. Indeed, we are left reacting to Nick's reactions, a condition which not only insulates Gatsby but also evokes his power.

During the journey Fitzgerald calls our attention repeatedly to Nick's filtering lens. We begin pointedly with Nick's aesthetic intellectualism, his “disappointment” that Gatsby “had little to say” and the arch dismissal of him as “simply the proprietor of an elaborate road-house next door” (64). Yet juxtaposed against this wry boredom is the promise of surprise: “And then came that disconcerting ride” (65). Thus, Fitzgerald sets the drama of the scene in the dialectics of Nick's response. Nick rapidly demonstrates a repertoire of judicious responses: his strained sensitivity at Gatsby's overtness, “A little overwhelmed, I began the generalized evasions which that question deserves” (65); his fine ear for the false note as Gatsby stumbles, or chokes, over “educated at Oxford. … And with this doubt his whole statement fell to pieces, and I wondered if there wasn't tion deserves” (65); his fine ear for the false note as Gatsby stum-something a little sinister about him, after all” (65); and his discreet confirming of his own instincts as he asks Gatsby in what part of the Middle West he grew up and is answered “‘San Francisco.’” Nick's power of lucid assessment is in full display.

Carraway's vision of Gatsby now becomes more subtle and extreme. When Gatsby recalls the “sudden extinction” of his clan, Nick responds, “For a moment I suspected that he was pulling my leg, but a glance at him convinced me otherwise” (66). Nick momentarily suspects Gatsby of an irony of which the observer is capable but the observed incapable, though Nick's glance leaves unsettled whether he thinks Gatsby means what he says or not. Gatsby's next image of himself, as a young, sad rajah in the capitals of Europe, tickles Nick with literary hilarity: “With an effort I managed to restrain my incredulous laughter. The very phrases
were worn so threadbare that they evoked no image except that of a turbaned ‘character’ leaking sawdust at every pore as he pursued a tiger through the Bois de Boulogne” (66). Nick reacts in the full possession of his worldliness, distancing the reader with him, as he caricatures Gatsby's tale into a pastiche of incongruent cliches. And at just that moment of assurance, Nick trips unknowingly over his own learned responses. Gatsby tells his story of the Argonne Forest: “We stayed there two days and two nights, a hundred and thirty men with sixteen Lewis guns, and when the infantry came up at last they found the insignia of three German divisions among the piles of the dead. I was promoted to be a major, and every Allied government gave me a decoration—even Montenegro, little Montenegro down on the Adriatic Sea” (66).

Influenced by the absurdity of the sawdust romance, Nick dismisses Gatsby's war reminiscence: “it was like skimming hastily through a dozen magazines” (67). But Carraway misjudges. Gatsby's tale is not incredible in context: unlike the leaking rajah, its subject is realistic, its derailing local and concrete, and the whole internally consistent. It is also confirmed by Nick himself in subsequent narrative when he summarizes Gatsby's career: “He did extraordinarily well in the war. He was a captain before he went to the front, and following the Argonne battles he got his majority and the command of the divisional machine-guns’ (150). Such acts of singular courage, of course, were familiar during the First World War. The narrative itself has been colored from the beginning by a sense of restless men—Nick in particular—returning from war, flushed with the adventure and thrill of combat. Nick and Gatsby had established the bond of war experience between them before they even learned each other's names (47), and the restlessness that Nick has noticed in Gatsby (“He was never quite still [64]) at the outset of their journey recalls again, like Nick's own restlessness, the agitations of the combat veteran. The Argonne Forest adventure then is not pulp fantasy in the same sense as the melancholy rajah; it is, in fact, close to Nick's own experiences and close to the texture of the novel. Nick has allowed his reactions to outrun his evidence.

Yet Carraway's opinion next does a “disconcerting” about-face. As Gatsby brandishes the medal from Montenegro, Nick begins to capitulate: “To my astonishment, the thing had an authentic look” (67). The Oxford picture completes the reversal: “Then it was all true. I saw the skins of tigers flaming in his palace on the Grand Canal; I saw him opening a chest of rubies to ease, with their crimson-lighted depths, the gnawings of his broken heart” (67). Nick's conversion is so odd that one scrutinizes for a hint of irony. There is none, nor any countervailing action either, like Nick's earlier clarifying glance. Nick's capitulation appears confirmed, furthermore, by his own “astonishment” and by Gatsby's “satisfaction” as he pockets up his trophies. Indeed, the flaming tigers' skins and the crimson-lighted chest have a familiar ring about them, recalling, for example, the blooming Mediterranean and idylls of Fifth Avenue of an earlier episode. Carraway betrays his susceptibility, much like that of which he accuses Gatsby, not only to romance but also to the fantasies of “a dozen magazines.”

A culminating incident follows. When Gatsby shows a “white card from his wallet” to the motorcycle policeman, who immediately apologizes for having stopped him, Nick asks, “‘What was that? … The picture of Oxford?’” (68). Nick's question is commonly considered sarcastic, though his habitual ambivalence makes an intentional naivete possible as well. Yet if Nick is now taking rhetorical revenge, are we to understand his vision of the Grand Canal as sarcastic, too? Or has Nick simply switched to his rationalist mode? If sarcastic, then Nick will undergo yet another sea change, since the journey ends in an affirmation of fairyland, “the city rising up across the river in white heaps and sugar lumps,” where “Even Gatsby could happen, without any particular wonder” (69). Either Nick means, confusingly, sometimes more and sometimes less than what he says, or his impressionability and fastidiousness alternately swallow each other.

Nick's “judgment” of Gatsby becomes exaggerated, unstable, and finally self-compromising. The key to Nick's response, of course, is his admission that his “incredulity was submerged in fascination” (67). To whatever degree Gatsby has won Nick over, he has won him not by an appeal to evidence but by an appeal to imagination. Because of his impressionability, Nick grasps an image and decks it out with his own bright feathers. But through this submersion, Nick's belief has in some measure grown. Fascination breeds credulity.
Indeed, Gatsby is such a cliché that on the flimsiest of bona fides he becomes a miracle. Fitzgerald shows Carraway increasingly convinced of Gatsby; simultaneously, he moves the reader as well, but not in unison. Because we diverge from Nick—sometimes hesitating at his reactions, sometimes moving beyond them—we feel, even as we too are compelled with fascination, a firmer objectivity. Nick's confusions, then, become values in the reader's portrait of Gatsby, making him powerful even as he is remote; plausible yet strange; possible. Thanks, curiously, to the distance Fitzgerald establishes between Nick and his reader, even Gatsby can happen here, without any particular wonder.

As the novel progresses, Nick's sense of possibility recedes. In the memorable scene when Gatsby, Daisy, and Nick tour Gatsby's house (91-97) after the two lovers have been reunited, we hear the note of doubt and disbelief echo like the faint rumble of thunder along the Sound. That counterpoint is structured, in part, into the details of the scene—the rain, the gathering darkness, the isolation of the lovers—but another part is developed by the steady commentary of the narrator. Indeed, while the scenic details are ambiguous in their import, Nick's emerging disillusionment is less so. Nick wants to suggest that for all the intensity of the moment the consummation is unreal, atavistic. But the scene we have is incomplete, perhaps contrary, evidence for his conclusion.

Just as Daisy's house is the symbol of the magical, transforming power of wealth, the tour of Gatsby's house is a ritual demonstration of his rightful entry into Daisy's world and beyond Daisy's world into a self-created beatitude of money. The tour is a set-piece, a celebration of the passage into fairyland. The three enter formally by the big posterns, the long way. Daisy murmurs enchantingly as she admires the feudal silhouette, the gardens, the odors of various flowers. The house is a castle of nascent life and incongruent riches: the Marie Antoinette music rooms and Restoration salons imminent with breathless, imagined guests, “period bedrooms swathed in rose and lavender silk and vivid with new flowers” (92). At this moment, Gatsby's life is the wild romance of the young rajah come true, and it is no wonder that Nick is on the verge of asking to see the rubies. Gatsby's shirts are the apotheosis of his wealth, part of the “youth and mystery”—like Daisy's “freshness of many clothes” (150)—that wealth imprisons. They are the riches of the East, existing only to glorify their owner, a numinous beauty so vast and so casually held that Daisy buries her face and cries, herself, in wonder. Daisy is at one with Gatsby's dream.

And for this interlude at least, Gatsby achieves his dream of Daisy. Nick, both as participant and as narrator, realizes the immensity of this fulfillment. In the ecstasy of Daisy's presence, Gatsby has transcended his known world: “Sometimes, too, he stared around at his possessions in a dazed way, as though in her actual and astounding presence none of it was any longer real” (92). As Gatsby tries ineffectually to explain himself, Nick observes the intensity and flow of this transformation: “He had passed visibly through two states and was entering upon a third. After his embarrassment and his unreasoning joy he was consumed with wonder at her presence” (93). Nick, too, has a sense of the delicate magic of the moment. As the three of them look at the pink and golden sunset over the sea, Daisy whispers to Gatsby, “I'd like to just get one of those pink clouds and put you in it and push you around” (95). In the ethereal adolescence of that profession of love is its power, and Nick responds to the aura of completeness that surrounds the two lovers: “I tried to go then, but they wouldn't hear of it; perhaps my presence made them feel more satisfactorily alone” (95). The twilight falling, Nick emphasizes the removal of Gatsby and Daisy into a storybook world of their own. As “The Eve of St. Agnes” leaves its lovers suddenly long ages hence, so too Carraway leaves Gatsby and Daisy inhabiting their vision in solitude: “They had forgotten me, but Daisy glanced up and held out her hand; Gatsby didn't know me now at all. I looked once more at them and they looked at me, remotely, possessed by intense life” (97).

Countering the tone of ritual, love, and apotheosis in this episode is an undertow, a suggestion of failure and constriction, made by Nick. This judgment is more than a matter of “structural” irony; it is an awkward and personal interpretation. Of Gatsby's absorption in the thought of the green light on Daisy's dock, for example, Nick writes: “Possibly it had occurred to him that the colossal significance of that light had now vanished
forever. … Now it was again a green light on a dock. His count of enchanted objects had diminished by one” (94). Not only is the narrator's grammatical shift from a conditional to a declarative stance peculiar, but the comment itself is peculiar, coming from the observer who has just described a whole mansion full of objects transformed in the enchantment of the lover's presence. Daisy admiring his rooms, Daisy brushing her hair with his golden brush, Daisy sobbing into his shirts—Gatsby's count of magical objects has actually increased a thousandfold (92). Nick's reflections are not the remarks of the person who almost asks to see the rubies, but rather the more hardened and distant judgments of the man who has seen further to the ruination of Gatsby's dream. They are remarks true to Nick's developing character, but less true to the moment that Gatsby and Daisy inhabit.

Nick wants to argue that the dream is unachievable at the very moment that Gatsby is achieving it. Another such incongruent judgment comes as he leaves the lovers:

As I went over to say good-by I saw that the expression of bewilderment had come back into Gatsby's face, as though a faint doubt had occurred to him as to the quality of his present happiness. Almost five years! There must have been moments even that afternoon when Daisy tumbled short of his dreams—not through her own fault, but because of the colossal vitality of his illusion. … No amount of fire or freshness can challenge what a man will store up in his ghostly heart.

As I watched him he adjusted himself a little, visibly. His hand took hold of hers, and as she said something low in his ear he turned toward her with a rush of emotion. 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.

[97]

Again, Nick seems to be speaking from two perspectives: the one of a man describing what he sees, the other of a man pleading, instead, his own view of life. Nick's assertion that “no amount of fire or freshness can challenge” a man's illusions argues discordantly with the “fluctuating, feverish warmth” of the voice that “couldn't be over-dreamed.” Daisy's voice is as exciting and compelling as Gatsby's vision of her; her voice is, in fact, the essence of her attractiveness, and its incessant, erotic modulations are the essence of the dream. Just as Daisy's voice held Nick spellbound in chapter 1, it is commensurate also with Gatsby's capacity for wonder. Nick seems to be temporarily both “inside and outside” this scene, but the conjunction of viewpoints mystifies, as if Daisy's voice could be both overdreamed and not overdreamed. For the reader, Nick's descriptions point a different direction from his assessments. The glory of this scene, of course, is its ambiguity about what is really won or lost, a mystery to which Nick is no master sleuth. While Nick misjudges the occasion by the measure of his own later disillusionment, Gatsby and Daisy exist inside the dream, living it.

In the novel's final chapter, a peculiar dislocation or reorientation of the story's direction takes place which again connects Nick's personal limitations with his blurred narrative judgment. The first three sections (164-76) of the chapter deal with Gatsby's funeral. The narrator's intention is to sink Gatsby's death into anticlimax by revealing his essential irrelevance to the world in which he had seemed to be the observed of all observers and by demonstrating again the pathetic fragility of the dream which had now “broken up like glass against Tom's hard malice” (148). But the story of Gatsby's burial, ironically, turns out to be not so much about Gatsby as it is about Nick. More than in the immediately preceding chapters, Nick's judgments and responses are evident here: his feeling of responsibility toward Gatsby, his growing awareness of the callous indifference of others, his final emotional numbness.
Nick identifies Gatsby with his own progress. The chapter, in fact, is largely a probing of Nick's statement that “I found myself on Gatsby's side, and alone” (165). Nick feels an “intense personal interest” (165) and a ceremonial responsibility toward Gatsby, whose body seems to call out to him for help and companionship (166): “I wanted to get somebody for him. I wanted to go into the room where he lay and reassure him …” (165). On Gatsby's behalf, Nick grows in angry disillusionment at the breaches of faith by those like Daisy and Wolfsheim who should care most for Gatsby at the final hour: “I began to have a feeling of defiance, of scornful solidarity between Gatsby and me against them all” (166). Just as he takes up partial residence in his house, Nick takes up Gatsby's moral residence, becomes Gatsby's factor, seeking out for him the apparent meaning of his death. That meaning is in its abandonment. After hanging up on Klipspringer, Nick acknowledges, he “felt a certain shame for Gatsby” (170), as if embarrassed for his friend at the indifference of those who accepted his generosity. In the desolation of Gatsby's funeral Nick begins, as the canvas is rolled back, to slip into an unfeeling abstractedness: “I tried to think about Gatsby then for a moment, but he was already too far away, and I could only remember, without resentment, that Daisy hadn't sent a message or a flower” (176). Nick loses Gatsby, too, and the ceremony's diminution becomes its revelation.

The narrative perspective toward Gatsby is thus both inside and outside in an odd, sequential way. Though Nick begins as Gatsby's surrogate, he becomes the dulled consciousness of society. That external frame of reference is illustrated in Nick by the futility of his comradeship and by his own failing intimacy with Gatsby. The narrative stance toward Gatsby in death has become the opposite side of its stance toward him in life: while earlier parts of the novel witness the world from the context of Gatsby, later ones witness Gatsby from the context of an indifferent world. On the strength, and ironic failure, of Nick's very empathy, the narrative perspective reduces Gatsby's dream to ashes. The vitiated ritual of Gatsby's burial finds its emotional correlative in Nick's numbness, the tableau comprising for him life's sentence upon the dreamer and the dream. Nick's psychic depletion becomes, too, the ironic reversal of Gatsby's dazed exaltation in his reunion with Daisy, the two events parallel in their isolation, one in “intense life,” the other in death.

Is Nick's judgment the same as the fable's? While Nick's numbness succeeds Gatsby's exhilaration in time, does it also succeed in value? Gatsby was a creature of magic and light, and though he used the “glitterati” of Long Island as stardust for Daisy, they were only that, as unimportant to him as he is to them. The loneliness of Gatsby's interment can only be irrelevant to the transforming power of his vision while he lived. Indeed, it is more important to Nick that Gatsby's funeral be attended than it ever could have been to Gatsby. Nick's dual perspective seems self-contradictory: the meaning that he brings to Gatsby's death from outside is inconsistent with his knowledge of Gatsby's special existence. The isolation of Gatsby's funeral cannot destroy the wonder of his life.

The centerpiece both for Nick's “intense personal interest” and for his “shame for Gatsby” is his visit to Wolfsheim, Gatsby's “closest friend” (172). Oddly, the episode resists Nick's melancholy irony. Wolfsheim's pleasant and casual gangsterism and his vision of the perfectly criminal in the perfectly patriotic and upper class render the scene comic. Nick's intention, apparently, is to show Wolfsheim as a genial sentimentalist and then to puncture his “friendship” (Gatsby's last “'goneggtion'” with his world) by revealing the facile cynicism and manipulativeness under it. For Wolfsheim will not attend the funeral, will not “'get mixed up in it'” (173): his friendship is merely conspiracy. Yet Wolfsheim also delivers some parting advice which forms a comment, in turn, upon Nick's brand of camaraderie: “'Let us learn to show our friendship for a man when he is alive and not after he is dead'” (173). Good advice—but Nick has acted out its reverse. He has been a better friend to Gatsby in death than in life, and his “interest” comes like an apology after the calamity he has watched so passively. Wolfsheim's perspective is the rejoinder to Carraway's. Just as Gatsby's dream is what ennobles him beyond Wolfsheim, so Wolfsheim's statement exposes Carraway. Nick, as he thinks to serve Gatsby in death, is really doing what he likes best: serving a form, a ceremony, a set of manners.

The problems with Nick as narrator are similar to the problems with Nick as moral center. The personal characteristics that have caused readers to distrust his moral vision are connected to the qualities that invite
the reader's distrust for the accuracy of some narrative judgments: his impressionability in the car ride sequence, his confusing ambivalence during the tour of Gatsby's mansion, his self-serving proprieties surrounding the funeral. Nick's judgments, however, seem to harden in disillusionment even as the fable's ambiguities compound. Rather than the arbiter of final meanings, Nick is a contestant in the novel's internal tugging war for truth. His narrative failings, in fact, recall other characters who live inside the defensive armor of their own mannerisms, pretensions, and falsehoods: Myrtle and her comic gentility; Jordan looking like a “good illustration” (178) or losing herself in the curious balancing act of her chin before a disagreeable conversation; Daisy and her “sophistication”; Tom expounding a stupid racism or swinging his forearms like a half-back along Fifth Avenue. Such masks and ploys symbolize characters who will not connect with one another or with the life around them.

Nick is the one character capable of perceiving life as Gatsby and the others live it, but he will not shake his fellows out of their defensive pretensions or their complacencies or their lies. Despite Gatsby's grand protean existence, Nick prefers to believe in the unchangeableness of the human character, or at least the unchangeableness of those careless people who smash up things and creatures. That belief is an expression of Nick's personality, for he comes to accept the loneliness and isolation of human experience, but it is not the only truth in the novel. Gatsby dies from the shallowness of Daisy, the hard malice of Tom, and his own pride and misjudgment, not from hope and wonder. Though Nick declares that “you can't repeat the past,” the story neither proves nor disproves it. That is perhaps the most unsettling effect of the novel: that the myth of Gatsby survives everything—his own presumption, Tom's malice, and Nick's gloom. That is surely because the dream is as much emotion as object, as much the capacity for wonder and aesthetic contemplation as it is Daisy Buchanan. Accordingly, the dream never loses its sense of reality: the thrill of excitement and possibility in Daisy's voice convinces utterly, long after she is confirmed in triviality. Gatsby's vitality alone is the measure of his dream. That is why Nick's gradual detachment from Gatsby in death not only misrepresents the dream but is irrelevant to it.

Yet we are drawn to the narrator. Beyond the fundamental decency which Nick reveals—as he wipes the dried lather from Mr. McKee's cheek (37), or corrects Daisy's assertion that Tom is shamming about a car deal while really talking to his girlfriend (116), or erases the obscene word from Gatsby's steps (181)—his sheer, brilliant responsiveness to life sometimes redeems his passivity. That sensitivity compares for the reader, perhaps better than Gatsby's, “to one of those intricate machines that register earthquakes ten thousand miles away” (2). Images flood in upon him, touching off flights of imagination: Jordan's chin, Daisy's voice, Gatsby's smile; he perceives the subtlest social communications; he resonates with sentiment, chagrin, perplexity, and transport. Nick's imagination charms us, even more than the occasions that draw it forth. In the “unprosperous” and “bare” interior of Wilson's wretched garage, for example, Nick fantasizes “that sumptuous and romantic apartments were concealed overhead”—incredible commentary, until it turns into half-truth, for the apartments do contain a woman of “immediately perceptible vitality” and “smouldering” nerve ends (25). Again, Fifth Avenue is “so warm and soft, almost pastoral,” that he “wouldn't have been surprised to see a great flock of white sheep turn the corner” (28). At the party in Washington Heights, as Catherine talks disparagingly on Monte Carlo, for Nick, “The late afternoon sky bloomed in the window for a moment like the blue honey of the Mediterranean” (34).

We feel a special affection for Nick, in part because the freshness and humor of the novel are substantially an expression of his vision. We wish him well. Our affinity with Nick is also a function of the novel's first-person point of view, a narrative perspective for which Wayne Booth's comment about Emma applies with equal force: “the sustained inside view leads the reader to hope for good fortune for the character with whom he travels, quite independently of the qualities revealed.” Together with his narrative intimacy, Nick's likeability with the audience creates (as Kenneth Burke would have it) form. These two phenomena arouse expectations within the psyche of the reader that the resolution of the narrative will also bring about Nick's personal fulfillment. Some version of a positive finish—wisdom, if not joy—is implicit in the very condition of the novel, the aesthetic choices Fitzgerald has made. Part of the work's ambivalence, however, stems from
Fitzgerald's undercutting of the novel's form; he defeats our expectations, for Nick loses Gatsby, misses in love, and retreats to the safe and complacent Middle West of his past. I suspect that the discomfort so many readers have felt with the novel's ending is a direct expression of this irresolution in Gatsby's form, a dissonance which must reinforce our sense of Nick's limitations. The conclusion of the novel challenges any blithe acceptance of Nick—as moral arbiter, as judicious observer, as companion, as a character fully entitled to our expectations of good fortune. Indeed, Nick's charming impressionability contains the seeds of his own disablement. His imagination is the strongest part of his character, as his fantasies about entering the lives of beautiful women on Fifth Avenue suggest; but the romance of life consists more in what he rhapsodizes than in what he does. As Nick himself observes, there is a “haunting loneliness” and “waste” about such a life (57). While Nick reverberates like a tympan with felt life, he is the opposite of Gatsby, fixed, like the wall of the cave against which the shadows play.

Readers sometimes confuse the narrator of The Great Gatsby with its author, but the novel is far more ambiguous and morally disconcerting than the attitude that Nick would have us accept. The work represents a kind of miscegenation of forms, a romance enclosed in a novel of manners, and Nick and Gatsby seem attached as if by pulleys: as the one is more credible, the other is less so. Gatsby can be both criminal and romantic hero because the book creates for him a visionary moral standard that transcends the conventional and that his life affirms. However, nothing in Nick compels our contemplation or our wonder; he lives in the image of an increasingly reductive melancholy, not of a transcending dream. While Nick has begun the novel addressing questions of judgment, he steadily reveals the infirmity of his own. Nick learns disillusionment for himself, but his unreliable assessments at several key moments distance the reader from the same inevitability. That difference, in fact, is part of the enduring fascination of Fitzgerald's employment of a first-person point of view in the novel. While Fitzgerald subverts our expectations for Nick, he does not wholly subvert the moral or emotional justice of those expectations. The possibility of fulfillment remains latent within the life of the novel despite Nick's inability to attain it. If Nick's ending betrays the story, the novel's inextinguishable sense of possibility partly restores it. Ultimately, the failure of Nick's narration is a failure of his will to believe, even in his own imagination. Too cautious to pay the price for living too long with a single dream, Nick pays the much dearer price for living too long with no dream.

Notes

In length, the book barely qualifies as a full-sized novel. In subject, it is about an American bootlegger who nourishes an adolescent dream about a golden girl he can't have. Its plot does little more than tell us who the protagonist is and get him killed off in the end by the down-and-out husband of the blowsy mistress of the rich brute who has married the girl whom the hero wants but can't have. Its manner of telling is disjointed, albeit by the literary design of the author, and accompanied by some seemingly casual moralizing by an omnipresent narrator sounding suspiciously like the author and sort of occupying himself at other times by taking an interest in a woman golfer who cheats, the only other substantial character in the novel if we except a denizen of the underworld, the mistress's dog and friends, Gatsby's father, a bunch of assorted party goers, and one mourner.

From this perspective, the adulation The Great Gatsby has received may seem totally out of proportion. For half a century, it has held a high place among twentieth-century novels. Its numerous reprints around the world and its successive presentations on film have made Gatsby as identifiable an American figure as Huck Finn. It has revived the twenties, set current fashions, and provided dialogue for three generations of devoted readers. In these respects alone, the question of its literary merits set aside, it qualifies as a great American novel. For clearly, it has added a name to that relatively small number of factual and fictional Americans by

Criticism: Kenneth E. Eble (essay date 1985)


[In the following essay, Eble places Gatsby in the tradition of the quest for an “American” literature.]
which Americans know themselves and are known by the world. And it has done so by means of a writer's craft working within the traditional form of a long fictional narrative. If a substantial claim is to be made for *The Great Gatsby* as the great American novel, it will have to be made by a more considered examination. What I propose here is to examine the novel's relationship to the concept of the “great American novel”; the substance of the novel, its “great argument,” as Edith Wharton phrased it; and the novel's structure and style, its excellence as a literary work, a novel.

John William De Forest, less than a great novelist himself, raised the question of “the great American novel” in an essay with that specific title in 1868. The literary nationalism that spawned the concept had already been expressing itself for at least half a century and had resulted in such documents as Joel Barlow's *Columbiad*, Royall Tyler's *The Contrast*, and Emerson's “The American Scholar.” The novels that De Forest could measure the concept against were not a promising lot. Their authors are largely forgotten by now—Paulding, Brown, Kennedy, and Simms: “ghosts,” who “wrote about ghosts, and the ghosts have vanished utterly.” Melville escaped De Forest's attention, much as *Moby-Dick*, for all its bulk, escaped most critics' notice until the twentieth century. Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* was there to be considered, but De Forest found the novel, as others did also, too insubstantial, too provincial, to be either novel enough or American enough to qualify. The novel he did single out was *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which had a sufficiently broad, true, and sympathetic representation of American life to make it worth considering. De Forest was biased here by his own understandable preoccupation with the Civil War and its aftermath, although *Uncle Tom's Cabin* deserves more attention than it gets. Edmund Wilson has pointed out: “It is a much more impressive work than one has ever been allowed to suspect. The first thing that strikes one about it is a certain eruptive force.”

By the time Fitzgerald began to write, seekers after the great American novel had a much wider choice, and since then a still wider choice. Edith Wharton's essay, “The Great American Novel,” in the *Yale Review* in 1927, expressed skepticism toward the very idea. As far as she could determine, “The great American novel must always be about Main Street, geographically, socially, and intellectually.” This was a restriction she did not accept, and most of her essay is about the limitations such insistence places on the novelist. Moreover, what might be expected of American novelists when Main Street, she argued, offered “so meagre a material to the imagination?” Still, she pointed out Robert Grant's *Unleavened Bread*, Frank Norris's *McTeague*, and David Graham Phillips' *Susan Lenox* as not only “great American novels,” but great novels.

Fifty years later, Philip Roth, writing *The Great American Novel* in name if not in fact, offered *The Scarlet Letter, Moby-Dick, Huckleberry Finn, The Ambassadors*, and *The Golden Bowl* as possibilities. To be precise, these are the choices of a “Vassar slit,” presumably schooled by a modern American English department and badgered into responding to Roth's fictional Hemingway roaring: “‘What about *Red Badge of Courage*! What about *Winesburg, Ohio! The Last of the Mohicans! Sister Carrie! McTeague! My Antonia! The Rise of Silas Lapham! Two Years Before the Mast! Ethan Frome! Barren Ground! What about Booth Tarkington and Sara Orne Jewett, while you're at it? What about our minor poet Francis Scott Fitzwhat'shis name? What about Wolfe and Dos and Faulkner?’”

Roth has Hemingway decide, “‘It hasn't been written yet.’” and to his boast that he will write it, a seagull croaks, “‘Nevermore.’” Perhaps gulls, if not Poe, have the last word on this matter. Frank Norris said something similar about the time Fitzgerald was born: “The Great American Novel is not extinct like the Dodo, but mythical like the Hipogriff.” He also said that the great American novelist was either “as extinct as the Dodo or as far in the future as the practical aeroplane,” which suggests that there should be dozens of them around today. Norris had many things to say about the novel, favoring novels that were “true” and with “a purpose,” and embracing both “realism” and “romance.” He surmised that in his time, the great American novel must be “sectional,” and yet he foresaw a unified America and American novelists reaching a “universal substratum” common to all men. By such a route, he had to admit, the idea of a distinctively “American” novel disappears when a great novelist sounds “the world-note.”
In his fiction—and it is well to note that he was christened Benjamin Franklin Norris,—Norris moved to the novel of epic scope that many others have in mind as requisite to the great American novel. He saw the settling of the American West as “the last great epic event in the history of civilization,” as Fitzgerald also implied in The Great Gatsby. In this respect, Whitman had already written the great American novel, although technically it happened to be a poem, Leaves of Grass, rather than a novel. Whitman, as well as anyone in prose or in poetry, defined this underlying ambition for the great American novel.

The preface to the 1855 edition of Leaves of Grass begins with two whopping assertions, the second scarcely more defensible than the first: “The Americans of all nations at any time upon the earth have probably the fullest poetical nature. The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem.” The elaboration of these assertions, the emphasis on “the largeness of nature or the nation” needing “gigantic and generous treatment,” are too familiar to need repeating. Fitzgerald expressed his awareness of Whitman’s impact in an essay published in 1926 and noted for its bringing Ernest Hemingway to public attention, “How to Waste Material: A Note on My Generation”: “Ever since Irving’s preoccupation with the necessity for an American background, for some square miles of cleared territory on which colorful variants might presently arise, the question of material has hampered the American writer. For one Dreiser who made a single-minded and irreproachable choice there have been a dozen like Henry James who have stupid-got with worry over the matter, and yet another dozen who, blinded by the fading tale of Walt Whitman’s comet, have botched their books by the insincere compulsion to write ‘significantly’ about America.”

Fitzgerald’s judgment of Dreiser and James aside, his awareness of the force of Whitman’s message is directly related to the idea of the great American novel and what that novel should be about. His essay describes various attempts and failures to deal with “American” materials. He cites the treatment of the American farmer, of American youth, of “American politics, business, society, science, racial problems.” His point is that this search for and exploitation of American material is largely in vain: “One author goes to a midland farm for three months to obtain material for an epic of the American husbandman! Another sets off on a like errand to the Blue Ridge Mountains, a third departs with a Corona for the West Indies—one is justified in the belief that what they get hold of will weigh no more than the journalistic loot brought back by Richard Harding Davis and John Fox, Jr., twenty years ago.”

Fitzgerald had already made these points in various parodies of popular novels and, more directly, in a letter to Maxwell Perkins just after The Great Gatsby was published. The letter was about Thomas Boyd’s new novel, Samuel Drummond, which Perkins had described to Fitzgerald in terms of high praise. To Fitzgerald the novel sounded “utterly lowsy,” and he sketched out a “History of the Simple Inarticulate Farmer and his Hired Man Christy” to make his point. The basic issue he raises is the same as the one in his essay: the essential weakness of novels dealing quaintly and falsely with American materials—in this instance, the earthy struggle between the American farmer and the soil—to satisfy some kind of craving for the great American novel. In both of these statements, Fitzgerald did not cite his own example from the recent past, the fact that This Side of Paradise, if it did not speak for all of America, was still received by the public (and promoted by Fitzgerald) as speaking for American youth. The Beautiful and Damned, which followed in 1922, might justifiably have been regarded as trying to take in all parts of Fitzgerald’s longer list, beginning with “business” and ending with “literature.”

The Great Gatsby, as Fitzgerald perceived in writing it, was something different, something more consistent with and closer to Fitzgerald’s wish reported by Edmund Wilson: “I want to be one of the greatest writers who have ever lived, don’t you?” One cannot understand Fitzgerald’s work, can’t come to terms with the possibility of The Great Gatsby being the great American novel, without responding to the naiveté, the presumptuousness, the grandiosity of that remark—as naive and presumptuous and grandiose as Whitman talking about the poetic natures of an American nation and its poets.
That sense of measuring himself against great writers persisted throughout Fitzgerald's life. The curriculum he set up for Sheilah Graham in 1939 was both a recapitulation of his own reading and a considered judgment of what books would best serve Sheilah Graham's beginning and his own continuing education. The novels form a diverse and respectable list, weighted toward the modern, as one might expect, and as much European as British and American. Among the various novels or parts of novels are most of those necessary to serious study of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century novel: *The Red and the Black*, *Vanity Fair*, *Bleak House*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, *Anna Karenina* and *War and Peace*, *Eugénie Grandet*, *Madame Bovary*, *Sister Carrie*, *Man's Fate*, a half-dozen or so novels by Henry James, a similar number by Hardy, Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist*, Faulkner's *Sanctuary*, and others. He prized his meeting with Joyce in 1928 and pasted the letter he received from him in his copy of *Ulysses*. The drunken serenading with which he and Ring Lardner paid their respects to Joseph Conrad is also a part of Fitzgerald lore. But there is a seriousness in this reading and literary hero worshiping that underscores Fitzgerald's conception of himself as a serious novelist. The long struggle to bring another novel into being after completing *The Great Gatsby* is not entirely to be blamed on the conditions of Fitzgerald's personal life. In part, the struggle was forced on Fitzgerald because of his ambitions to go beyond *The Great Gatsby*, to achieve that writer's goal he set forth in a letter to Scottie, "so that the thing you have to say and the way of saying it blend as one matter—as indissolubly as if they were conceived together." Fitzgerald's letters to Scottie are further testimony to his seriousness as a writer. The reading he sets forth for her reaches back to *Moll Flanders* and forward to Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*. "I wish now," he wrote to her June 12, 1940, "I'd never relaxed or looked back—but said at the end of *The Great Gatsby*: 'I've found my line—from now on this comes first. This is my immediate duty—without this I am nothing.'"

But what Fitzgerald did not emphasize, either in an offhand remark or in his written comments, was his being an American writer, a fashioner of American materials, a writer of the great American novel. To put it in a simple form, he solved the problem of what he should use for material by setting the problem aside. More precisely, he recognized that a preoccupation with what a novel should be about was probably a strike against the novel at the outset. Thus, he became free to deal as best he could with that limited substance he had, free and inadvertently American to "spin my thread from my own bowels," as Emerson said, or in Whitman's words, "launch forth, filament, filament, filament, out of itself, ever unreeling them." Or, in Fitzgerald's matter-of-fact words, "My God! It was my material, and it was all I had to deal with.""

What I am suggesting here is that if there is such a thing as the great American novel, it will not be because of the American-ness of what it is about. Such a novel may be, as *Moby-Dick* is, about whaling and whales and those who pursue them, much of which is American because the author is American, or as *Huckleberry Finn* is American by the same line of reasoning, or as *The Great Gatsby* is. Thus, Fitzgerald's novel is animated by and makes its impact through a writer's intensely devoted attempt to understand a portion of human experience, the personal dimensions of that experience that reach into the hearts of human beings and the contexts that always complicate and alter such personal responses. From one perspective, these contexts are indubitably American, as much so as they seem to convey the pulse beat of the urban American 1920s. But from another, they are no more American than Ithaca is Greek or *Bleak House* British. What is kept before the reader—and not setting aside the particulars by which that is made manifest—are the longings for love, wealth, power, status, for dreaming and realizing dreams and facing the realities of which dreams are compounded and by which they are compromised.

There is another side to this observation. The story of *The Great Gatsby*, both to its advantage and its disadvantage in weighing the novel's merit, is intertwined for many readers with the story of F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald. If one result is to question the likelihood of such a person as Fitzgerald being able to write a great novel, another is to endow the novel with something of the authenticity of the real story of the Fitzgeralds' gaudy but tragic lives. I further suggest that this preoccupation with "self," the fictional one focused on Gatsby, the real one lying behind the fascination that the Fitzgerald story continues to have for the American public, may be what is more American about the novel than any other aspect. Benjamin Franklin's
Autobiography may be the original American novel, even though, like Leaves of Grass, it is not a novel. That aside, what followed the Autobiography was a succession of great American books—poems, essays, romances, novels—that were chiefly explorations of the self. Emerson's Essays and Thoreau's Walden can be added to the novels already mentioned, and to those, Hopalong Cassidy, on whose fly leaf Gatsby had set down his own Franklinesque resolves.

The Great Gatsby, then, is in the right American line, in regard to conceptions, implied and stated, about what should constitute the great American novel. More directly, of course, Gatsby, despite its brevity, illuminates the American past and present, answers the challenge of getting within its pages something of the scope and variety and dynamics of American life, the light and dark of American experience, the underside and upperside of American society. Moreover, it does so within the larger framework of human experience, invariably moving readers to the dimensions of myth that convey meaning independent of time, place, and the particulars of experience.

Robert Ornstein's “Scott Fitzgerald's Fable of East and West” is one of dozens of essays that explore the novel's symbolism, allusions, ironies, ambiguities, and mythical dimensions. Ornstein argues that Fitzgerald has created “a myth with the imaginative sweep of America's historical adventure across an untamed continent. … One can even say that in The Great Gatsby Fitzgerald adumbrated the coming tragedy of a nation grown decadent without achieving maturity.” His essay, however, refuses to narrow the theme of the novel to that of the betrayal of the American dream; rather, its theme “is the unending quest after the romantic dream, which is forever betrayed in fact and yet redeemed in men's minds.” Ornstein sees this theme brought out not only in terms of American experience but also in an embodiment of the romantic response to life. “Gatsby is great,” he writes, “because his dream, however naive, gaudy, and unattainable, is one of the grand illusions of the race, which keep men from becoming too old or too wise or too cynical of their human limitations.”

Fitzgerald dramatized that perception in a brilliant way in “Absolution,” originally intended as an introduction to the Gatsby story. There the crazed priest tells the young boy: “Go and see an amusement park. … It's a thing like a fair, only much more glittering. … But don't get up close, because if you do you'll only feel the heat and the sweat and the life.”

One of the prominent themes in The Great Gatsby is that familiar one, "All that glitters is not gold," and its corollary, "but it glitters, all the same." For much of the world and for America itself, America has been the great amusement park, holding its World's Fairs and World Series and awarding “World Championships” as events in which most of the world never participates. What better setting for a meditation on the romantic vision and romantic disillusionment?

This dimension of The Great Gatsby has held a central place in the criticism of the novel since the first revival of interest in Fitzgerald shortly after his death. Prior to that time, Fitzgerald seems justified in replying to John Peale Bishop's letter about the novel: “It is about the only criticism that the book has had which has been intelligible, save a letter from Mrs. Wharton,” or to Edmund Wilson: Not one of the reviews “had the slightest idea what the book was about.” When it was praised by such writers as T. S. Eliot, Edith Wharton, and Gertrude Stein, it was in such general terms as Eliot's “the first step that American fiction has taken since Henry James.” Even to such a sympathetic critic as Fitzgerald's contemporary Paul Rosenfeld, the novel was "beautifully done, breezy throughout … extraordinarily American, like ice cream soda with arsenic flavoring, or jazz music in a fever-dream.” Only Thomas Caldecott Chubb, writing in the Forum in 1925, perceived the book to be “a fable in the form of a realistic novel.” “At once a tragedy and an extraordinarily convincing love tale and an extravagana.”

Notwithstanding the restrained and ambivalent responses to the novel when it first appeared, most of the later criticism has been searching and favorable. John W. Bicknell begins with a hint dropped by Lionel Trilling that Fitzgerald's novel is a prose version of Eliot's The Waste Land, a poem Fitzgerald knew almost by heart. Like Conrad, Fitzgerald sees “the modern corruption in contrast to a lost rather than to an emergent ideal.” Bicknell's overall critical intent is to determine whether Gatsby is tragic or merely pessimistic. He ends by accepting Alfred Kazin's view that “in a land of promise ‘failure’ will always be a classic theme.”

124
Bewley's essay, “Scott Fitzgerald's Criticism of America,” finds more to praise in *Gatsby*, perhaps because he does not assume that tragedy is the definitive measure of a novel's greatness. He writes: “Fitzgerald—at least in this one book—is in line with the greatest masters of American prose. *The Great Gatsby* embodies a criticism of American experience—not of manners, but of a basic historic attitude to life—more radical than anything in James's own assessment of the deficiencies of his country. The theme of *Gatsby* is the withering of the American dream.” Bewley's essay acknowledges that “Gatsby, the ‘mythic’ embodiment of the American dream, is shown to us in all his immature romanticism. His insecure grasp of social and human values, his lack of critical intelligence and self-knowledge, his blindness to the pitfalls that surround him in American society, his compulsive optimism, are realized in the text with rare assurance and understanding. And yet the very grounding of these deficiencies is Gatsby's goodness and faith in life, his compelling desire to realize all the possibilities of existence.” Edwin Fussell's “Fitzgerald's Brave New World” also mentions the universality as well as the uniqueness of the American experience. “After exploring his materials to their limits, Fitzgerald knew, at his greatest moments, that he had discovered a universal pattern of desire and belief and behavior and that in it was compounded the imaginative history of modern, especially American, civilization.”

With respect to its serious import, its examination of both American life and lives in much of the modern Western world, *Gatsby* bears comparison with those other books that might stand as the great American novel. It does not sprawl like *Moby-Dick*, nor hover and ruminate like *The Scarlet Letter*, nor heap up its substance like any work of Dreiser. It does not hint and suggest and qualify like Henry James, nor does it have the robust, yet lyric, quality of *Huckleberry Finn*. Yet, consider some vital qualities all these novels share. Chiefly these are *Gatsby*'s moral preoccupations, as inseparable from the novel as from *Moby-Dick* or *The Scarlet Letter*, and its dramatization of innocence coming into experience, as memorably fixed in Nick Carraway and Gatsby as in Huck and Jim or Ishmael on the *Pequod*. Moreover, with the final page of the novel establishing “the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes” (p. 217), Fitzgerald gives the novel an amplitude that bears comparison with James's powers in *The Ambassadors* or *The American*. The persuasiveness of Fitzgerald's prose (or Keats's poetry) aside, that moment of gazing on the “fresh, green breast of the new world” must have been and may be, even “for the last time in history,” “something commensurate to his capacity for wonder” (pp. 217-18).

The events following the twenties, notably a worldwide economic depression and the outbreak of another world war, may unknowingly have attuned modern readers to the serious dimensions of *Gatsby*. For it has been since World War II, and particularly in America, that the realities of living in a world of limited resources have begun to register. Throughout much of its history, America was a place of endless expanding and advancing. Without exaggerating greatly, one can place *Gatsby* with those classic statements that recall us to the fact that, as Fitzgerald came to recognize, one cannot both spend and have. Projected beyond the personal, one cannot espouse infinite progress but must accept some kind of eternal return, “boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past” (p. 218).

All readers have been affected by Fitzgerald's style, for Fitzgerald was marvelously sensitive to the sounds and cadences of language. “For awhile after you quit Keats,” he wrote, “all other poetry seems to be only whistling or humming.” His attraction to Conrad was due to Conrad's attention to the power of the written word, to “an unremitting never-discouraged care for the shape and ring of sentences” that aspired to “the magic suggestiveness of music—which is the art of arts.” Fitzgerald's sentences have movement, grace, clarity, directness when necessary, force when desired, and cadences appropriate to the mood or emotion or scene. Matched with the visual images, simile and metaphor, sentences like this emerge in profusion: “We drove over to Fifth Avenue, so warm and soft, almost pastoral, on the summer Sunday afternoon that I wouldn't have been surprised to see a great flock of white sheep turn the corner” (p. 33). “Yet high over the city our line of yellow windows must have contributed their share of human secrecy to the casual watcher in
the darkening streets, and I was him too, looking up and wondering. I was within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life” (p. 43). “For a while these 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” (p. 119). Fitzgerald's style is remarkably apt and precise, even when he is dealing with nearly ineffable matters: “He was a Son of God—a phrase which, if it means anything, means just that—and he must be about His Father's business, the service of a vast, vulgar, and meretricious beauty” (p. 118). Part of that aptness is the quality of Fitzgerald's wit, apparent in that Homeric catalog of guests that begins: “From East Egg, then, came the Chester Beckers and the Leeches, and a man named Bunsen, whom I knew at Yale, and Doctor Webster Civet …” and ends “All these people came to Gatsby's house in the summer” (pp. 73-6). Or the bite of such a description as: “the dim enlargement of Mrs. Wilson's mother which hovered like an ectoplasm on the wall” (p. 36).

These quotations, chosen to exemplify Fitzgerald's style, serve also to illustrate the inseparability of style and content. Major and minor characters in *Gatsby* are brilliantly created by both what Fitzgerald chooses to reveal about them and how he reveals it. Most of the preceding passages are important in creating a character and shaping a reader's perception of that character. In the first instance, that pastoral touch, seemingly a stylistic flourish, is exactly right for perceiving Tom Buchanan and Myrtle in contrast to the ash heaps surrounding Wilson's garage and the tacky apartment where Tom has been keeping her. Similarly, Nick Carraway's reflection calls a reader's attention to his being both inside and outside the main action, a vital aspect of his characterization. And speaking of Gatsby as a son of God who goes about his Father's business reverberates powerfully in one's accumulating impressions of that central character. The minor characters in the novel are created with that terse exactness that is apparent in Fitzgerald's handling of words in the novel: Meyer Wolfsheim and his human molar cufflinks; Mr. McKee, who has “‘done some nice things out on Long Island’” (p. 38); George Wilson, veiled in ashen dust; and Owl-Eyes, finding real books in Gatsby's library, but with the pages uncut.

“I think it is an honest book,” Fitzgerald wrote in the introduction to the Modern Library Edition in 1934, “that is to say, that one used none of one's virtuosity to get an effect, and, to boast again, one soft-pedalled the emotional side to avoid the tears leaking from the socket of the left eye, or the large false face peering around the corner of a character's head.” It is this restraint, even more than the virtuosity of effects, that distinguishes Fitzgerald's style in *The Great Gatsby*. In almost all of his other fiction, the quality of the prose gives otherwise ordinary materials a polish that not only exacted high prices from popular magazines but may have hinted at more profundity than the content delivered. In *Gatsby*, straining for effect is seldom apparent. The whole novel is compactly put together, as much by repetition of images and symbols as by exposition and narrative.

The opulence associated with both Gatsby and the Buchanans is established in Chapter 1 by a physical description of the Buchanans' house and lawn: “The lawn started at the beach and ran toward the front door for a quarter of a mile, jumping over sun-dials and brick walks and burning gardens—finally when it reached the house drifting up the side in bright vines as though from the momentum of its run” (p. 8). At the end of the first chapter, the cadences change as we see Gatsby on his lawn at night: “The wind had blown off, leaving a loud, bright night, with wings beating in the trees and a persistent organ sound as the full bellows of the earth blew the frogs full of life. The silhouette of a moving cat wavered across the moonlight, and turning my head to watch it, I saw that I was not alone—fifty feet away a figure had emerged from the shadow of my neighbor's mansion and was standing with his hands in his pockets regarding the silver pepper of the stars” (p. 25). A paragraph later, Chapter 1 ends with the “single green light” (p. 26) at the end of the dock that became one of the final images in the novel. Between those two images are other descriptions of landscape and house, from the “blue gardens” after “the earth lurches away from the sun” (pp. 47-9) to the “sharp line where my ragged lawn ended and the darker, well-kept expanse of his began” (p. 99) in Chapter 5. At the end, these images accumulate: the opening of the windows at dawn, the photograph of the house that Gatsby's father shows to Nick, “cracked in the corners and dirty with many hands” (p. 207), and Carraway's last look at “that
huge incoherent failure of a house. On the white steps an obscene word, scrawled by some boy with a piece of brick, stood out clearly in the moonlight, and I erased it, drawing my shoe raspingly along the stone” (p. 217).

James Joyce said of *Ulysses* that he had put in enough enigmas and puzzles to keep professors busy for centuries. *The Great Gatsby* lacks that density, but it has engaged the attention of many professors to date. Color symbolism, patterns of images, sources and analogues, ambiguities, mythical dimensions continue to be worked over. Passages of dialogue are as carefully wrought as descriptive passages. Some have become passwords of *Gatsby* cultists: “‘Can't repeat the past? … Why of course you can!’” (p. 133) and “‘Her voice is full of money’” (p. 144) and “‘In any case … it was just personal’” (p. 182). Others are equally part of the texture of the novel, shaping character, amplifying meanings, knitting parts together: “‘Is it a boy or a girl? ’” Myrtle asks of the “gray old man who bore an absurd resemblance to John D. Rockefeller,” “‘That dog? That dog's a boy.’ “It's a bitch,” said Tom decisively. ‘Here's your money. Go and buy ten more dogs with it”’ (pp. 32-3). Fitzgerald also knew when to have his characters stop talking. In the draft of the novel, much of *Gatsby’s* story is told in dialogue as he talks to Nick. It permits him to talk too much, to say, for example, before Fitzgerald excised it: “‘Jay Gatsby!’ he cried suddenly in a ringing voice. ‘There goes the great Jay Gatsby. That's what people are going to say—wait and see.’”

As with details of his style, the structure of *The Great Gatsby* has been subject to minute examination, Fitzgerald's debt to Conrad was early pointed out: “for the use of style or language to reflect theme; for the use of the modified first person narration; for the use of deliberate ‘confusion’ by the re-ordering of the chronology of events.” Fitzgerald's use of “a series of scenes dramatizing the important events of the story and connected by brief passages of interpretation and summary” is like Henry James's “scenic method.” In these respects and others, *The Great Gatsby* responds, as a great American novel surely should, to the call for “newness” sounded repeatedly throughout America's literary history.

I have written at length elsewhere, as have others, about the structure of *The Great Gatsby* and will not go into detail here. The facsimile of the manuscript enables any reader to study Fitzgerald's revisions, small and large. He was a careful reviser, nowhere in his work more than in *The Great Gatsby*.

In general, his revisions were devoted to solving the technical problems of presenting the story—the narrative structure—and in sharpening, trimming, amplifying descriptions, narrative, dialogue. The choice of Nick Carraway as narrator was probably not made until some jelling of the essential story took place in Fitzgerald's mind. The short stories “Absolution” and “Winter Dreams” are written in the conventional third person. The longer form in itself may have raised questions about the mode of telling; the examples of James and Conrad were at hand to suggest the use of a first-person narrator. Although that choice was in one sense a technical one, it was also a means of presenting his material “through the personal history of a young American provincial whose moral intelligence is the proper source of our understanding and whose career, in the passage from innocence to revaluation, dramatizes the possibility and mode of a moral sanction in contemporary America.” Such a view still seems fairly to describe Fitzgerald's intent, although a spate of criticism has pointed out the unreliability of Carraway as a narrator. The choice of narrator was related to other technical problems, chiefly that of how and when (and in what order and way in the novel) the narrator uncovers for the reader the complete story of Gatsby's past. Like other modern novels, *Gatsby* does not follow a straightforward chronology; Fitzgerald worked hard to preserve the advantages of a disjointed structure against the confusion such a method may create. One of the effects was to keep Gatsby from fully materializing, helping Fitzgerald solve the difficult problem of making a deliberately shadowy figure the central character of the novel.

It is not easy to summarize even the most important changes Fitzgerald made to achieve the structure he wanted. Suffice to say that changes and shifts of materials kept Gatsby offstage for a longer period of time than in the first version. Between his first appearance as a figure on his lawn and Nick's conversation with him in Chapter 4, the reader is exposed to Daisy, Tom, Jordan Baker, and the Wilsons, is transported through the
valley of ashes and into Myrtle's Manhattan apartment, and gets a fuller glimpse of Gatsby during the first party at his house. The chief results, aside from heightening one's interest in the mysterious Gatsby, are the various juxtapositions of beauty and squalor, peace and violence, vitality and decay—in short, the intensifying of the central contrasts between the ideal and the real.

All this is accomplished in three chapters, with the material that originally comprised these chapters being rearranged in various ways. Chapter 4 extends our acquaintance with Gatsby, and Chapter 5 becomes the center of the novel. This chapter was very closely reworked, chiefly in order to give it a static quality, to approximate in the telling Gatsby's attempt to make time stand still. From that chapter on, the novel picks up speed. The real world intrudes in the guise of a reporter through whom details of Gatsby's actual past are exposed. A second party, sharper delineation of Tom Buchanan, and the second trip into Manhattan prepare the reader for the final sweep of the plot to the running down of Myrtle Wilson, “her left breast … swinging loose like a flap” (p. 165). “I want Myrtle Wilson's breast ripped off,” he wrote Maxwell Perkins. “It's exactly the thing, I think, and I don't want to chop up good scenes by too much tinkering.”

The remaining chapters were chiefly reworked to wind down events with economy but also with measured impact. Some of Gatsby's explanations were shifted to the present tense to give them greater immediacy. The last chapter shifted attention to Nick, but still kept him linked tightly to Gatsby by means of the funeral, his talk with Gatsby's father, and those benedictory words pronounced by Owl-Eyes, “‘The poor son of a bitch’” (p. 211). Nick's last encounter with Tom underscores Fitzgerald's achievement of making Carraway a vital character in his own right, a technical device that helps hold the structure together, a means of amplifying the moral and social dimensions of the novel and the way in which the story gets told. The last image of the book, the “fresh, green breast of the new world,” was originally written as the conclusion of the first chapter. Now placed at the end of the novel, it enlarges even as it brings the novel to an end.

This discussion of style and structure argues for the novel's high degree of finish, surely a merit in a novel, although not necessarily what many would associate with the great American novel. The exchange between Fitzgerald and Thomas Wolfe illustrates my point. Wolfe, a great “putter-inner” of a novelist, challenges Fitzgerald's criticism of his work by citing Shakespeare, Cervantes, and Dostoevsky as “great putter-inners—greater putter-inners, in fact, than taker-outers and will be remembered for what they put in … as long as Monsieur Flaubert will be remembered for what he left out.” Wolfe's arguments are unanswerable for those who insist that a great American novel must “boil and pour.” By that measure, The Great Gatsby must fall short, for all that it has a size beyond its actual page length.

Still, one can, only half facetiously, propose that Gatsby is an efficient novel, and thereby identifiably and pleasingly American. For the time one puts into it, a great deal comes out. Even its nuances of style are not likely to be lost on American readers, for they have the laconic power of sarcasm, the brevity of the one-liner, and the directness of American speech. Its moral dimensions still touch the sense of decency and fair play, without engaging the reader in time-consuming ethical and metaphysical speculations. The novel's topicality is that of the twenties, but is not confined to that decade. The author's rhetorical flourishes are nicely spaced; the story has some action and plenty of pathos shading off into tragedy. It raises basic questions citizens of a democracy have to wrestle with: How does one recognize greatness without an established social order? How does the acquisition of power, wealth, and status accord with the professions of democratic equality? How does an idealist and an individual—both prized qualities of the American—keep himself from succumbing to the materialism of the masses or from kicking himself loose from the universe? If all this can be accomplished in a book under 200 pages and still selling for under (it was priced at n 1925), what could be greater and more American than that?
The foregoing claims may be the strongest that can be made for the stature of The Great Gatsby as the great American novel. A less convincing form of reasoning, but one worth addressing briefly, is to see Gatsby in the line of American novels of manners, novels like those of Howells and James and Edith Wharton. It is Wharton, in the essay previously mentioned, who points out that “Traditional society, with its old-established distinctions of class, its passwords, exclusions, delicate shades of language and behavior, is one of man’s oldest works of art.” She expresses dismay that American novelists have been turned away from this material, from the novel of manners, just as James expressed to Howells his dismay that American society didn't furnish the richness and diversity that would support such novels. Nevertheless, Frank Norris saw in Howells that breadth of vision and intimate knowledge of Americans East and West that went part way toward establishing an “American school of fiction.” If he did not quite claim that Howells was writing the great American novel, he did call attention to Howells's efforts to establish the novel of manners as an estimable kind of American fiction.

The novel of manners in Howells's hands and in Fitzgerald's did not preclude its being a serious and socially engaged work. Gertrude Stein's letter in response to The Great Gatsby recognized that Fitzgerald was “creating the contemporary world much as Thackeray did his in Pendennis and Vanity Fair and this isn't a bad compliment.” Howells's and Fitzgerald's examinations of American society show the novel of manner's concern for moral behavior measured against social norms. In the background of both authors' work are reminders of that moralistic and idealistic strain of Americans who populated a wilderness and created its Washingtons and Lincolns. But the society each saw around him was one in which that kind of American was hard pressed to withstand the amoral and materialistic drive for power that characterized American success. The tragic hero set forth in Gatsby is really the American failure, failing to hold to the course of power that wins success and failing, moreover, because of the strength of idealistic illusions.

Too few readers know Howells's The Landlord at Lion's Head, a novel that started out as one merely about a “jay” student at Harvard but that became one of Howells's strongest social novels. Jeff Durgin, the protagonist of the story, is one more provincial who is sufficiently strong and amoral, like Gatsby, to gain power and wealth by his own shrewdness and drive and luck. Landlord lacks the tightness and finish of Gatsby, but in its central theme it may be more modern and less sentimental than Fitzgerald's novel. For Durgin and his dream are not defeated, much as the many Gatsbys who pursue their driving materialistic dreams are not defeated in American life. Rather, Durgin's success at the end of that novel is the American success of power and money. The girl of Durgin's dreams turns out to be so sanctimonious as to deserve little better than the pallid artist who claims her and who, like Carraway in Gatsby, provides the novel's supposed moral center. Durgin ends up with the daughter of a Europeanized mother and a wealthy American father, a woman all but a dolt would prefer to Durgin's earlier choice. Like Tom Buchanan and Daisy, the Durgins seem likely to make it in the modern world, although Carraway says that they have “retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness” (p. 216) and he back to pondering his father’s wisdom that “a sense of the fundamental decencies is parcelled out unequally at birth” (p. 2). A generation or two earlier than Fitzgerald, Howells, too, saw what the American dream was for most citizens: money, power, social position, and a modicum of culture. Only a “provincial squeamishness” (p. 216) in both writers caused them to question the substantiality and rightness of the materialistic dream.

I am not arguing that the novel of manners somehow provides its writers with some special claim to a novel's greatness. In fact, probably the opposite is true in regard to American writers. Mark Twain's condemnation of Jane Austen's work conveys the disrespect that assigns such novels to a distinct and lesser category. The point is, rather, that the novel of manners has an appropriateness to American writing fully as much as does the romance or tall tale. Howells and James both extended that form, achieving at their best something of what Dickens and Thackeray achieved for the British novel. Balzac and Zola can also fit into this category, as can Norris and Fitzgerald.
But categorizing a novelist's work is a folly not unlike looking for the great American novel. It matters little whether *The Great Gatsby* is the great American novel or not. It probably matters that writers, much less readers, keep such concepts before them. No reader needs an unrelieved diet of great novels, American or any other kind. Writers, on the other hand, probably do need the urging of tradition, the example of other writers and other novels and kinds of novels, and the idea of greater books than they have yet written. Even then, the novels they write will be as various as the lives they live and the thoughts they think. As there are many American writers and readers, so there are bound to be many American novels, some of them great.

Howells looked back on his career and wrote: “Mostly I suppose I have cut rather inferior window glass with it … perhaps hereafter when my din is done, if any one is curious to know what the noise was, it will be found to have proceeded from a small insect which was scraping about on the surface of our life and trying to get into its meaning for the sake of the other insects, larger and smaller. That is, such has been my unconscious work, consciously, I was always, as I still am, trying to fashion a piece of literature out of the life next at hand.”38 It may be enough to say of *The Great Gatsby* that F. Scott Fitzgerald achieved what he set out to do, to write “something new, something extraordinary and beautiful and simple + intricately patterned.”39

Notes

6. Ibid., p. 61.
9. Ibid., 263.
14. Ibid., p. 79.
19. Ibid., p. 342.
Matthew J. Bruccoli (Columbus, Ohio: Merrill, 1971), pp. 74-91.


25. Ibid., pp. 244-62.


39. Bruccoli and Duggan, *Correspondence*, p. 112.

**Criticism: Darrel Mansell (essay date December 1987)**


*[In the following essay, Mansell suggests possible sources of and purposes for a reference to a jazz work in a scene of Gatsby.]*

Fitzgerald said in retrospect that his first novel had actually been not one book but three, and his second novel two. He wanted his third novel to be more coherent: more spare, economical and “intricately patterned.” Indeed he wanted the new one to be “perfect.”

The critical consensus has been that what he produced is close to perfect. In *The Great Gatsby* there seem almost no loose, unworking parts—no automobile wheels lying in the ditch like the one after a Gatsby party, “unconnected to the car by any physical bond” (Chapter III). The novel is said to have “perfection of form,” to be “compact,” “tightly structured,” to have a “tight inevitability of … construction,” to have a “formal completeness and integrity.”

But there is at least one episode lying outside just about any conception of the formal integrity of the novel—one wheel lying loose in the ditch. That is the scene when the orchestra leader at the fateful party in Chapter III announces a musical work by a Mr. Vladimir Tostoff: the *Jazz History of the World.* Nick says that when the work was over
girls were putting their heads on men's shoulders in a puppyish, convivial way, girls were swooning backward playfully into men's arms, even into groups, knowing that some one would arrest their falls. ...  

What are we to think of a piece of music with such a title? Why did the work create a sensation at Carnegie Hall the previous May (as the orchestra leader says it did)? Why does he say so “with jovial condescension”? Why does the audience laugh when he says so? Surely we aren't to take a sensational piece with such a preposterous title as moving or beautiful—Nick says the nature of the music simply eludes him. Yet the piece has a strange, mesmerizing effect on the party-goers; and, most strange of all, had in the manuscript of the novel a deeply moving effect on Nick himself. There he strives—Fitzgerald strives—for three turgid paragraphs omitted from the published novel to make us understand and feel something which seems to have taken a profound emotional hold on the author himself:

It facinated [sic] me ... it started out with a wierd [sic], spinning sound that seemed to come mostly from the cornets, very regular and measured and inevitable with a bell now and then that seemed to ring somewhere a great distance away. A rhythm became distinguishable after awhile in the spinning, a sort of dull beat but as soon as you'd almost made it out it disappeared. ... The second movement was concerned with the bell only it wasn't the bell any more but a muted violin cello and two instruments I had never seen before ... you were aware that something was trying to establish itself, to get a foothold, something soft and ... persistent and profound and next you yourself were trying to help it, struggling, praying for it—until suddenly it was there, it was established rather scornfully without you and it seemed to look around with a complete self-sufficiency, as if it had been there all the time.

I was curiously moved and the third part of the thing was full of even stronger emotion. I know so little about music that I can only make a story of it ... but it wasn't really a story ... there would be a series of interruptive notes that seemed to fall together accidentally and colored everything that came after them until before you knew it they became the theme and new discords were opposed to it outside. But what struck me particularly was that just as you'd get used to the new discord business there'd be one of the old themes rung in this time as a discord until you'd get a ghastly sense that it was all a cycle after all, purposeless and sardonic. ... Whenever I think of that summer I can hear it yet.

The last was weak I thought though most of the people seemed to like it best of all. It had recognizable strains of famous jazz in it—Alexander's Ragtime Band and The Darktown Strutter's Ball and recurrent hint [sic] of The Beale Street Blues.  

It is not impossible to make sense of this curious episode—to think of some relevance it has to the novel. Indeed almost every interpretation of the novel has a way of doing so. For instance the novel is said to be concerned with time; and the Jazz History of the World shows that concern in being a juxtaposition of the timeless (history) and the evanescent (jazz). Or Tostoff's composition is, “amid the tossed-off names and the tossed-off identities ... a piece of music that is itself a tossed-off debasement of the idea of history.” Or Gatsby himself is a kind of showman, an entrepreneur; and this “musical extravaganza” is one of his meretricious productions. Or this sprawling and chaotic musical composition shows the hugeness of Gatsby's parties, their “movement, mingling, and commotion.” Or the composition's non-linearity, polyphony and complex rhythms are “like a buried preface, an anamorphic projection of the book's operative principle.” Or the composition's sensuality shows the “chaos and libertinism of Gatsby's world.”

There is just no consensus as to the relevance or significance of this puzzling episode. Fitzgerald himself regretted having written it: “I thought that the whole episode ... was rotten.”
I think there is something of a factual, historical nature to be said about the episode. Fitzgerald liked to date his scenes by putting in them specific details his readers would associate with a particular year. Often such details have to do with music. The song “Poor Butterfly,” played on a gramophone at Princeton in a scene in *This Side of Paradise*, “had been the song of that last year” (Chapter IV)—the year 1917. The song “Something Seems Tingleingleing” is described in a scene in *The Beautiful and Damned* as “the year's mellowest fox-trot” (Chapter II)—thus 1913 (from the 1913 musical *High Jinks*). In *The Great Gatsby* the orchestras in Daisy's Louisville are said to set “the rhythm of the year” with songs like the “Beale Street Blues” (Chapter VIII)—the year 1918. And “Three O’Clock in the Morning,” played at one of Gatsby's parties, is a “neat, sad little waltz of that year” (Chapter VI)—the year 1922.

The *Jazz History of the World* may be just such a piece of music dating a scene. The orchestra leader says the piece “attracted so much attention at Carnegie Hall last May. If you read the papers you know there was a big sensation” (50). That would have been May, 1921 (the scene being the summer of 1922).

It happens that during the concert season of 1921 the great composer Richard Strauss was making a much-publicized tour of the United States conducting his own compositions with various symphony orchestras. The month of May that year would have been off-season at Carnegie Hall; but on 31 October Strauss conducted a program of his own music there. The music critic Richard Aldrich wrote next day that the hall “was filled to at least its legal capacity” to hear the celebrated composer; the audience greeted his appearance with a great roar of applause that lasted some time.12

Scheduled for that Carnegie Hall concert (but replaced at the last minute) had been Strauss's symphonic work *Also Sprach Zarathustra*. This piece was subsequently performed (Strauss conducting) on 15 November at the Metropolitan Opera House. A “large audience that practically filled the house” gave the concert enthusiastic appreciation (*New York Times*, 16 November 1921, 22c). Now there must be only one actual symphonic piece extant which ever became known as a history of the world like the piece played at Gatsby's party. That is Strauss's *Zarathustra*. Its author himself described it as “an idea of the development of the human race from its origin, through the various phases of development …” (these words appear in the *Times* concert review cited above). Furthermore, the bell Nick makes so much of in the long description of the piece cancelled by Fitzgerald is probably the much-noted bell which peals in the *Nachtwanderlied* section of Strauss's work.

I think Fitzgerald's idea of a 1921 performance at Carnegie Hall of a composition on such an unusual, not to say bizarre, theme as the history of the world—a performance enthusiastically received and subsequently written up in the papers—grew out of these actual circumstances (Strauss's name being changed in the manuscript of the novel to Leo Epstein, then to Tostoff). I think Fitzgerald read about the concert in the papers (“If you read the papers,” the orchestra leader says). Fitzgerald was in St. Paul, Minnesota, at the time, where he wrote some book reviews for the New York papers.13 Furthermore, I think that at the time of the composition of the novel he knew *Zarathustra* itself at least vaguely from having heard it (in addition to concert performances there was at least one phonograph recording by 1924). Nick's puzzled fascination with the piece was Fitzgerald's own. Indeed *Zarathustra* celebrates the Nietzschean superman so often referred to in Fitzgerald's fiction.

What is puzzling in the *Jazz History of the World* episode may therefore be explicable more or less as follows. Fitzgerald wanted to date his scene by reference to a particular musical event of 1921 which had caught his attention: a well-publicized performance of a composition reported (in the *Times*) to have been conceived by its author as nothing less than a history of the world. Furthermore, Fitzgerald actually knew and had been arrested by Strauss's composition. He struggled unsuccessfully in the manuscript of his novel to get his fascination into Nick's remarkably long, profoundly-felt and groping attempt to describe the Epstein-Tostoff piece of music heard at Gatsby's party (by no means all of Nick's description in the manuscript applies to *Also Sprach Zarathustra*).
At the same time Fitzgerald was also trying in the scene to do something else. He wanted the piece of music in the novel to be just right for one of Gatsby's parties. Hence Strauss is transmogrified into a jazz history of the world. In the early twenties “jazzing” the classics was very much an issue—generally thought to be a sign of the creeping vulgarization of culture. Aldrich for instance took that position in an indignant newspaper article of 1922 (“Jazz draws the line nowhere. Nothing is safe from its devastating touch. The jazz blacksmiths … lay violent hands upon music that musicians have always approached with respect and … reverence”). In the manuscript even the members of the orchestra at the party are themselves described as disdainful of what they are about to play: they “looked at one another and smiled as tho this was … a little below them. …”

Such a piece of music at one of Gatsby's parties plays on a major theme in the novel: America's brash, energetic and meretricious vulgarization of European culture. A jazz history of the world—just right at a house where Klipspringer plays The Love Nest on the piano in the Marie Antoinette music room (92, 96); just right at a house which is itself an imitation of some Hotel de Ville in Normandy (5); just right in a novel where Myrtle Wilson's New York apartment is trying to summon up an image of Versailles (29).

Fitzgerald just was not successful in bringing these two ideas together: the Jazz History of the World as strange beauty and as the vulgarization of culture. At the last minute he threw out the former and replaced it with nothing but Nick's hasty remark, “The nature of Mr. Tostoff's composition eluded me.” Then Fitzgerald went straight to the next scene as already written. The novel's central figure suddenly materializes (“my eyes fell on Gatsby”) as if summoned up out of the music to be its very embodiment—its beauty and vulgarity.

**Notes**

15. Facsimile, p. 54.
Criticism: Caren J. Town (essay date winter 1989)


[In the following essay, Town deconstructs the language used by Gatsby narrator Nick Carraway, noting disconnections between what he says and what he actually means.]

From the petal's edge a line starts
that being of steel
infinitely fine, infinitely
rigid penetrates
the Milky Way
without contact—lifting
from it—neither hanging
nor pushing—

—William Carlos Williams, from “The Rose”

During their first meeting in The Great Gatsby, Daisy Fay Buchanan playfully calls her cousin (and the novel's narrator) Nick Carraway “an absolute rose.” He responds:

This was untrue. I am not even faintly like a rose. She was only extemporizing, but a stirring warmth flowed from her, as if her heart was trying to come out to you concealed in one of the breathless, thrilling words. Then suddenly she threw her napkin on the table and excused herself and went into the house.¹

What matters to Nick here and throughout the novel, is not the veracity of what is being said, or even the words themselves, but the “heart” that is “concealed in one of the breathless, thrilling words.” Words may lack the power to express objective truth, but Nick believes in their power authentically to embody emotion in metaphor and in his power therefore to be true to his story, an account of strictly emotional truth. A few pages later Nick reports:

The instant her voice broke off, ceasing to compel my attention, my belief, I felt the basic insincerity of what she had said. It made me uneasy, as though the whole evening had been a trick of some sort to exact a contributory emotion from me. I waited, and sure enough, in a moment she looked at me with an absolute smirk on her lovely face, as if she had asserted her membership in a rather distinguished secret society to which she and Tom belonged. (18; emphasis added)

The word “absolute” reappears, designating both an objective and an emotional truth: Daisy is not sincere, but she is compelling. Nick sees the insincerity but is willing to be seduced by its mode of expression, which the next line deftly confirms: “Inside the crimson room bloomed with light …” (emphasis added). The “absolute rose” is transformed into an “absolute smirk” that encompasses, finally, the “crimson room” blooming with light. Even though Nick makes it “absolutely” clear that he is not to be associated with that particular flower and tries to dissociate himself from Tom, Daisy, and Jordan, the rose has opened and cast its color on the entire company. In his attempt to establish his credibility as narrator, Nick, too, becomes tainted by the rosy tint.

Thus the “absolute” signifies the paradoxical nature of Nick's explanations of human behavior. When Nick speaks—and Gatsby's entire story is told in his words—he is never in absolute control of the story he tells.
Instead, a dialectic of intention and interpretation results in patterns that finally come to dominate the novel. This web of interconnecting words and signifying relationships undercuts Nick's position as detached observer and constantly threatens to disrupt or subvert his attempts to gain distance from the characters he introduces and the situations he describes. In other words, the question is not whether Nick means what he says: Nick *means* to be reliable, but his language is unreliable, and the question becomes one of metaphorical instead of psychological reliability. The effect of this trait is that Nick and the reader, from the first page of the novel, struggle for control over interpretation, engaging in an elaborate dance of acceptance and rejection of narrative authority. A dance or a game: “There is not a single signified that escapes, even if recaptured, the play of signifying references that constitute language,” Derrida says in his *Of Grammatology*. As the rose example shows “absolutely,” Nick is unable to escape the play of references that he sets in motion.

The paragraph that immediately follows Daisy's exit (to confront her husband Tom about phone calls from his mistress) emphasizes the futility of Nick's belief in the transmissibility of meaning. Nick has been left alone with his new friend Jordan Baker to figure out what has just happened:

> Miss Baker and I exchanged a short glance consciously devoid of meaning. I was about to speak when she sat up alertly and said “Sh!” in a warning voice. A subdued impassioned murmur was audible in the room beyond, and Miss Baker leaned forward unashamed, trying to hear. The murmur trembled on the verge of coherence, sank down, mounted excitedly, and then ceased altogether.

Daisy's voice struggles to make itself understood; it “trembled on the verge of coherence” but then was lost. As is the case with the entire novel, the meaning of particular passages promises to become clear but never does. Each phrase, each gesture, each action recorded by Nick remains as “consciously devoid of meaning” as the “subdued impassioned whisper.” Jordan Baker, whose first word in the novel is “absolutely” (11), can't make sense of them either.

Daisy's voice promises but does not—or cannot—deliver; it consists of surface glitter (Gatsby will later equate it with money) and extemporaneous promises. Earlier Nick has tried to isolate its particular quality:

> It was the kind of voice that the ear follows up and down, as if each speech is an arrangement of notes that will never be played again. … [T]here was an excitement in her voice that men who had cared for her found difficult to forget: a singing compulsion, a whispered “Listen,” 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.

What one hears when listening to Daisy's voice is not content but style, the “arrangement of notes.” This voice carries with it a “singing compulsion,” a promise of both a past and a future that is, ultimately, the goal of all effective communication. Nick hopes that his language, too, will transcend its limitations, as Daisy's conversation transcends its insubstantiality or insincerity, that it will compel its listeners with its promise. In spite of its clear desire to persuade, his voice consistently promises more than it can deliver.

Crucial to Nick's elaborate but ultimately Quixotic strategy for gaining control of his self-representation and his narrative is his attempt to win the reader's confidence, beginning on the first page of the novel. First, Nick introduces himself before he introduces the rest of his characters, telling us that his father has told him that “all the people in the world haven't had the advantages [he has] had”:
In consequence, 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. Most of the confidences were unsought—frequently I have feigned sleep, preoccupation, or a hostile levity when I realized by some unmistakable sign that an intimate revelation was quivering on the horizon; for the intimate revelations of young men, or at least the terms in which they express them, are usually plagiaristic and marred by obvious suppressions. Reserving judgments is a matter of infinite hope. I am still a little afraid of missing something if I forget that, as my father snobbishly suggested, and I snobbishly repeat, a sense of the fundamental decencies is parcelled out unequally at birth.

What is obvious here is that the sentences do not follow one another logically, and these ironies have often been pointed out by Gatsby critics. The careful reader, however, is constantly asking how the ideas presented are related. For example, why is it “in consequence” of his having been told that all people are not equal that Nick is inclined to reserve judgments and is “made the victim” of boring confidences? There seems to be something missing here, perhaps that it suits Nick's self-definition to invite confidences. Or why does it follow, given what came before, that “reserving judgments is a matter of infinite hope”? His self-proclaimed desire to avoid conversations with “wild, unknown men” sounds more like evidence of his infinite cynicism than of his infinite hope. Or, finally, how does Nick escape the indictment heaped on other “young men” that their “intimate revelations” are “usually plagiaristic and marred by obvious suppressions”? Thus, while Nick is telling the reader one thing (that he is open minded), the logical inconsistencies are saying something entirely different (that he is not).

But the passage is doing something other than just evoking skepticism, creating simple ironies, or reflecting the incoherence of the culture out of which Nick speaks. By looking closely at the language, one can see that there is a stylistic accumulation taking place, which allows the reader to reevaluate what is being said. Immediately after declaring that he is “inclined to reserve all judgments,” Nick has judged those who confide in him to be “curious natures” and “veteran bores,” whose minds are “abnormal.” In this early passage in the novel, there is a radical injection of doubt: Nick argues for the normality of his own mind, contrasts his nature to the “curious” ones around him, and claims authenticity for his story in relation to the “plagiaristic” ones he has been told. Yet who is he arguing with? Surely even the most skeptical reader would not be suspicious of Nick already—we are only on page 1! The effect of Nick's pleading is to put the reader in the position of defending Nick's honor—or his sanity—a position that is crucial to the success of the narrative. For Nick's story to “work,” for Gatsby to become the romantic/tragic hero that Nick intends him to be, the reader must not become suspicious of the person telling his story; he must fall under the same “singing compulsion” as do those who listen to Daisy's voice.

In conflict with this bid for sympathy, however, is a linguistic pattern that emerges as the passage is read more closely. Through his use of several qualifiers (“not a few,” “abnormal,” “unjust,” “unknown,” “unsought,” “unmistakable,” “unequally”), Nick so qualifies himself that it becomes difficult to believe what he says unequivocally. The more obvious self-deprecations (his references to his snobbishness, or his lack of interest in the “intimate revelations” of his classmates) can now be seen as distractions that focus the reader's attention away from the less “obvious suppressions,” from the hidden qualifications of his narrative. Nick has thus not completely succeeded in winning us over.

Derrida provides a useful metaphor to describe this process of accumulation and distraction. The genealogy of the text “is neither causality by contagion, nor the simple accumulation of layers,” he says. “And if a text always gives itself a certain representation of its own roots, those roots live only by that representation, by never touching the soil, so to speak” (101). The text of The Great Gatsby is crisscrossed by a root system that
has no fixity in the soil of absolute truth, a kind of hydroponic textuality that nevertheless searches for rootedness, for completion, for final explanations.

Thus any confidence in one's ability to distinguish between revelation and suppression in Nick's narrative can result in tripping over roots. On page 2 of the novel, Nick speaks at length, ostensibly about Gatsby's faults and merits, but he actually reveals more about himself and his own limitations.

And, after boasting this way of my tolerance, I come to the admission that it has a limit. Conduct may be founded on the hard rock or the wet marshes, but after a certain point I don't care what it's founded on. When I came back from the East last autumn I felt that I wanted the world to be in uniform and at a sort of moral attention forever; I wanted no more riotous excursions with privileged glimpses into the human heart. Only Gatsby, the man who gave his name to this book, was exempt from my reaction—Gatsby, who represented everything for which I have an unaffected scorn. If personality is an unbroken series of successful gestures, then there was something gorgeous about him, some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life, as if he were related to one of those intricate machines that register earthquakes ten thousand miles away. This responsiveness had nothing to do with that flabby impressionability which is dignified under the name of “creative temperament”—it was an extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness such as I have never found in any other person and which it is not likely I shall ever find again. No—Gatsby turned out all right in the end; it is what preyed on Gatsby, what foul dust floated in the wake of his dreams that temporarily closed out my interest in the abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men.

The same thing is happening here as in the previous passage: the reader gets only false directions and incoherent conclusions. Nick starts this passage by reminding the reader of his tolerance and then holds out a so-called admission that there are limits even to such reluctantly given tolerance, as regards human conduct. But then the “argument” turns again, with Nick saying that he wanted the world to be at “a sort of moral attention forever.” However, he also says that Gatsby (the first mention of his name, by the way) was “exempt from [his] reaction.” The reader wonders which of the three different reactions Nick is talking about. Was Gatsby exempt from Nick's limited tolerance, from his disregard for the foundations of conduct, or from his desire for moral attention? Then, as if this is not confusing enough, Nick utters the famous conditional phrase—“If personality is an unbroken series of successful gestures”—which is supposed to valorize Gatsby to any reader who accepts the premise. But does it? One is never completely sure if Nick believes that personality is or ought to be a series of successful gestures. And if the premise is not accepted, does that mean that Gatsby is not gorgeous after all, but something horrible, or at least something shabby? Or might it not mean that Nick's narrative is nothing more than an “unbroken series of successful gestures”? Again, as in the previous passage, Nick wants the reader to play by his rules and defend his propositions, to place hope, as he does, in reserving judgments and “romantic readiness.”

Yet what Nick says he admires—Gatsby's “heightened sensitivity” and “romantic readiness”—reminds the reader of his earlier distaste for the “griefs of wild, unknown men” and qualifies the seeming praise. (Remember that these passages are only one page apart.) So when Nick comes out with the amazing “No—Gatsby turned out all right in the end,” the reader wonders with whom Nick is arguing here—himself? The reader, certainly does not need to be convinced about Gatsby at this point, since he has not even seen him, watched him behave, heard his voice. But then he finds out that it is what floated in Gatsby's wake that “closed out” Nick's interest in the “abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men.” So it was not Gatsby at all (whom we did not suspect) but the characters around him (whom we have not met) whom Nick blames for Gatsby's tragedy (which we have not witnessed). By the time the reader has finished the first two pages, Nick has given—or given away—the main characters, the plot, the moral, and complete directions for how to
read the rest of the novel, but the reader has begun to wonder whether or not it is possible to get there from here.\textsuperscript{11}

These directions seem less and less reliable as Nick continues; each story he tells about his past undercuts itself. Take, for example, his family history:

My family have been prominent, well-to-do people in this Middle Western city for three generations. The Carraways are something of a clan, and we have a tradition that we're descended from the Dukes of Buccleuch, but the actual founder of my line was my grandfather's brother, who came here in fifty-one, sent a substitute to the Civil War, and started the wholesale hardware business that my father carries on to-day.

\textsuperscript{(2-3)}

The hallowed family tradition is apocryphal; Nick's family—with its merchant origins—is only a generation removed from the poverty and shabbiness of Gatsby's father. Highly ironic also is his famous assertion:

I was rather literary in college—one year I wrote a series of very solemn and obvious editorials for the \textit{Yale News}—and now I was going to bring back all such things into my life and become that most limited of all specialists, the "well-rounded man." This isn't just an epigram—life is much more successfully looked at from a single window, after all.

\textsuperscript{(4)}

The possibility of a "single window" through which to look at the world, however, has diminished significantly in the first pages of the novel; Nick's house of fiction, like Dickinson's poetry, is "more numerous of windows" and is actually a rather drafty place.

Thus reading the novel carefully involves not following Nick's directions too blindly but watching for moments when he reveals too clearly his desire to lead. Perhaps the most obvious example of this constraint occurs early in the novel when Nick describes being a newcomer to West Egg. He feels lost, he says, until a newer arrival asks him for directions, and then he comments:

And as I walked on I was lonely no longer. I was a guide, a pathfinder, an original settler. He had casually conferred on me the freedom of the neighborhood. And so with the sunshine and the great bursts of leaves growing on the trees, just as things grow in fast movies, I had that familiar conviction that life was beginning over again with the summer.

\textsuperscript{(4)}

Once again, a passage \textit{seems} to tell us something about Nick's romantic imagination: he thinks of himself as a pathfinder, an original settler. It might also be argued, less charitably, that it shows how ridiculous Nick is, since he is so quick to romanticize even the most trivial of incidents. Most important, the reader becomes like that newer arrival who has come on the scene of the novel shortly after Nick arrives but late enough so that Nick has to give directions. Nick is the map reader, movie director, creator of a clearly fictional road map filled with hidden dead ends and potholes.

A disordering pattern similar to that of the rose cycle also begins in this passage. Nick's "familiar conviction" looks forward to Jordan Baker's comment that "life starts all over again when it gets crisp in the fall" (118). The result is a confused sense of both natural and narrative time; for whom is this "familiar"? Neither version is exactly conventional; after all, the year traditionally begins with the winter solstice or with the vernal
nor do these versions conform to the action of the novel: the summer brings only heat, enervation, and hot tempers, and the fall brings no beginning either, only an ending, of his dream for Nick and of his life for Gatsby. Just as Gatsby's death is final, so is Nick's return to the Midwest a final abandonment of his illusions and his youth. Once again, the competing voices and versions have disrupted what appear to be Nick's intentions.

The conflict between initial intention and final execution is emphasized by the ongoing references to Gatsby's house. It is first described as "a factual imitation of some Hotel de Ville in Normandy, with a tower on one side, spanning new under a thin beard of raw ivy, and a marble swimming pool, and more than forty acres of lawn and garden" (5). The only thing to which this house is true is the quality of its imitation. Its history is equally problematic:

A brewer had built it early in the "period" craze, a decade before, and there was a story that he'd agreed to pay five years' taxes on all the neighboring cottages if the owners would have their roofs thatched with straw. Perhaps their refusal took the heart out of his plan to Found a Family—he went into immediate decline. His children sold his house with the black wreath still on the door. Americans, while occasionally willing to be serfs, have always been obstinate about being peasantry.

The story resembles Nick's family history in its unsuccessful attempt to remake the past into something more romantic. It also has at its heart a puzzling enigma: it is never clear just what the difference is between serfs and peasants, and as a result the story promises more—in terms of genealogy and moral—than it actually delivers.

This perpetual slipping away of the solidity of the romantic past and the intrusion of actual and more sordid origins is emphasized later in the novel when Gatsby, who has just asserted that it is possible to change the past, is described as "looking around him wildly, as if the past were lurking here in the shadow of his house, just out of reach of his hand" (111). It may be possible to change the past, but it is impossible to escape it.

These disruptions continue throughout the novel. Near the end Nick tries to put things into what he considers to be the proper perspective because he comes to recognize that he is in some way responsible for the chaos surrounding Gatsby's life—and death. He says, "It grew upon me that I was responsible, because no one else was interested—interested, I mean, with that intense personal interest to which everyone has some vague right at the end" (165). Nick is responsible, he says, because he became an "interested" as opposed to a detached observer. Yet notice that this interest is something to which everyone has "some vague right": what seems an intense personal involvement is only a vague connection, and Nick is no closer to explaining what happened to Gatsby, or to himself.

What the reader begins to see is that Nick is responsible because he created Gatsby, or at least a romanticized version of Gatsby, and this larger-than-life image leads to Nick's disappointment at the apparent lack of interest in Gatsby's death. In fact, Nick's most eloquent passages at the end of the novel, after Gatsby's unattended funeral, are an attempt to order the chaos that he created in his mythologizing of Gatsby, to find another way of making sense of what happened, to immortalize Gatsby. Yet the stylistic disruptions that I have described prevent the reader from feeling any sense of closure, no matter how hard Nick tries. From beginning to end, Nick's language subverts his intentions.

This responsibility is not solely Nick's, however; we all hope that language will let us make sense out of chaos, will give meaning to life, will save us from death. This hope is what Daisy's voice promised for Gatsby (as well as for Nick): "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” (97). The same warmth that Nick felt in Daisy's voice, the same promise, is shared by Gatsby. Because it is not real, this voice can be dreamed about endlessly; because it is insubstantial, it can never die. Yet when it actually could have saved Gatsby from death, the voice never comes:

I have an idea that Gatsby himself didn't believe it [the phone call from Daisy] would come, and perhaps he no longer cared. If that was true he must have felt that he had lost the old warm world, paid a high price for living too long with a single dream. 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 toward him through the amorphous trees.

Without Daisy's voice Gatsby's world is “material without being real,” and the rose, which was “absolute” early in the novel, is now “grotesque.” At Gatsby's end there is neither rose nor any voice: “I tried to think about Gatsby then for a moment, but he was already too far away, and I could only remember, without resentment, that Daisy hadn't sent a message or a flower” (176). Nick cannot depend on Daisy's “deathless song” of a voice or on roses either, but he feels compelled to find some meaning in what has happened, to find closure. He tries first to invoke geography as an explanation by recounting his annual Christmas return to the Midwest:

I am part of that, a little solemn with the feel of those long winters, a little complacent from growing up in the Carraway house in a city where dwellings are still called through decades by a family's name. I see now that this has been a story of the West, after all—Tom and Gatsby, Daisy and Jordan and I, were all Westerners, and perhaps we possessed some deficiency in common which made us subtly unadaptable to Eastern life.

Here Nick tries to claim that all the characters in the novel share some fundamental quality that both sets them apart and renders them deficient. However, the reader notices that Nick comes to this conclusion immediately after remembering his house—“where dwellings are still called through decades by a family's name.” This recalls Gatsby's house, which not only has no name but also an obscure and vaguely unsavory past, as well as Nick's story of his origins, and the reader begins to suspect that Nick's frantic struggle to find common ground is a quest that is doomed to fail.

This common ground must begin to seem uncertain to Nick as well, since he next tries to invoke history as a way of unifying the novel:

And as the moon rose higher the inessential houses began to melt away until gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes—a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby's house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder.
Since houses have failed him in the previous passage, as they failed Gatsby earlier, Nick must now claim that they are “inessential.” He then begins to speculate about the reactions of the Dutch sailors to their first view of what was to become West Egg, ascribing to them responses that are not unlike his own toward Gatsby. It would not suit Nick’s purposes to paint the sailors as greedy plunderers or as exploitative conquerors; instead, they must approach the new world with “aesthetic contemplation,” as artists. In order to justify his position as authoritative narrator, Nick must force both the past and the present to conform to an appreciation of beauty that is free from personal desire; the only contemplation allowed is “aesthetic.” The “real,” for Nick, lies not in desire or the material but in the aesthetic.

In this most lyrical passage, especially, Nick's language betrays him. The island “flowered” (evoking other flowers in this novel—roses, daisies, and myrtles—which are all tainted); it becomes a “fresh green breast” (alluding to the other breast—Myrtle’s—which was ripped off); and the trees “pander in whispers” (referring to Nick's pandering for Gatsby). The reader is also transported back to the “original settler,” “singing compulsion,” and “absolute rose” passages, with all their ambiguity. Clearly, Nick is more “interested” in his narrative than he wants to admit.

Interested, but he remains powerless to change anything, even to set right a falsification of events. When he meets Tom for the last time, and Tom recounts his version of the accident that killed Myrtle and led to Gatsby's murder, Nick responds, “There was nothing I could say, except the one unutterable fact that it wasn’t true” (180). Nick, who once saw himself as “pathfinder,” now finds himself unable to correct even the most obvious and important of misinterpretations.

So, as Nick feels his distance and control slipping away from him in the last few sentences of the novel, he plays his final card and tries to implicate the reader:

Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter—tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther. … And one fine morning—

So we beat on, boats against the current borne back ceaselessly into the past.

(182)

Nick tries to make us, his readers, feel that “we” are also caught in the same dance, that we share Nick's dream and his dilemma. We suddenly recognize that we are being inscribed in the text and forced to acknowledge that we have participated in this tragedy by listening to Nick's story. Unfortunately, the perceptive reader does not share Nick's hope that “one fine morning—” his optimism for the future, nor his nostalgic pull toward the past. Instead, at the end of the novel, Nick's dream merges with Gatsby's dream, and Nick and his readers are “borne back ceaselessly into the past,” the past of the novel. The chain of disconnections that has bound us up should force us to question all aspects of the narrative, including the narrator, Gatsby, and the reader's involvement with both of them. Nick has become, against his will, both lover and rival, while struggling to remain just a good friend.

In each formulation, in each attempt to reconstruct history, origin, and identity, both for himself and for Gatsby, Nick fails, not for lack of trying but for the limitations inherent in his language. Just as Gatsby, after kissing Daisy, will “never romp again like the mind of God” (112), so Nick will never be able to save Gatsby from death by explaining him:

Through all he said, even through his appalling sentimentality, I was reminded of something—an elusive rhythm, a fragment of lost words, that I had heard somewhere a long time ago. For a moment a phrase tried to take shape in my mouth and my lips parted like a
dumb man’s, as though there was more struggling upon them than a wisp of startled air. But they made no sound, and what I had almost remembered was uncommunicable forever.

(112)

The truth that Nick had hoped to convey becomes a “fragment of lost words,” a final meaning that was “uncommunicable forever.”

Notes

1. F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York: Scribners, 1925), 5. All subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.
2. Consistently, critics have praised *The Great Gatsby* for its multiple perspectives instead of considering it flawed. Fitzgerald—unlike other novelists of the same period—is rarely called upon to decide between various means of representation; indeed, he is celebrated for combining elements of realism and romance into the same novel. But while the novel is praised as both a realistic representation of the 1920s and a romantic rendering of the American Dream, Nick is forced to be either sincere or insincere; he is very rarely permitted to be both. For to assume that Nick is both trustworthy and untrustworthy threatens the privileged position that allows the critic to pass moral judgment on the perspective of the novel and on the psychology of the narrator. For language to become the site of misrepresentation, regardless of the intention of either character or critic, dulls the edge—or perhaps removes the need—for critical thematizing.

3. Kent Cartwright (“Nick Carraway as an Unreliable Narrator,” *Papers on Language and Literature* 20 [1984]: 218-32) says we distrust Nick because his judgment is “exaggerated, unstable and finally self-compromising” (224). Nevertheless, “because we diverge from Nick—sometimes hesitating at his reactions, sometimes moving beyond them—we feel, even as we too are compelled with fascination, a firmer objectivity” (224). So lack of identification becomes a point of novelistic unification. But the novel's overall vision—meaning Fitzgerald's vision—is clouded by Nick's ambiguous narrative position; instead of being “the arbiter of final meanings, Nick is a contestant in the novel's internal tugging war for truth” (229).

These distinctive links and interrelationships between utterances and languages, this movement of the theme through different languages and speech types, its dispersion into the rivulets and droplets of social heteroglossia, its dialogization—this is the basic distinguishing feature of the stylistics of the novel.
Any utterance is, he says, “a contradiction-ridden, tension-filled unity of two embattled tendencies in the life of language,” between the “unitary” language and “social and historical” forces (272). I see these tendencies—a pulling toward and a pulling away from the desire for unity—strongly at work in *The Great Gatsby*.

6. Warwick Wadlington (*The Confidence Game in American Literature* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975]) and Gary Lindberg (*The Confidence Man in American Literature* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1982]) discuss the pervasiveness of the confidence man in American novels. For Wadlington, the game of literature is a confidence game, which is made up of “problematic, ambivalent, or deceptive transactions that establish imaginative authority and renew individual identity, in both the world the writer imagines and the relationship he fashions with his reader” (ix). “Men seek and create the grounds of confidence, which is to say, mutual faith,” he says, “as much to validate themselves as to control the wills of others” (6). The trickster represents the “neither-both,” as opposed to “either-or” or “both-and,” an “illusive fullness” that is marginal to all sectors. “The Trickster’s marginal nature does not so much synthesize oppositions, as serve as a referent for them: it is what oppositions seek to capture” (19). This figure is also representative of American culture:

In the national iconography, Americans are peddlers of assurance. The iconography was shaped early by the historical uniqueness of the experiences open to the nation, by the new Romantic faith in the self, and by the competitive energies of capitalism.

Lindberg agrees with this relationship of the confidence game to America:

[The confidence man] is a covert cultural hero for Americans. … It is not our official pieties that he represents but our unofficial reward systems, the strategies that we have for over two centuries allowed to succeed. He clarifies the uneasy relations between our stated ethics and our tolerated practices.

The confidence man, he says, “makes belief” (7). Nick can be thought of as a kind of confidence man, although he is also fooling himself.

7. Fitzgerald was also skeptical of such assertions. His narrator comments in “The Rich Boy,” a story often seen as a precursor to *The Great Gatsby*:

When I hear a man proclaiming himself an “average, honest, open fellow,” I feel pretty sure that he has some definite and perhaps terrible abnormality which he has agreed to conceal—and his protestation of being average and honest and open is his way of reminding himself of his misprision.


8. Ross Posnock (“‘A New World, Material without Being Real’: Fitzgerald’s Critique of Capitalism in *The Great Gatsby*,” in *Critical Essays on F. Scott Fitzgerald’s “The Great Gatsby,”* ed. Scott Donaldson [Boston: G. K. Hall, 1984]: 201-13), says that Gatsby (and Nick’s representation of him) “risks incoherence … not simply from personal defect but because he is a product of a capitalist society that Fitzgerald reveals to be profoundly incoherent” (202). But the conflict between classes does not divide the novel because Nick’s “‘aesthetic contemplation’ abstracts Gatsby from a human world and places him in an ideal realm” (211). In sum:
Gatsby becomes just the sort of hero that a lonely, modestly successful thirty-year-old like Nick would be likely to invent. As Nick's invention, Gatsby, in effect, is transformed into a commodity that Nick sells the reader. The object Nick provides for our consumption is a version of a perennially marketable cultural myth—the romantic hero as passive sacrificial victim.

(211)

9. In The Resisting Reader (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), Judith Fetterley reformulates this problem in terms of sexist cultural assumptions. The narrative structure of the novel, she says, “could be more accurately described as one of Fitzgerald's most self-conscious and most successful solutions to the problem of how to tell a story” (93). She continues:

To accuse Nick of dishonesty in his treatment of women and Fitzgerald of carelessness in handling that dishonesty is to miss the point. Nick's dishonesty goes unrecognized by most of the novel's readers: it is not perceived as dishonest because it is common, pervasive, and “natural” to a sexist society. The Great Gatsby is a dishonest book because the culture from which it derives and which it reflects is radically dishonest.

(93-94)

Fitzgerald, she says, was able to achieve his effects “by drawing on a large cultural lie which he neither recognizes as such nor makes any conscious commentary upon” (94). This lie is a double standard for men and women that goes like this: “men are legitimate subjects for romantic investment and women are not; men can support it and women cannot; Daisy must fail Gatsby but Gatsby need not fail Nick” (95). I think this too easily equates Nick, a fictional character, with Fitzgerald and diminishes what the novel reveals about Nick's struggle with self-representation and metaphor.

10. An analogy to Nick's difficulties in describing Gatsby can be seen in Derrida's discussion of the problem of naming in relation to Lévi-Strauss:

Thus the name, especially the so-called proper name, is always caught in a chain or a system of differences. It becomes an appellation only to the extent that it may inscribe itself within a figuration. Whether it be linked by its origin to the representations of things in space or whether it remains caught in a system of phonic differences or social classifications apparently released from ordinary space, the proper-ness of the name does not escape spacing. Metaphor shapes and undermines the proper name. The literal [propre] meaning does not exist, its “appearance” is a necessary function—and must be analyzed as such—in the system of differences and metaphors.

(89)

The proper name, like Gatsby's made-up name, exists only in appearance; there is no inherent self that it represents. In spite of Gatsby's attempt to create a personality for himself and Nick's struggles to define that self, Gatsby—and all his name represents—is “caught in a chain or a system of differences.”

11. Gary Scrimgeour (“Against The Great Gatsby,” in Twentieth-Century Interpretations of “The Great Gatsby,” ed. Ernest Lockridge [Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1968], 70-81) sees the problem as more one of morality than of clarity. “Carraway's honesty is a matter not of principle,” he says, “but of convenience” (76). He moves from this to an assertion that Nick's assumed morality threatens the structure of the novel: “If the reader cannot accept Carraway's statements at face value, then the
The integrity of the technique of the novel is called in question” (77). Finally, Scrimgeour says that Nick is a “moral eunuch,” which makes the meaning of *The Great Gatsby* “much blacker than that of *Heart of Darkness*” (78).

12. For Derrida this is the predictable longing for the metaphysics of presence:

The subordination of the trace to the full presence summed up in the logos, the humbling of writing beneath a speech dreaming its plenitude, such are the gestures required by an onto-theology determining the archeological and eschatological meaning of being as presence, as parousia, as like without difference: another name for death, historical metonymy where God's name holds death in check. That is why, if this movement begins its era in the form of Platonism, it ends in infinitist metaphysics.

(71)

13. Cartwright says that part of the novel's ambivalence, “stems from Fitzgerald's undercutting of the novel's form” (231). What Fitzgerald has done is defeat traditional reader expectations both for a narrator and for an ending:

The work represents a kind of miscegenation of forms, a romance enclosed in a novel of manners, and Nick and Gatsby seem attached as if by pulleys: as the one is more credible, the other is less so. Gatsby can be both criminal and romantic hero because the book creates for him a visionary moral standard that transcends the conventional and that his life affirms. However, nothing in Nick compels our contemplation or our wonder; he lives in the image of an increasingly reductive melancholy, not of a transcending dream.

(232)

Although ultimately he capitulates to the vague cohesive power of the novel, to its “inextinguishable sense of possibility” (232), Cartwright raises the crucial questions of reader expectation and authorial intentionality. This reinforces what Bakhtin says about all novels: that they carry within them a variety of forms and constantly defeat expectations created by the structure and voices of the narrative. Cartwright's reading provides the prologue to a critique of the actual function of the novel, although he falls back on possibility (or politics, or psychology) to hold the novel together.

**Criticism: Richard Lehan (essay date 1990)**


*In the following essay, Lehan discusses the reasons why The Great Gatsby is still considered a literary classic.*

Any attempt to pinpoint the importance of a work involves a slightly circular argument. The criteria that one brings to the work establish its sense of importance, and the claim for importance then justifies the criteria. Such a necessary circularity need not, however, diminish the more obvious contexts used in establishing the worth of a literary text. Complexity and artistry, vision and technique are the values usually brought to the evaluative process. But even within these terms critics find room for disagreement. What is narratively complex and artistically accomplished to one may seem simplistic and awkward to another. So at the outset we must be aware that any discussion of the “greatness” of a work involves judgments that are both tentative.
and personal.

The problem of evaluation is complicated further by the fact that there are many modes of fiction: the early realism of Defoe, for example, functions differently from the comic realism of Dickens, which in turn functions differently from the romantic realism of Hugo, or the naturalism of Zola, or the mythic symbolism of Joyce. Fitzgerald began his career by writing an aesthetic novel in the tradition of the bildungsroman; moved on to write a seminaturalistic, documentary kind of novel; then under the influence of Conrad, turned to the highly wrought novel of symbolic detail, controlled by the sensibility and moral intelligence of a narrator who participates in the action. Along with the mythic symbolism of Joyce, the stream of consciousness of Virginia Woolf, the narrative primitivism of D. H. Lawrence, this kind of novel is central to the very idea of the modern, at the same time that it functions differently—and hence must be read and evaluated differently—from the other narrative modes and the subgenres within those modes. *The Great Gatsby* is perhaps the best example of what might be called moral symbolism, and the critics who underestimate this novel tend to do so by not seeing clearly the mode in which it was written—and how successfully that mode was accomplished.

Some of these critics are also put off at the outset by Fitzgerald's reputation, which has been diminished by the short stories—many of them trivial—that he wrote for such popular journals as the *Saturday Evening Post*. Ernest Hemingway always felt superior to him on this score. That Fitzgerald diluted his craft under the urgent pressures of debt and the need for money cannot be denied. That he also wrote a dozen or so of the best short stories in the twentieth century can also not be denied. When he was in control of his craft, Fitzgerald was capable of consistently major achievements.

By 1924 Fitzgerald was in the position to write a masterwork like *Gatsby*—everything had been building toward this moment. He had served a kind of apprenticeship in the writing of his two previous novels, and he had begun to conceptualize the Gatsby novel in such short stories as “Winter Dreams,” “The Diamond as Big as the Ritz,” “Absolution,” and a bit later “The Rich Boy.” He would never be so completely in control of his craft again, so sure of the narrative effect that he wanted to create, and in such good health that he would have the energy to work on that novel even at times to the point of exhaustion.

What Fitzgerald did in *The Great Gatsby* was to raise his central character to a mythic level, to reveal a man whose intensity of dream partook of a state of mind that embodied America itself. Gatsby is the last of the romantic heroes, whose energy and sense of commitment take him in search of his personal grail. The quest cannot be separated from the destiny of a nation—from people who came to a new world, crossed a continent, and built a nation. Such an exercise in will was not without consequence, however, for these people left behind a trail of plunder and waste—of Indians massacred, of the land and its minerals exploited, of nature pillaged. Once the frontier was exhausted, the adventurous state of mind still existed; only now the object of its contemplation was less heroic and sometimes even banal. Fitzgerald's Gatsby was a man of such heroic vision without the opportunity to find a commensurate experience for it. Once the frontier was gone, Gatsby brought his Western intensity East and found a “frontier” equivalent in the New York underworld, the world of professional gamblers, bootleggers, financial schemers, and a new breed of exploiters that the city bred differently from the land. Such a man will stand out in “respectable” company because he will lack social credentials. Novelists like Henry James, E. M. Forster, and Ford Madox Ford gave us insight into how such a highly structured world works; it turns primarily on manners, a system of decorum that those who are within the system share and that separates them from those who are outside. In this world Gatsby is a poseur, a man who fakes it, exploiting his brief contact with Oxford, his war record, and a natural physical elegance that belies his crudity of taste and his lack of a privileged knowledge of manners.

And it is this Gatsby who becomes the object of focus for Nick Carraway—a young, privileged Westerner who has also come East to try his fortune. But Nick does not have to make his own money—that was done by those who came before him, whose crude ventures are now concealed by bourgeois status. Nick's granduncle
and father have settled comfortably into the business of American business, of servicing the hardware needs
of the new America. Such is a diminished thing. The romantic intensity that the pioneers brought to the new
world, Gatsby now brings to a beautiful but also rather superficial, self-involved, self-protecting, morally
empty young woman. The power of this novel ultimately comes from the structured relationships between
these narrative elements. We have two kinds of seeing in this novel: the visionary whose vision has been
emptied, and a moral observer who is initially unsympathetic to what he sees in the visionary (“Gatsby …
represented everything for which I have an unaffected scorn”) but who is eventually won over by what is
compelling and poignant in Gatsby's story. Nick comes to see that Gatsby's fate cannot be separated from his
own or from the destiny of America—that something heroic has passed in the backwash of time; that in the
era of Harding and Coolidge, the era of modern America, a crass materiality has absorbed our attention,
making it a dreamer's fate to idealize what is now most hollow in an emptied past. We most often think of the
visionary as one who can read the future; but the visionary is really the person who can read the past, who
knows what has been used up, what has been materially exhausted and is no longer available. In this context
Fitzgerald was truly a visionary.

In *The Great Gatsby* Fitzgerald tells an extremely American story, so much so that he even thought of titling
it “Under the Red, White, and Blue.” The sense of personal destiny in the novel gives way to a sense of
national destiny and that in turn to a romantic state of mind. Fitzgerald's literary imagination was always
deply connected to the romantics; he began reading them seriously at Princeton under the influence of
Professor Christian Gauss, and he brought the same intensity of romantic interest to an aesthetic tradition that
spawned so many of the young disillusioned men and women that Fitzgerald made the trademark of his
fiction. Such disillusionment was imbedded in the vision itself, inseparable from its workings: illusion versus
reality, a transcendental ideal in conflict with an earthy materialism, the Keatsian frozen moment in contrast
with time the destroyer, the romantic ideal transforming physical reality, the rose elevated beyond the
garden—such was the fateful metaphysics behind a novel like *Gatsby*, a metaphysic that gave such tragic
priority to the unreal that it was assured the ideal would be undone in time. But to state the problem this
bluntly robs it of narrative subtlety, robs it of the greatest gift Fitzgerald brought to his novel—a style so well
honed that his story takes on the intensity of a poem.

And indeed it was a poem that served among his models. In *The Great Gatsby* Fitzgerald wrote an American
equivalent to *The Waste Land* and brought the same intensity of vision to the postwar, secular world of
America that T. S. Eliot had brought to the world of postwar England. So many of the touches in the novel are
purely Eliotic—the scene in the Washington Heights apartment where the principals talk about Mrs.
Eberhardt, who “goes around looking at people's feet in their own homes” (31), or the counterscene in Daisy's
mansion where it is asked, “What'll we do with ourselves this afternoon … and the day after that, and the next
thirty years?” (118), or the scene involving Nick walking the city streets seeing both from the inside and out.
Nick may start off with absolute scorn for Gatsby, but he comes to admire him both as a man and as a portent
of America. Nick sees what is both pathetic and grand in the last of the American romantics, the last of the
breed with an epic sense of destiny whose vision took him beyond the realm in which the rest of us live. When
asked why Daisy married Tom Buchanan, Gatsby responds, “it was only personal.” Such touches Fitzgerald
brought to every page of *The Great Gatsby*, which radiates with its own special energy.

Fitzgerald's fiction, his conception of character, the narrative unfolding, the complexity of language—all
make for a novel of unbelievable complexity. On a personal note, I can say that I have read this novel well
over one hundred times, and every time I reread it, I find that I am seeing things that I had previously missed.
Few novels—particularly those so seemingly simple on the surface—hold up so well and have the ability to
continually surprise us. *The Great Gatsby* seems larger than the criteria that we bring to its evaluation;
whatever we say about it seems never complete or satisfactory enough. It is a novel that has continually
proved itself larger than its many critics, which is perhaps what we mean when we speak of it as a
masterpiece. When the canon of American literature changes, the criteria we use to establish that canon
change as well. Literary posterity is always a fragile thing, but challenges to the permanence of *The Great
Gatsby seem to cast more doubt on our critical criteria than they do on Fitzgerald's achievement.

**Criticism: Carol Wershoven (essay date 1993)**


In the following essay, Wershoven notes that Daisy Buchanan is a prototypical “child bride” whose “purchase” is required by a society of commodity.

Undine Spragg [in Edith Wharton's *The Custom of the Country*] is only one in a series of girls whose appetite mirrors a nation's desire. In four novels that followed *The Custom of the Country—The Great Gatsby*, [Wharton's] *Twilight Sleep* [and Ellen Glasgow's], *The Sheltered Life* and *In This Our Life*—versions of the insatiable girl appear, and so, too, does a recognizable pattern. The desiring/desired girl stands at the center of a vortex. Around her swirl instances of failed marriages, blocked communications, social disorder and decay. Like *The Custom of the Country*, each of these four novels is set in a world of deception, where illusion and role-playing supersede reality and emotion. But a new element appears in the pattern: a crime. In these novels, there are two shootings and two car “accidents” (hit-and-run). In each case, the innocent heroine is either the culprit or is indirectly responsible, and, in each case, society helps to cover up the deed.

These conspiracies of evasion are the logical outcomes of the crimes, as those around the heroine are her accomplices. They have created the atmosphere in which the child bride flourishes: they have, in essence, created her. And those around her perceive that she cannot be held responsible for her actions, for she embodies the pure freedom of endless choice without consequences. She is the consumer who need never pay.

She is an icon of desire and damnation. Like Undine Spragg, she is what men want, and she is full of discontent: forever attracted to a new amusement, a new toy, a new man, and forever bored, disappointed, seeking a new deal. Men strive to pay for her, and they pay twice. They work to acquire her, and they assume the responsibility of owning a delinquent child, one who smashes things and people with the petulance of a spoiled little girl.

The price of the child bride never seems to be too high. In these novels, even when the beloved child is revealed as a manipulator, betrayer, or murderer, she is carefully shielded from the consequences of her desires. This icon of longing must not be shattered, for if she is gone, what is left? Only the Valley of Ashes that created her.

In the middle of *The Great Gatsby*, Meyer Wolfsheim, who has ingeniously transformed human molars into jewelry and the dirty deal into a corporate empire, offers Nick Carraway a business connection. His offer encapsulates most of the relationships of the novel, for F. Scott Fitzgerald's book is largely about deals. Tom Buchanan has bought his wife, and Jay Gatsby wants to exercise his prior option on the merchandise. Nick, the novel's moral center, is learning to trade in stocks and bonds. Gatsby sells liquor in the guise of medicine, Tom Buchanan and George Wilson dicker over the sale of a car, Myrtle Wilson sells herself, and Meyer Wolfsheim bought the World Series.

At the center of the trading is, of course, the golden girl, or more accurately, as Michael Millgate notes, the gold and white girl. Daisy is the golden girl in the white palace, the “Daisy” with a gold center and white petals, the princess dressed in white, driving a white roadster. She is, then, the color of money but also the color of the “absence of all desire.” The white palace is remote and inaccessible, Millgate says, and Daisy's white innocence is life-denying (111). Daisy wants things and people, but she feels no true sexual desire, and thus there is no space inside her that can be filled, no unfinished part of her that can be completed by another.
She is a trick of blankness. Even her golden color, the color of money, is also the color of brass, the imitation. It is the color of the brass buttons on her dress the day she reunites with Gatsby, himself resplendent in a silver shirt and golden tie.

At the center of all the deals, then, is a bad bargain. Daisy is the meretricious beauty to which Gatsby consecrates his life.

It is fitting that a book about buying and selling should center on a woman who does not give full value for the money. Most trades involve some deception, or at least some illusion, on the part of buyer and/or seller. And so The Great Gatsby is a novel of lies, filled with open secrets, evasions, deceit, and betrayal. It begins with the open secret of Tom's infidelity and Daisy's dramatic enactment of the role of long-suffering, beautiful fool. The scenario entertains Jordan, a professional golfer who is a liar and a cheat. The first scenes introduce the keynote of deception that continues throughout. Tom lies to his mistress about his wife's refusal to divorce him; Myrtle and her sister deceive Myrtle's husband, poor George; everyone suspects Gatsby is lying about his genteel past; and a series of deceptions lead to Gatsby's murder.

As the Houyhynhms said, a lie is “the thing that is not,” and this is a novel about the love of “what is not.” In The Great Gatsby, appearances are worshipped as if they were real, things are substituted for emotions, things provoke emotion, and people become things.¹

The central characters, Daisy and Gatsby, drift from role to role, almost as if they were searching for the most appropriate one. Daisy is first seen in an elaborate tableau of elegance and lassitude, posed on her sofa, gazing motionless at some invisible object, a figurine in a cool, lush setting. In the space of a few hours, she attempts two new roles: the injured wife and the adoring young mother. Her lover, trying to explain his past to Nick, also posits a series of roles, from which Nick can choose the one he finds most plausible: war hero of Montenegro, white hunter in the colonies, Oxford man. Daisy is drawn to Gatsby's flair for drama. As Marius Bewley notes, what Daisy likes best at Gatsby's party is the empty gesture of an actress and her director (278), slowly moving toward one another in a pantomime of love, a parody of her own slow movement back to the lover who wants to dominate her life.

And the love that supposedly binds these two is frequently represented as an uncontrollable feeling prompted by an object. Gatsby beseeches Daisy's green light in the darkness; she is where the light is, but somehow the light evokes the feeling. Daisy loses control and weeps, not on first re-encountering her lost love, but when she sees the piles of pastel-colored shirts he flings, like tribute, into her lap. Betrayal is also revealed by a thing: George Wilson discovers his wife's adultery when he finds a jeweled dog leash in her room.

The lines dividing people, images and things become increasingly blurred. Daisy's little girl, charmingly dressed and adorably (but briefly) exhibited to Nick, seems like her mother's doll, or a prop in Daisy's drama of marital virtue wronged and affronted. Daisy's attitude towards Gatsby is most tellingly revealed in the words of passion that give the game away. Tom is certain that Daisy has been unfaithful when she lovingly compares Gatsby, so fresh and clean and beautifully dressed, to the image of a man in a shirt advertisement. There seems to be no higher tribute in this world of illusion than to compare one's beloved to an advertisement.

It is a dead world, a place dominated by a pair of eyes on a billboard, eyes that are sightless but forever peer out, looking for something. Like the eyes of Dr. Eckleburg, the innocents of the novel keep looking for something, something new and better, for they are bored with the things they have already bought. Daisy wonders what they'll do each day, and the next day, identifying the dilemma of people who can have whatever they want, as soon as they want it. Tom, too, is bored, seeking excitement first in sport, then in infidelity, seeking identity in a book of racist political philosophy. Myrtle is bored with her husband and looking for a better deal; George, too, dreams of moving to a new place where business will be better.
Gatsby, more than anyone else, is eternally hopeful, confident that one more purchase will save him. Malcolm Bradbury says Gatsby aims “to transform money into love” (65) by buying Daisy. For, as [Judith] Fetterley says, Daisy has become the embodiment of the things Gatsby has craved for so long. Her family's rich house in Alabama, where he first sees her, is “the house of romance which he can only enter through her,” and she is “the ultimate object in it. It is she for whom men compete, and possessing her is the clearest sign that one has made it into that magical world” (74).

Fitzgerald's comment on his relationship to his wife Zelda is relevant to Gatsby's motives. In his notebooks, Fitzgerald discussed his marriage to Zelda, a dream fulfilled only after much frustration. Zelda had broken their engagement because Fitzgerald had no money, and she married him only after he had become rich and famous, with the publication of his first novel. Fitzgerald describes the bitter lesson learned from both denial and subsequent gratification of his longing:

The man with the jingle of money in his pocket who married the girl a year later would always cherish an abiding distrust, an animosity, toward the leisure class—not the conviction of the revolutionist but the smouldering hatred of a peasant. In the years since then I have never been able to stop wondering where my friends' money came from, nor to stop thinking that at one time a sort of droit de seigneur might have been exercised to give one of them my girl.

(Qtd. in Spindler 152)

His fear describes the plot of *The Great Gatsby*, and Spindler says the statement reveals Fitzgerald's awareness that “money was the dynamo which powered the bright lights of the leader class” (152). But the comment also reveals Fitzgerald's understanding that women are property, prizes to be won. And so his greatest character, Jay Gatsby, perceives Daisy as “that which money exists to buy,” as Fetterley says. To own her “both indicates the fact of money and gives point to its possession” (74).

Fitzgerald seems to say that Daisy is the source of Gatsby's doom, that she brings him down. Critics of the novel generally agree that Daisy's destructive power is not willed or conscious, that Gatsby has simply invested too much in a property that cannot appreciate in value. Nevertheless, our general sense of Gatsby's story links his fall to his choice of the golden girl. Perhaps if he had found some other embodiment of his dreams, if he had purchased something else, his life might have been otherwise. The being who created himself, this Son of God, is incarnated, made fallible and vulnerable, when he makes the wrong consumer decision.

As Gatsby remembers it, the fatal choice is his decision to commit himself to Daisy. On that autumn night, as he and Daisy walked on a sidewalk “white with moonlight,” he turned to Daisy and noticed that “the blocks of the sidewalk really formed a ladder and mounted to a secret place above the trees.” The moment of choice arrives, for Gatsby can reach the secret place

if he climbed alone, and once there he could suck on the pap of life, gulp down the incomparable milk of wonder.

His heart beat faster and faster as Daisy's white face came up to his own. He knew that when he kissed this girl, and forever wed his unutterable visions to her perishable breath, his mind would never romp again like the mind of God. So he waited. … Then he kissed her … and the incarnation was complete.

(112)
Gatsby has bought the definitive item; given the choice between the stars and the earth, between a secret place of endless wonder and the blank, white face of mortality with its “perishable breath,” Gatsby comes down to Daisy, who must lift her face to reach him. God has been made man; anticipation, infinite promise have been reduced to a limiting realization. It seems that God has become man not by becoming a child, but by loving one.

The passage is not so straightforward. For the alternatives of Gatsby's choice are not clear. From what heights did Gatsby fall? And to what has he been reduced?

Without Daisy, Gatsby thinks, he could climb that white ladder to the sky and be safe in a solitary spot, free to suck the milk of wonder, to romp. This choice is a child's choice, a consumer choice. Gatsby perceives this secret world as a place of dependency and drift, where the maternal breast of dreams is ever-available, where he can suck the milk of wonder endlessly as he romps in innocence. To get there, he must take a white sidewalk and climb a white ladder to live on the white liquid of dreams. In a novel filled with negative images of the white princess in her white world, the world relinquished by Gatsby seems remarkably similar to the world he chooses.

Gatsby's “fall” into Daisy's perishable world is no Fortunate one. There is no moment of transition from that secret world of play to the mature world of guilt, sorrow, and perhaps redemption. If Daisy indeed brings Gatsby down, she brings him down to reality. The fallen Gatsby is not so much diminished as revealed. He has chosen Daisy not as an alternative to that playful world of wonderful white dreams, but as an embodiment of it.

As Fitzgerald points out, Gatsby makes himself, and he creates his own destiny as well. Like that first self-made man, Ben Franklin, Gatsby methodically and systematically designs his regimen of self-improvement. His diary, like Franklin's, allocates each moment of the day for one more step on the way to wealth. Gatsby learns and studies under a more modern version of the self-made man, the predator/pioneer Dan Cody. Gatsby learns to believe in his mentor's values of power, possession and control. He becomes exactly what he wanted to be—the latest incarnation of an old American dream. By Gatsby's time, the self-made man is no longer creative and inventive like Franklin, nor rapacious and atavistic, like Cody. He is polished and charming, a con man. But Gatsby's misfortune is to be the con man duped by his own yearnings.

Gatsby is brought down by his refusal to see the nature of his own dreams, and that is why he must remain faithful to Daisy until he dies. As Fetterley says, Gatsby has invested himself in Daisy (76-77), so to recognize her emptiness is to recognize his own. It is easier to remain in a world of lies, to die waiting for a call that will never come, a declaration of love from a girl who cannot love. The dream must be sustained by deception, of others and of oneself, so that identity can be sustained.

It is easier for all those in Gatsby's world to go on as they began than to confront the evil inside their dreams. When the golden girl kills, her crime must be concealed, and Gatsby, Tom, and even Nick conspire to cover up the truth. And so the novel ends as it began. It ends in falsehood, from Gatsby's lie to save Daisy, to Jordan's lie to save her pride. It ends in deception, from George Wilson's tragic mistake, to the revelation of Gatsby's real name, to the Buchanans' re-assumption of the role of united married couple.

And, most of all, it ends with a final picture of the power of money. Money can buy the innocent bride, and enough money can keep her safe in a white palace. Money can sustain the illusion that, somewhere, there is one new thing, one new pleasure or one new person that, purchased, will fill the emptiness inside. And so the story of the Buchanans ends with two more purchases, as Tom buys jewelry to adorn his new mistress, his latest acquisition. Business continues as usual.

Note
1. This blurring of polarities is very like the blurring of subject and object in *Sister Carrie*.

**Works Cited**


**Criticism: Ronald Berman (essay date 1994)**


*[In the following essay, Berman discusses ideas current in America in the early part of the decade just before Gatsby’s publication.]*

In “Echoes of the Jazz Age,” written in the early thirties, with a flourish Fitzgerald identified the crucial year of the preceding decade: “May one offer in exhibit the year 1922!”¹ It is the turning-point year in which *The Great Gatsby* takes place. And in the novel he makes it a point to be specific about the dating of his story. In what particular ways does the novel use its moment? Let us look at certain ideas in circulation in the summer of 1922, and in the period around it: ideas that, like that of “civilization,” are referential in the text. For Tom Buchanan “civilization” is highly meaningful—and is opposed to his sense of “the modern world.” Does he echo a public debate? And, is his anxiety over ideas and social situations possibly derived?

One set of anxieties can probably be discarded. In a 1921 interview Fitzgerald stated that, “except for leaving its touch of destruction here and there, I do not think the war left any real lasting effect. Why, it is almost forgotten right now.”² Possibly to our surprise there was substantial agreement with this. Leading into the year *The Great Gatsby* takes place, on November 30, 1921, the *New Republic* states of “the new spirit” that worldwide, “improvement is spreading rapidly and is increasing in self-confidence and in positive achievement as well as in volume. It is clearly the expression of a temper radically different from that which prevailed during and after the war.” Throughout 1922, the *Saturday Evening Post* showed little interest in a war that had by now receded from the memory of its readers and was no longer good copy. The *Post*, in any case, had many other quarrels to engage in, and there are good reasons for it being a magazine of choice for Tom Buchanan. “civilization” is highly meaningful—and is opposed to his sense of “the modern world.” Does he echo a public debate? And, is his anxiety over ideas and social situations possibly derived?

In a 1921 interview Fitzgerald stated that, “except for leaving its touch of destruction here and there, I do not think the war left any real lasting effect. Why, it is almost forgotten right now.”² Possibly to our surprise there was substantial agreement with this. Leading into the year *The Great Gatsby* takes place, on November 30, 1921, the *New Republic* states of “the new spirit” that worldwide, “improvement is spreading rapidly and is increasing in self-confidence and in positive achievement as well as in volume. It is clearly the expression of a temper radically different from that which prevailed during and after the war.” Throughout 1922, the *Saturday Evening Post* showed little interest in a war that had by now receded from the memory of its readers and was no longer good copy. The *Post*, in any case, had many other quarrels to engage in, and there are good reasons for it being a magazine of choice for Tom Buchanan. In 1923, the year of the first publication of *Time*, almost nothing was said in its weekly coverage about war disillusion. The archaeologist of news will find instead that *Time* covers war debts, war finances, and armament limitations without invoking war disillusion. In the early twenties *Time* covered fiction and theater in more detail than it now does, but very little of its critical attention was devoted to books or essays about the lasting, debilitating effect of our experience in the Great War. Much attention, however, was paid by *Time*, other magazines, and by Fitzgerald to certain resentments.
On July 5, 1922, a date to remember, the *New Republic* continued its campaign of national introspection or “interpretation” (the term is from the first sentence of the first issue in 1914) of public events. There was much to interpret, beginning with the industrial war in West Virginia in which coal miners had killed nineteen strike breakers. The editors thought that these unionized miners were identical in class outlook and behavior to those who had recently beaten and tortured black migrant workers in Springfield and East St. Louis. There were troubles enough abroad: the Marines were in Haiti; Ireland was habitually regressive in politics and in culture; and in Germany Walther Rathenau had just been assassinated. But, at least for the *New Republic*, foreign policy was not at this point the main issue: what mattered most in American life was the management of domestic change. There were many anxieties, and traditional kinds of explanation seemed no longer to hold. It seemed, for example, to be no longer useful to think about the relationship of Capital to Labor, or of Democrat to Republican. Politics was a waste of time. In 1922, the public duty was to reassess the aggregate of individual lives that constituted the nation and to bring to bear a new private and public sense of self.

Perhaps nothing *could* be done about West Virginia until the values of a “Christian people” were asserted—and recognized. About other things much remained to be done, especially about the dual facts of too much money in circulation, and in too few hands. There was an uneasy sense of the swiftness of social change, and, even more, that it might be unmanageable. The issue of July 5 ended on an especially disquieting note, with a review of recent books on coming of age in America. Its last words were about a new cultural sense of self, about the child no longer “the subject of the parental regent, however wise.” In the coming decade, it was plain to see, personal identity would be achieved through “self-direction and self-determination.” The author reviewed is Rabbi Stephen S. Wise and his book *Child Versus Parent* is taken for a tract for the times. Undesired social change seems now to begin, literally, at home. Both author and reviewer believe that the growth of social character should indeed be ordered by “self-discipline” but they doubt that will happen. Fitzgerald would write in the early thirties that “the wildest of all generations” was that “which had been adolescent during the confusion of the War.” As for self-discipline, that had been stood on its head: the generation of children had “corrupted its elders.”

There is one other thing about this issue that is of special interest to novelists: a review of *Ulysses* by Edmund Wilson. Since reading it, “the texture of other novelists seems intolerably loose and careless.” *Ulysses* has invalidated traditional kinds of fiction, including, one supposes, books like *This Side of Paradise* and *The Beautiful and Damned*. New fiction will clearly have to be ironic in tone, modernist in technique. Fitzgerald dutifully read *Ulysses* and wrote to Wilson about its personal effect on him. There is more to the effect of modernism on Fitzgerald that needs to be said and I will try to amplify that in later chapters.

Other magazines will of course have other concerns but they too are focused on the overriding theme of change. There is *Vanity Fair*, a publication closer than the *New Republic* to the tactical issues of Fitzgerald's fiction. *Vanity Fair* means also to be interpretative—its motto has, from the first issue in 1913, been “a record of current achievements in all the arts and a mirror of the progress and promise of American life.” Its sense of “promise” resonates to Fitzgerald's themes. *Vanity Fair* was (before the advent of the *New Yorker*) the main source for the creation of social identity through high style. It assumed that self-determination operates through consumption. One of its great themes is the acquisition of identity by conscious choice. That choice is exerted through transaction within the marketplace. The primary assumption of the marketplace of style is that we can choose what we want to be without inhibition. A secondary assumption is that diligent consumption, as thoughtful and perhaps as arduous as that of a lifetime of good works, legitimatizes our efforts. When Myrtle Wilson shops at Pennsylvania Station she is by no means being simply materialistic—she displays the care and prudence once associated with the vocation of citizenship. She understands that purchases and styles are meant not to gratify but to display the character of choice—and the choice of character.

*Vanity Fair* is necessarily about commodities, and its advertisements are as important as any other instructions conveyed by commercial literature. I believe that Fitzgerald took quite seriously the techniques and even the claims of advertising—he did not differentiate it from the rest of “culture” and indeed he used it to enormous advantage in a novel about people whose energies are often bent toward consumption. There are no warnings
in *The Great Gatsby* that when we leave love for advertising or for the description of commodities we are moving from a realm of higher to lower seriousness.

*Vanity Fair* has a powerfully affective sequence of advertisements (nearly all illustrated, with many taking up an expensive full page) of its principal commodities, automobiles. Here they are in order of appearance in the July 1922 issue: the life-changing designs of the Chalmers Six, Oldsmobile, Wills Sainte Claire, Haynes 75, Renault, Winton, Kimball, De lage, Talbot-Duracq, Marmon, D. A. C., Mercedes, Stanley, Elgin, Dusenberg, the three-wheeled Neracar (“a new type of automotive vehicle unlike either an automobile or a motorcycle”), Ford, Le Baron, Rumpler Raindrop, Studebaker, Durant, Stutz, Pierce-Arrow, Cadillac, Sunbeam, Ballot, Packard Twin-Six, Paige, Daniels, Derham, and La Fayette. The August issue will add the Maxwell, Locomobile, Essex, and the Rolls-Royce favored by Gatsby. In relation to all advertisements and text the automobile is by far the most important commodity in the issue. It is as important a symbolic object to *Vanity Fair* as it is to *The Great Gatsby*. Each car has a social character to confer. Some will grant middle-class reliability. Most, however, have more extensive ambitions. The products imply consumers who are themselves “leading,” “powerful,” and even “perfect.” These products confer “esteem,” “security,” “enjoyment” and, possibly more important, something not likely to be granted often by daily life, complete “satisfaction.” In *The Great Gatsby* one of these cars will even turn out to be “triumphant.”

Few of the cars on the pages of *Vanity Fair* are less elaborate than Gatsby's, which begins to seem representative rather than extreme. There are not only spare tires but cases for them; there are tools and gauges for mileage, gasoline, and oil; and logs for daily expenses. There are monograms in metal to prove ownership. There are traveling sundials. A special model of the Pierce-Arrow comes equipped with water tank and icebox for cocktail parties; with bottles, glasses, “knives, forks, plates and other picnic paraphernalia.” This model also has a Victrola and room for records to play on it. There is a built-in Kodak to memorialize its usage. The Stutz is itself interpretative, “owned and liked by men who have long since passed the Dollar Sign on the road to achievement.”

Gatsby seems less idiosyncratic when a magazine of 1922 is opened. The majority of other commodities in the July issue of *Vanity Fair* are clothes that make the man. Advertisements of the 1990s now praise natural impulse and promise individuality within the mass. Ads of the twenties are more socially instructive. They reflect realities, not impulses. We buy underwear because of “The Question of Health.” A watch is not an ornament or *jeu d'esprit* but “The Last Essential in Dress.” What matters is that which allows us to be “approved” and which turns us into “ladies” and “gentlemen.” B. V. D.s suggest neither sexuality nor privacy—they are what a man wears for the last perceivable stage of correctness in the club locker room. It is only natural that a considerable amount of anxiety should be generated because the marketplace is full of those who aspire to mobility but who cannot defend their origins. The marketplace of identity has to avoid the issue tackled by the great novels of social change that kept inner consciousness focused on the past. In the great line of narrative from Dickens to Lawrence and Joyce the problem is not that of achieving status but of reconciling it with one's former, inner—and true—identity. The ads of *Vanity Fair* promise a change of identity so complete that there will be no former self left to argue with.

The Vanity Fair Shopping Service undertakes “to leave the decision” about acquiring a new self through commodities “to Vanity Fair's judgment.” It is a judgment much less fallible in its sense of a social self than any individual's is liable to be. There are many ads like this one in magazines of the twenties, providing instructions for those on the margins of class. The marketplace had to formulate character as well as supply demand. Fitzgerald once wrote ad copy himself and was aware of the relationship between style and status: Gatsby leaves the decision about his shirts to a man in England who sends over a “selection” of things each season. Daisy understands not only the plenum of styles but the way they reach Gatsby and what they mean to him.
The ultimate promise about acquired identity is made in *Vanity Fair* by an ad for the La Fayette: “He Who Owns A La Fayette is envied by all who truly love fine things. Quiet, beautiful and strong, this car rules any road it travels.” It should be no surprise that after Daisy tells Gatsby indirectly that she loves him, she seeks for her own objective correlative: “You resemble the advertisement of the man. ... You know the advertisement of the man—” (93). Probably not the man in the La Fayette ad, but the man whose face is drawn a thousand times a day in the art of commercial realism, a figure perfectly achieved.6

But even *Vanity Fair* has second thoughts about “progress and promise.” In the May 1922 issue, the omnipresent Hendrik Willem Van Loon had invoked “civilization” in a way that would reverberate throughout the decade.7 The term will come to mean a great deal to Tom Buchanan in the spring of 1922 and to those he represents. Van Loon writes that after the war, “America has suddenly been called upon to carry forward the work of civilization.” We must now provide what an exhausted Old World used to provide, “art and literature and science and music and all the other great accomplishments of the human race.” Or, as Tom confusedly puts it in his redaction of profundity, “oh, science and art and all that” (14). By “art” both mean aesthetics in the service of social stasis: realistic images with moral values. But there are some redefinitions also about “the human race.” Van Loon adds that civilization as we know it may well vanish, exactly as when “unknown hordes from unknown parts of Asia and Eastern Europe broke through the barriers of Rome and installed themselves amidst the ruins of the old Augustan cities.” The modern equivalent of these hordes is “the latest shipment of released Ellis Islanders” who will “make a new home among the neglected residences of your own grandfathers and uncles.” The issue was addressed from the other side of the aisle at exactly the same time (May 10, 1922) by the *New Republic*, which concluded that national identity would be changed no matter what people like Van Loon wanted. A “new” kind of “upstart half-breed Americans seem destined to rule the larger American cities for many years in spite of the discomfiture, the dismay and the ineffectual protests of the former ruling class.” It is a good description of the political-cultural dialectic—and also of Tom Buchanan and his fears.

*Harper's Monthly Magazine* in the early twenties had few advertisements and showed little interest in either domestic or national policy. It was very much in the genteel tradition, concerned with manners, the fiction of sensibility, various uses of Nature, the alternatives of city and country life, and the cultural responsibilities of the enlightened middle class. More than one piece in the July 1922 issue sought to be inspirational about America. But the theme so persistent in other texts finds expression here also: we were better off before times changed. The opening essay, “What Happens to Pioneers,” is about a country once untroubled by mass migrations from Europe to America—or from South to North. It insists that before the twentieth century, ownership and working of the land themselves constituted moral character. As for the settlement of the wilderness—that had been an act of national altruism. It is bad enough that the change in population from country to city-based has wrought a change in our national character—much worse is the effect of ideas about our past. A certain nameless reviewer for the *New Republic* (clearly infected by the spirit of Veblen and of Beard) is the villain of this piece in *Harper's*. That reviewer, obviously a modern materialist with no regard for the meaning of American history, has converted “The dreaming builders” of our union, who were entirely altruistic, into “real-estate speculators, usurers, merchants, brokers,” and pettifogging lawyers. The “mystic exaltation” of the Founding Fathers has been reduced to mere “pecuniary interest.” Their motive for developing the wilderness is now interpreted by moderns as being only the desire to profit from it. American history, according to such new, deracinated intellectuals, *is an exact counterpart of contemporary history*. There are two main sources of resentment in this piece: that the innocent past should be so distant from the corrupt present; and that it should be judged by “modern” ideas.

The July *Harper's* ends with the “Editor's Easy Chair” in which the reader is warned that “A man's most difficult antagonist is within himself, and the same is apt to be true of nations.” The specific issue is American national life perceived in terms (“anxieties,” “loss of “confidence,” and of “balance”) that are clearly not political but moral-psychological. This kind of transference is one of the great modes of periodical literature and of the entire enterprise of social commentary. There are some good reasons for the public being addressed
as if it were in a continual state of moral crisis. In an age of limited government there are necessarily limited expectations. It is rare for the editorialists of the early twenties to appeal to state or federal agencies. They sermonize instead. And they persist in understanding national issues as if they were moral issues. This is as true of Irving Babbitt as it is of Tom Buchanan. It is as if national character were perceived as an enlarged form of individual character. Within that tradition the editor of Harper's looks back at the nineteenth century, and says that “the old way” of doing things “has not worked well” for us. The truth may be that twentieth-century problems are not amenable to nineteenth-century solutions. There is an unbridgeable distance between our history and our selves.

If we are to judge from this limited sample, public debate on the subject of true Americanism was mournful and confused. As for American “civilization,” that debate was even angrier and uglier than Tom Buchanan's. The term “civilization” was everywhere in use for the expression of anxiety. It was often used as a code word meaning innocent American national character before mass immigration and Emancipation—and before the loathsome effects of modernity.

During a “polite” and “pleasant” dinner on East Egg Nick Carraway unconsciously engages a national dialectic: it takes no more than saying, “You make me feel uncivilized, Daisy” (13). Nick says that he “meant nothing in particular by this remark, but it was taken up in an unexpected way” (14). From this point on Tom Buchanan is cued to debate “civilization,” and the text begins its refraction of ideas from print. As Tom says of his current favorite book, “everybody ought to read it” (14), and the implication is that ideas do in fact circulate from texts. Fitzgerald has gone to some trouble to indicate—in a very pointed communication from Nick to the reader—that an eruption has occurred that reveals underlying truths. Beneath the surface of a “pleasant” evening is resentment, even rage if we are to judge from what seems to be its displaced forms in Tom. We get from “art” and “science” to race very quickly. There is a strange parallel between this passage and another passage published a few years before, in 1919, which also moves volcanically from “art” to “civilization.” William Winter’s life of David Belasco complacently views the state of Broadway productions and then suddenly precipitates national resentments about the visible evidences for historical change:

The spirit of our country is and long has been one of pagan Materialism, infecting all branches of thought, and of unscrupulous Commercialism, infecting all branches of action. Foreign elements, alien to our institutions and ideals as to our language and our thoughts,—seditious elements, ignorant, boisterous, treacherous, and dangerous—have been introduced into our population in immense quantities, interpenetrating and contaminating it in many ways: in the face of self-evident peril and of iterated warnings and protests, immigration into the United States has been permitted during the last twenty years of about 15,000,000 persons—including vast numbers of the most undesirable order. We call ourselves a civilized nation—but civility is conspicuous in our country chiefly by its absence. Gentleness is despised. Good manners are practically extinct. Public decorum is almost unknown. We are notoriously a law-contemning people. The murder rate—the unpunished murder rate—in our country has long been a world scandal. Mob outrage is an incident of weekly occurrence among us. Our methods of business, approved and practised, are not only unscrupulous but predatory. Every public conveyance and place of resort bears witness to the general uncouthness by innumerable signs enjoining the most elemental decency. … The tone of the public mind is to a woeful extent sordid, selfish, greedy. In our great cities life is largely a semi-delirious fever of vapid purpose and paltry strife, and in their public vehicles of transportation the populace—men, women, and young girls—are herded together without the remotest observance of common decency,—mauled and jammed and packed one upon another in a manner which would not be tolerated in shipment of the helpless steer or the long-suffering swine.
The suddenness of transference from “art” to “civilization” says something about the way Tom Buchanan's mind works, or fails to work. Winter clearly feels that the movement from one kind of statement about the art of theater to another kind of statement about the nature of “civilization” is appropriate and that it makes sense.

Daisy and Jordan make fun of Tom but they do not seriously challenge his ideas about civilization. In fact, when Daisy reveals her own ideas she says something of their sources. She has many doubts, and they come from “the most advanced people” who think that “everything's terrible anyhow” (17). We are faced in the right direction, invited to agree with those who in 1922 argue that life is unsatisfactory. Daisy's sources are cultural pessimists—there is a word for it, Kulturpessimismus, or the belief that modernity is without soul or public morality, and that a return to the values of the past is the only possible solution. It was a position for those opposed to the effects of democracy, in America as well as Germany. Pessimism about “civilization” was often expressed in a language strikingly similar to Tom's. In 1920 George Santayana began Character and Opinion in the United States with this assertion: “Civilization is perhaps approaching one of those long winters that overtake it from time to time. A flood of barbarism from below may soon level all the fair works of our Christian ancestors, as another flood two thousand years ago levelled those of the ancients.”

Related issues were not confined to a lunatic fringe, and they were heavily publicized by magazines and newspapers. In 1923 the celebrated Study of American Intelligence by McDougall and Brigham appeared, stating that “the intellectual superiority of our Nordic groups over the Alpine, Mediterranean and negro groups has been demonstrated.” The New York Times and the American Museum of Natural History agreed. Tom Buchanan would not have been perceived as a crank in the period from 1921 to 1923. He would have compared favorably with some members of Congress. He would have been understood as being under the respectable wing of the amateur anthropologists Madison Grant and Lothrop Stoddard, and of George Horace Lorimer, editor of the Saturday Evening Post. A modern historian observes that Grant, a notable racist, “inspired” other writers, and that he was the focus of “sympathetic comments in the editorials of such influential publications as the New York Times and the Saturday Evening Post.”

Prophecy is a very old business. It has become our habit to think of ourselves as a people without prophets; and yet there was never a time when mankind had more seers or more interesting ones. What is H. G. Wells but a prophesier, and from whom do we receive counsel if not from Mr. Chesterton? Mr. Shaw is our Job's comforter, and George Horace Lorimer, on the editorial page of Saturday Evening Post, calls us to repentance. A few years ago I had the adventure of reading Madison Grant's The Passing of the Great Race, an impassioned proclamation of the merits of the blond Nordic race, and a lamentation over its decay. At that time such a book was in the nature of a revelation whether you gave faith to its assertions and proofs or scoffed at them. The thing that struck me was the impossibility (as it seemed to me) of any reader remaining unmoved; I thought him bound to be carried to a high pitch of enthusiastic affirmation or else roused to fierce resentment and furious denial. And so, in the event, I believe it mainly turned out. At that time, although he was the author of several books, I had not heard of Lothrop Stoddard, unless as a special writer and correspondent for magazines. It was not until April 1920, that The Rising Tide of Color Against White World-Supremacy was published. Even so, attention is not readily attracted to a book of this type. Many who have since read it with excitement knew nothing of the volume until, in a speech at Birmingham, Alabama, on 26 October, 1921, President Harding said: “Whoever will take the time to read and ponder Mr. Lothrop Stoddard's book on The Rising Tide of Color … must realise that our race problem here in the United States is only a phase of a race issue that the whole world confronts.”
According to the *Saturday Evening Post*, Stoddard's work attracted “an extraordinary amount of attention” and was recognized as “the first successful attempt to present a scientific explanation of the worldwide epidemic of unrest.”\textsuperscript{13} He was a household name, which is probably why he is encountered in Tom's household as “this man Goddard” (14) who has written “The Rise of the Coloured Empires.”

In 1924 there was much political discourse over American character in Congress, and much argument in print. In a volume at least as well known as Santayana's, Irving Babbitt's *Democracy and Leadership*, the following was stated: “We are assured, indeed, that the highly heterogeneous elements that enter into our population will, like various instruments in an orchestra, merely result in a richer harmony; they will, one may reply, provided that, like an orchestra, they be properly led. Otherwise the outcome may be an unexemplified cacophony. This question of leadership is not primarily biological, but moral.”\textsuperscript{14} One admires the qualification, but the thrust of argument remains the same: pessimism over those of us who are neither Nordic nor Christian. But Babbitt was infinitely better than most on this issue: in 1925 *Reader's Digest* carried a Madison Grant piece from an earlier issue of the *Forum*, which reads as if it were designed for a Tom Buchanan who had briefly flickered into consciousness over the immigration debate. Grant's essay, “America for the Americans,” argues not only against the admission into the United States of black or yellow peoples but also of Germans, inassimilable because of their guttural speech and mannerisms (the war was not adduced). During the early twenties it was widely thought that Germans were insufficiently Nordic. Grant uses the same kind of vocabulary as Tom: “our institutions are Anglo-Saxon and can be maintained by Anglo-Saxons and by other Nordic peoples in sympathy with our culture.”\textsuperscript{15}

To return to the year of the novel's events: here are two passages that may indicate what we now call intertextuality. The first is from John Higham's history of immigration. It is about a series of articles that Kenneth Roberts wrote for the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1920 and that appeared in book form under the title *Why Europe Leaves Home* in 1922. Roberts cast his findings into the framework of the Nordic theory, concluding that a continuing flood of Alpine, Mediterranean, and Semitic immigrants would inevitably produce “a hybrid race of people as worthless and futile as the good-for-nothing mongrels of Central America and Southeastern Europe.”\textsuperscript{16} The second passage, from *The Great Gatsby*, seems to be a mere interlude: “Inside, the crimson room bloomed with light. Tom and Miss Baker sat at either end of the long couch and she read aloud to him from the ‘Saturday Evening Post’—the words, murmurous and uninflected, running together in a soothing tune. The lamplight, bright on his boots and dull on the autumn-leaf yellow of her hair, glinted along the paper as she turned a page with a flutter of slender muscles in her arms” (17-18).

There is action and meaning at this moment, although it would seem to be a pause in the narrative. Fitzgerald's text reminds us of the existence of other texts. The enormous, imitative enterprise of mass literacy is perceptibly within the consciousness of characters in his own text. What Tom is hearing we will never know, but we can expect that the ideas of the moment are being read to him, and that they too are soothing and uninflected. More is involved than Norman Rockwell covers.

The relationship between race and religion and culture had its critics, among them Harold Stearns, who argued against it in *Civilization in the United States* (1922). According to Stearns, “whatever else American civilization is, it is not Anglo-Saxon … we shall never achieve any genuine nationalistic self-consciousness as long as we allow certain financial and social minorities to persuade us that we are still an English colony.”\textsuperscript{17} But it was, by 1922, too late to sort out distinctions—the political debate over immigration from eastern and southern Europe made them easy to cloud over. Even *Civilization in the United States* had to acknowledge the current theory and its vocabulary. Other contributions, for example Geroid Robinson's essay on race, admit that “the attitude of both Northerners and Southerners is somewhat coloured by the fear that the blacks will eventually overrun the country.”\textsuperscript{18} The essay of Louis Reid on small towns celebrates the “true American civilization,” that is, national life before the arrival of Catholics and Jews.\textsuperscript{19} Walter Pach, who was reasonably enlightened and has been praised as an art critic by E. H. Gombrich, found himself dependent on race and religion as determinants, arguing for an “art-instinct accumulated in a race for centuries.” In the case of
literature, he said that instinct belonged to “the Anglo-Saxon race.” Stating this was the only way he could conceive of the inherent ability of Americans to produce the cultural proofs of their existence.

The March 1, 1922, issue of the *New Republic* carried the introductory chapter of Walter Lippmann's forthcoming *Public Opinion*, and in this chapter he warned the audience “that under certain conditions men respond as powerfully to fictions as they do to realities.” Fictions might be true (or false) scientific theories; they might even be “complete hallucinations”—but they were representations of the environment that determined our responses to it. Some fictions might be beneficial—useful without being accurate—but those abroad in 1922 were apt to be neither. In *Public Opinion*, Lippmann describes fictions corresponding to—identical to—the theories that Tom Buchanan raises in the first and seventh chapters of *The Great Gatsby*. Lippmann's list of current fictions in “news” (he took special pains to distinguish “news” from “truth”) are Tom's bugbears: ancestry and American history; race and nationality; and in particular the ideology of “Anglo-Saxons.” At the heart of the Lippmann thesis is the premise that these issues, important though they may be in themselves, have become demonized by their public discussion. In both Lippmann and Fitzgerald the conveyance of ideas by print results in an intellectual tragicomedy. It is useful to see Lippmann's reaction to what Fitzgerald was to call “stale” ideas: “The more untrained a mind, the more readily it works out a theory that two things which catch its attention at the same time are causally connected. … In hating one thing violently, we readily associate with it as cause or effect most of the other things we hate or fear violently. They may have no more connection than smallpox and alehouses, or Relativity and Bolshevism, but they are bound together in the same emotion … it all culminates in the fabrication of a system of all evil, and of another which is the system of all good. Then our love of the absolute shows itself.” It is wise, thought-provoking, and related to one of Fitzgerald's problems in the writing of *The Great Gatsby*. Fitzgerald was no political scientist but he did need to describe the effect of political ideas upon personality and the manifestations of personality. We infer not that Tom Buchanan is either a Democrat or Republican but that within him there really is a “love of the absolute” that wants to “show itself.” In essence, psychological necessity chooses belief.

H. L. Mencken agreed to a certain extent. His was eventually the most crushing rebuttal to the fiction of Anglo-Saxon civilization. Mencken's essay on the failure of Anglo-Saxon civilization (1923) was reprinted in *Prejudices: Fourth Series* (1924). But as early as 1917, in an essay on Howells, Mencken had identified what others thought was the problem of American democracy as its nature: our system worked not despite but because of “the essential conflict of forces among us.” In this respect Mencken was more political than either Santayana or Babbitt—and very much more political than either Pound or Eliot. The point of the 1923 essay was not only that the country needed new immigrants but that (and his essay takes on the form of a narrative) the old ones, who now called themselves natives, had failed dismally to establish any kind of “civilization” of their own. Mencken writes about the proud, vainglorious and ignorant culture-hero, or would-be culture-hero, the anxiety-ridden Anglo-Saxon whose “defeat is so palpable that it has filled him with vast alarms, and reduced him to seeking succor in grotesque and extravagant devices. In the fine arts, in the sciences and even in the more complex sorts of business the children of the later immigrants are running away from the descendants of the early settlers. … Of the Americans who have come into notice during the past fifty years as poets, as novelists, as critics, as painters, as sculptors and in the minor arts, less than half bear Anglo-Saxon names. … So in the sciences.” Mencken's Anglo-Saxon is constitutionally a bully, hence his many acts of aggression against social change are accompanied by “desperate efforts” of “denial and concealment.” The Anglo-Saxon's “political ideas are crude and shallow. He is almost wholly devoid of esthetic feeling. The most elementary facts about the visible universe alarm him, and incite him to put them down. Educate him, make a professor of him, teach him how to express his soul, and he still remains palpably third-rate. He fears ideas almost more cravenly than he fears men. His blood, I believe, is running thin; perhaps it was not much to boast of at the start.”

As Harry E. Barnes observed in the *American Mercury* in 1924, the issue was very much one of “ideas” and public opinion: Madison Grant's work on the superiority of Nordic “civilization” was itself “a literary rehash
of Gobineau and Houston Stewart Chamberlain.” And even Grant was “progressively debased” as his book became “widely disseminated,” and decanted into Lothrop Stoddard.²⁵ By the time such ideas reach Tom Buchanan they exist in the form in which he states them.

The Anglo-Saxon fears the loss of his “civilization” and that fear is easily confused with conscience. He continually justifies what he does by the illusion of keeping faith with history. Mencken has created a character in a historical drama who responds to the issues of the moment and reminds us of the issues in Fitzgerald's text. Tom seems not only to have read many texts but to originate in them. He is obsessed with acquired ideas. So much so that he expresses a great many of them in the quarrel at the Plaza at a moment when we expect other passions of body and mind. Tom is faced with his wife's lover, with the idea of love itself, but the argument over Daisy takes the form of a lecture on Kulturbolchewismus. Tom orates about house, home, and family; about nobodies from nowhere; and about the various abominations of “the modern world” (101). His ideas have traveled a long way from Irving Babbitt and Santayana, from Grant and Stoddard to their reification by mass media. He is so confused by ideas transmitted from mind to media that he can perceive Gatsby only as an epiphenomenon of “the modern world.”²⁶ As for Daisy, to her embarrassment she realizes that Tom sees her only as part of the “institutions” he defends.

As if following a script written by H. L. Mencken, Tom discourses in the first chapter about the arts and sciences and “civilization” itself. He later comes to view Gatsby as a kind of problem in modern institutions. Tom is, like Mencken's satirized Anglo-Saxon, enormously alarmed by the “elementary facts about the visible universe”: “pretty soon the earth's going to fall into the sun—or wait a minute—it's just the opposite—the sun's getting colder every year” (92). Fitzgerald has added to Mencken's text a kind of strategic entropy of both world and mind imagining it. When Tom begins his lecture on civilization in the first chapter the reader is tempted to write him off as a crank, which is probably the wrong thing to do. It seems logical because Tom cannot convince anyone with an independent mind of his views on history or national destiny. But there are no independent minds in his household. Daisy and Jordan do not openly disagree—in fact, they go along. They find him ridiculous but acceptable. As Jordan later says, settling differences at the Plaza, “We're all white here” (101). It would appear, by the simplest kind of extension, that there are few independent minds anywhere else.

Tom agonizes over adultery and divorce. He is alarmed into reflection over race and class. He is irrational about all those who would “throw everything overboard and have intermarriage between black and white” (101). Even a moralist must have exceptional capacities for outrage to worry about all these things. Unless, of course, his whole concept of identity were involved.²⁷ Part of that identity has been provided by association: the text introduces him as “Tom Buchanan of Chicago,” which does more than mimic society-page seriousness. He is part of a place, and his opinions are approximations of Chicago opinions. His hometown (he and Daisy try “to settle down” (61) there after their marriage) was the most racially troubled and intolerant city in the North. Industry in the early twenties encouraged a migration of black workers from Georgia and Alabama to the factories of the Midwest. It was a cause of great concern because it raised the price of labor in the South. And, of course, the migrants ran up against a new phenomenon in American life, persecution from the side that won the Civil War. In so doing, they caused a tremendous revaluation in national life. The notorious Chicago riots were caused by confrontations over jobs, housing, and beachfront recreation. The consequence was the formation of national opinion largely in favor of racism. We recall that Tom worries in the first chapter of The Great Gatsby about the white race being “dominant” and keeping “control” of its civilization (both here and abroad). He was not much different from, say, the New York Times of July 23, 1919: “The majority of Negroes in Washington before the great war, were well-behaved … most of them admitted the superiority of the white race and troubles between the two races were unheard of.”²⁸

When Tom articulates his ideas we can see some of their likely sources and understand the allusions. But Fitzgerald's text is not a tract; it is concerned with motive as well as ideology. Idea is related to act. We recall Tom's grabbing Nick's arm, bruising Daisy, and breaking Myrtle's nose, as well as his general foaming at the
Tom is three-dimensional and is equipped with a number of anxieties connected to his ideas, or to his need for ideas. For example, he seems fixated upon “I” and “we.” He fears “all kinds” (81), in itself a phrase of psychological interest. He talks about “people” (who are unidentified) “sneering” at things sacred to him (101). This too seems meaningful, because the matter has been turned into psychodrama. Max Scheler’s classic study of Ressentiment, written in the decade before The Great Gatsby, suggests that Fitzgerald understood the connection of idea to personality. Scheler depicts the internal language of resentment, which says to itself, “I can forgive everything, but not that you are—that you are what you are—that I am not what you are.”

There is no textual connection, but there is a clear parallel between this mode of thought and Tom’s litany about Nordic selves: “I am and you are and you are and—” (14). Tom speaks a language of absolute subjectivity. He has invested his needs in ideas, which is to say in allowable aggressions. If he is in fact a representative figure then he says much for Fitzgerald’s view of the cultural moment.

We enter the narrative of The Great Gatsby to the description of universe, earth, hemisphere, and ocean. Throughout the story the skies will turn, with their silent commentary on the meanings we define as history. In the summer of 1922 we have been separated from the past. Given the anemic description of his family, Nick conveys that his own past has not much to recall. We gather that from the limit on his articulation of its values. He has been given the least useful of social virtues, a kind of passive toleration. It is as if all the moral energy of the nineteenth century had dwindled into good manners.

The novel begins with mention of two important events in national consciousness, the Civil War and the Great War of 1914-18. Neither holds Nick’s attention for more than a moment. Hemingway was to make a career out of recollections of his war; Fitzgerald understands things differently. For him the war is a checkpoint in history, a barrier to the influence of the past. His imagination is sociological. Nick dreams neither of the past nor of the war but rather of the new agenda of the twenties—banking and credit and investment.

The postwar world is free of the past and of its institutions, but it is not free of its own false ideas. When Tom Buchanan informs Nick and the reader that “Civilization’s going to pieces” (14), he has probably never said truer words. But he is of course displaying more than he describes. He echoes a vast national debate about immigration, race, science, and art. There is something seriously wrong in America—yet it may be Tom’s own class and type that is responsible. He represents a group as idle and mindless as that excoriated by Carlyle in Past and Present. There is something wrong with the immoral pursuit of wealth by historical figures like James J. Hill—except that inherited possession seems no better. Fitzgerald’s rich boys often pose as guardians of tradition and often adduce a false relationship to public values.

The more we hear about “civilization” in the text and the more we experience its style and morality the more we, like Nick Carraway, make our own withdrawal from the historical moment. History in The Great Gatsby can rarely be taken at face value—perhaps it is as suspect as biography. When Tom alludes to his favorite racial or geographical or class prejudices (and when Daisy plays to them) a public dialogue is refracted. The most interesting thing about that dialogue is that many of those “advanced” people who deplore civilization in America are considerably less attractive than Tom Buchanan. He only echoes their discourse. What matters is not the specific character (if there is any) to his ideas about “science” or “art” but his reflection of a historical moment in which their discussion is more poisonous than his own. In the summer of 1922 there will be very little use in his appealing to profound texts or Daisy appealing to the most advanced people or Nick appealing to the values of the past—or the reader appealing to a larger and more confidence-inspiring set of standards beyond those governing the action. The allusive context of the novel is meant to disturb and disorient. It is as if Fitzgerald had Balzac in mind, and, describing a milieu in which all things are permitted, made it impossible for protagonists or readers to bring to bear morals and other norms.

As for the issue of “Civilization,” that was not to be adjudicated by the defenders (and inventors) of the American past. In 1924, while Fitzgerald was thinking over the story that would become The Great Gatsby,
the American Mercury (April 1924) had published a sardonic study of character acquired through consumption: It was richly attentive to certain kinds of ads that showed consumers “how to rise quickly” and “how to become” something other than they were. It noted the increased use of phrases like “wonderful,” “astounding,” “amazing” and “miraculously” applied to personal change and betterment. In the marketplace of ideas personal identity was itself to become a commodity.

Notes

3. The editors feared as a consequence the domination of western Europe by a “militaristic France.” Peter Gay writes in Weimar Culture (New York: Harper & Row, 1970) that the murder of Walther Rathenau was part of the celebration of the youth culture of the twenties. According to one of Rathenau's assassins, Ernest-Walter Techow, “The younger generation” was “striving for something new, hardly dreamed of. They smelled the morning air. They gathered in themselves an energy charged with the myth of the Prussian-German past, the pressure of the present and the expectation of an unknown future” (p. 87).
5. In a letter to Edmund Wilson the week before the review appeared Fitzgerald admitted that Joyce had caused him to think of his own family history: “I have Ullyses [sic] from the Brick Row Bookshop & am starting it. I wish it was layed in America—there is something about middle-class Ireland that depresses me inordinately—I mean gives me a sort of hollow, cheerless pain. Half of my ancestors came from just such an Irish strata or perhaps a lower one. The book makes me feel appallingly naked” (The Crack-Up, p. 260). To use the terminology of James R. Mellow, an “invented” life might naturally proceed from these feelings, and a heightened perception of assumed identity in others.
7. For a sense of Van Loon's standing see the immensely favorable review of The Story of Mankind by Charles A. Beard in the December 21, 1921, issue of The New Republic. See also the full-page ad for Van Loon's book, with many blurbs, in the February 1, 1922, issue.
8. William Winter, The Life of David Belasco. 2 vols. (New York: Moffat, Yard and Company, 1918) 2:424-27. If there is a solution to Winter's problem that lies in converting art to the display of domestic virtue and history to anti-modernism:

If true civilization is to develop and live in our country, such conditions, such a spirit, such ideals, manners, and customs as are widely prevalent among us to-day, must utterly pass and cease. The one rational hope that they will so disappear lies in disseminating Education. … For that education Society must look largely to the ministry of the arts and, in particular, to the rightly conducted Theatre. … Few managers have been able to take or to understand that view of the Stage. David Belasco was one of them. It is because his administration of his “great office” has been, in the main, conducted in the spirit of a zealous public servant; because for many years he maintained as a public resort a beautiful theatre, diffusive of the atmosphere of a pleasant, well-ordered home, placing before the public many fine plays, superbly acted, and set upon the stage in a perfection of environment never surpassed anywhere and equalled only by a few of an earlier race of managers, of
which he was the last, that David Belasco has, directly and indirectly, exerted an
immense influence for good and is entitled to appreciative recognition, enduring
celebration, and ever grateful remembrance.

R. Mellow for pointing this book out to me and copying out the passage cited.
Henry James, Santayana, Babbitt, Eliot, and Pound are like the _Kulturpessimisten_ of Weimar. See the
78f. For this side of the Atlantic there is good recent coverage in Eric Sigg's _The American T. S. Eliot_
(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 110f. Here is Sigg's account of Henry James on
civilization versus immigration: “For James, ethnic pluralism jeopardized social order and cultural
achievement. He assumed that America should and could produce art equal to that of Europe. He
further assumed that American high culture would arise from distinctively American elements in the
country's tradition, from shared assumptions about education, morality, and manners, and most
important, from a common language used and preserved self-consciously. Immigrants offer James
another instance of an American incongruity that is at least bathetic indecorum and at worst surrealist
horror” (p. 129).

See also Samuel G. Blythe's lead article “Flux,” _Saturday Evening Post_, August 19, 1922, pp. 3f. On
political leadership Blythe says that “Politics in this country is now guerrilla warfare. It is not even
that. It may best be compared to operations by bodies of indignant and disgusted citizens, in various
parts of the country, without communication or ordered plan, getting together from sense of protest
and going out and shooting in the dark, hoping they may hit something: but shooting anyhow. There
is nothing coherent about our politics. There is nothing much articulate about it in its present state.
The prime motive in all our demonstrations is protest. The actuating spirit is change.” All things are
relative: Blythe has a ferocious attack on “the increasing interference of government in private
affairs.” Liberals distrusted government performance; conservatives like Blythe distrusted its powers,
 further reasons for the constant adjuration to Americans to be more moral and more Christian.
18. Ibid., p. 355.
19. Ibid., p. 295.
20. Ibid., p. 228.
22. Ibid., pp. 154-56. See the powerful piece by Augustus Thomas, “The Print of My Remembrance,
_Saturday Evening Post_, July 8, 1922, pp. 24f. Thomas apologizes for writing in a good part for a
charitable Jewish physician in _As A Man Thinks_, a one-act play at the Lambs, “instead of having him
ridiculed as he generally was in the theater.” Thomas attributes racial hatred to the Jewish willingness
to work as perceived by the more neglectful and lazy “Anglo-Saxon temperament” (94). Even
between liberals and conservatives—racism aside—the debate on cultural differences was framed in
terms of the distinction between “Anglo-Saxon” and the rest.
24. Ibid., pp. 171-77.
26. See Perrett, America in the Twenties, pp. 159-60: “In 1890 there had been one divorce for every seventeen marriages; by the late twenties there was one for every six … novels, plays, and works of social criticism steadily derided marriage as an outmoded institution, something the modern world could well do without. There were confident predictions that marriage would die out before the end of the century.”

27. I disagree with the view that American history is present in the text only to the extent that the “materialism” of “the modern American upper class” betrays our national origins. (See Kermit W. Moyer, “The Great Gatsby: Fitzgerald's Meditation on American History,” in Critical Essays on F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby, ed. Scott Donaldson (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1984), pp. 215f. Tom is said to have a “materialist orientation” and “Daisy represents the materialism of her class.” But Tom and Daisy are rarely seen evaluating things according to cost nor do they judge experience by material standards. Tom's mind is directed by texts and ideas that, far from having anything to do with materialism, are per fervid distortions of idealism.


Criticism: Bryan R. Washington (essay date 1995)


[In the following essay, Washington compares Henry James's Daisy Miller and Gatsby, emphasizing the themes of racism, white cultural conservatism, and repressed homosexuality.]

Beginning with the premise that The Great Gatsby revises Daisy Miller, the readings that I undertake in this chapter are concerned with various states of panic: sexual, racial, and social. Eve Sedgwick's theory of “homosexual panic,” in other words, points toward a dense interpretive terrain extending far beyond, although always implicating, desire. As I have indicated, a repressed homosexuality undergirds “Going to Meet the Man.” Moreover, it is associated with (or presented within the context of) racial discord. The idea that homosexuality and race are important for The Great Gatsby is hardly startling. Nick's fixation with Gatsby easily suggests flirtation, and his obsession with ethnic origins punctuates the text. But the notion that either homosexuality or race bears any relevance to James's novella may at first seem a critical anachronism.

Winterbourne, who frames the narrative, is a genteel conservator, even an enforcer. But in disciplining Daisy he responds to more than the defiant transgression of class boundaries that the time she spends with Eugenio (a courier) and Giovanelli (a questionable gentleman) represents. Published in 1878, Daisy Miller is not only the product of Reconstruction but also a commentary on the social (textual) implications of that era. Disembarking from the City of Richmond, Daisy arrives in Europe the incarnation of America after the Civil War, the unsuspecting emblem of “[c]ivilization … go[ne] to pieces.”1 The many references to her whiteness invite the speculation that whiteness is in serious jeopardy. But the insistence on whiteness prods blackness, in effect, into the text. Indeed, neither Winterbourne nor finally James can decide whether this new America, this Daisy, is educable, capable of understanding that, if blackness were to penetrate its discourse, James's narrative enterprise would cease to exist. Ignorant of the old textual rules, Daisy is dangerous. The threat she poses to the community of white American exiles imagined does not implicate only the potential assault of race. It also suggests the possible exposure of the homosexual underpinnings bracing not simply Daisy Miller but arguably all of James's texts. The effete Winterbourne, the suggestively asexual custodian of haute bourgeois conventions, is as necessary for the survival of James's genteel endeavor as the denial of blackness.
(or, for that matter, as Daisy herself). She, however, refuses to listen to him, refuses to be allegorized. Daisy prefers the company of comparatively manly men, who—by ushering her out of the drawing room (privileged in the text because it is so private) and through the streets to the public forum of the Roman Colosseum—quite literally put her at physical and social risk. His own narrative legitimacy in question, Winterbourne is almost desperate.

Equally (if less ambiguously) panicked, Nick Carraway valorizes the “Middle West”—

not the wheat or the prairies or the lost Swede towns, but the thrilling returning trains of my youth, and the street lamps and sleigh bells in the frosty dark and the shadows of holly wreaths thrown by lighted windows on the snow. I am part of that, a little solemn with the feel of those long winters, a little complacent from growing up in the Carraway house in a city where dwellings are still called through decades by a family's name. (177)

Ethnic cohesiveness and familial continuity are exactly the values James assigns to Europe. But the most persuasive indications of The Great Gatsby's Jamesianisms are realized in the figuration of Daisy Buchanan, a woman of apparently irreconcilable dualities. Fitzgerald's Daisy is both a flower of innocence with the power to rescue Nick (and by implication Gatsby as well) from a commodified world and a kind of cultural monster who betrays her creator's Romantic female ideal. As Nina Auerbach argues, “if the American Girl did not exist, James would have had to invent her as a personification of the United States. …”2 Auerbach is concerned to show, and justifiably, that James's female subjects do not result from a steadfast feminism, but rather from the anticipation of a “coming 'common deluge' that threatened to drown the private and fastidious perceptions of art,” thereby making it preferable to pay lip service to the rhetoric of the “new woman” rather than endure “the garbage of mass lower-class culture that surged below her.”3

James's American girl is an invention of narrative conceived to serve a particular cultural end: to halt the displacement of the rarefied, refined, and therefore feminine aesthetic world on which his vision depended by the aggressive, anti-aesthetic, and therefore masculine world of commerce. In the sociohistorical sense, then, the female he portrays may have existed, but she by no means speaks for the whole of America—unless, of course, one assumes that the Americans who matter are white and rich. By contrast, the archetypal female whom Fitzgerald would reclaim did exist: she is the preoccupying force in James's most ambitious writing. The “fragment of lost words … uncommunicable forever” (112) is the textual past that Fitzgerald aims to recapture. Indeed, it will become clear that the critical work I draw upon, particularly in my discussion of Daisy Miller, is similarly invested. Lionel Trilling, William Wasserstrom, F. W. Dupee—all of whom were at their most influential in the 1950s—practiced a conservative readerly politics that contemporary critics generally revalorize.

In Heiress of All the Ages, William Wasserstrom sees James as the central figure in the genteel tradition, a tradition he defines as that group of texts concerned to “establish order within the human spirit and in the life of the society.”4 If, as Wasserstrom maintains, the genteel tradition strove to overcome the “vast distances of wilderness, religious disorganization, political disorder, slavery, Civil War, tenements, strikes,”5 then the texts associated with it did so by attempting to remove themselves from them. Paradoxically, however, when the narrative scene shifts from America as such to Europe (imagined as stable) James's international fictions resonate with the tensions that made America the enemy of his narrative project. The genteel tradition saw democracy as antithetical to art. But, when it appropriated the novel—always new, always in process—as the primary vehicle of its message, it ultimately defeated itself: for the novel constitutes a democracy in and of itself. Few readers of Daisy Miller, however, have found solace in the dynamics of democracy animating it. F. W. Dupee, for example, considers Daisy's failure to listen to the voice of Europe intolerable, arguing that she is “a social being without a frame” who “does what she likes because she hardly knows what else to do. Her
will is at once strong and weak by reason of the very indistinctness of general claims." Similarly, Wasserstrom sees Daisy as “infantile,” “ignorant”—a misguided innocent who “childishly throws away her life.”

To the extent that Daisy emblematises the tension between America's impulse to democratize and Europe's compulsion to create hierarchies, the conflict is resolved only in her death. When Daisy sickens and dies, she is both silenced and, to invoke Bakhtin, “ennobled.” Wasserstrom argues that James saw the American girl as the symbol of the “dream of history,” as the heiress of a society that is the “heir of all the ages. It became therefore her duty to resolve and transcend all antitheses. When she failed, the result in literature was tragic. But when she brought off the victory, she paid the nation's debt to history.” Ideally, then, James's American girl permits the desired union between America and Europe. Her cultural assignment: to “achieve a great marriage in which two great civilizations would be joined.”

“Daisy and her mama,” Winterbourne insists, “haven't yet risen to that stage of—what shall I call it—culture, at which the idea of catching a count or a marchese begins. I believe them intellectually incapable of that conception.” Though in the final analysis Winterbourne dismisses Daisy as an indecipherable text (“he soon went back to live at Geneva, whence there continue to come the most contradictory accounts of his motives of sojourn: a report that he's ‘studying’ hard … —much interested in a very clever foreign lady” [74]), his investment in shielding her from the scrutiny of other, potentially more invasive readers (suitors) is considerable. Daisy's conduct with her courier, Eugenio, suggests that she regards him as more than a servant. Indeed, Mrs. Costello pronounces their relationship an “intimacy,” arguing that there's no other name for such a relation. They treat the courier as a family friend—as a gentleman and a scholar. I shouldn't wonder if he dines with them. Very likely they've never seen a man with such good manners, such fine clothes, so like a gentleman—or a scholar. … He probably sits with them in the garden of an evening.

(17-18)

What is at risk here? The obvious response is that Daisy's crossing the conventional line between “mistress” and “servant” attests to her ineligibility as a genteel heroine. Which would explain Winterbourne's outrage at her ambiguously ardent relationship with Giovanelli, who on Winterbourne's terms is “a music-master or a penny-a-liner or a third-rate artist” (45). Were Giovanelli a member of the Italian nobility, were he for example Prince Amerigo of The Golden Bowl, then presumably he would be an appropriate suitor and a potential mate for Daisy, for America. But Daisy's transgressions implicate more than class. The emphasis on her whiteness, as I have suggested, is almost obsessive. At the beginning of the narrative she is “dressed in white muslin, with a hundred frills and flounces and knots of pale-coloured ribbon” (5). Indeed, references to her white dresses, white shoulders, white teeth crowd the text. This iterative whiteness, traditionally read as an affirmation of her virtue, is also simply—complicatedly—whiteness.

We know from The American Scene that James was greatly concerned that the country would never recover from the sociocultural split of the Civil War, but he also romanticized the antebellum South, which perhaps accounts for the name of the ship transporting the Millers abroad. Richmond, the capital of the Confederacy, is on the move, in transit. Why? Because white women and children must be evacuated? Implicitly, Daisy's archetypal whiteness is defined against its archetypal opposite, blackness. In short, since she blithely ignores class boundaries, would Daisy be capable of venturing further? Or, in the aftermath of the war, in the aftermath of the Emancipation, had America changed so irrevocably that anything could happen? As her conduct with Eugenio and Giovanelli invites us to speculate, Daisy would conceivably risk her own racial destruction were she permitted to pursue the implications of the social freedoms she embodies. This is what democracy does: it precipitates chaos. In James's tale, race is of course unspeakable. In The Great Gatsby, however, it dominates the discourse.
If Nick Carraway is Winterbourne unambiguously panicked, Daisy Buchanan is Daisy Miller fully recontextualized:

“... Sophisticated—God, I'm sophisticated!”

(18)

Assuming, then, that she is to reenact the drama of American innocence, it is Daisy Buchanan's sophistication that prevents her from fulfilling, as Wasserstrom would argue, her destiny. In *The Great Gatsby* the figuration of women in general suggests an attempt to produce a suitable “heiress”—not of the ages, but to the Jamesian legacy. Daisy (murderous cosmopolite) and Jordan (innocent miller's daughter transcribed to dishonest baker's) are genteel conspirators. But Myrtle, the potentially relentless force in this gendered cultural garden, is expeditiously weeded out because she places male (textual) authority in even greater peril.

Like her namesake, Daisy Buchanan is defined by her whiteness. So is Jordan Baker:

The only completely stationary object in the room was an enormous couch on which two young women were buoyed up as though upon an anchored balloon. They were both in white, and their dresses were rippling and fluttering as if they had just been blown back in after a short flight around the house.

(8)

If these women can fly, then for Nick they are either angels or witches, saints or sinners. In short, Nick is the prisoner of his own classifications, desperately hoping that these privileged white women are the female archetypes he needs them to be and hopelessly disenchanted when they prove to be more complicated than his allegories of gender would allow.

Richard Godden suggests that Daisy has “repressed her body and cashed in her voice, … described as ‘full of money.’” For Godden, then, “the structure of Daisy's desire is economic.” Myrtle, on the other hand, “is described most frequently in terms of ‘blood,’ ‘flesh,’ and ‘vitality.’” (Her husband, Wilson, is represented as “blond,” “spiritless,” and “anaemic,” as though his wife has drained him of his vital fluids.) But that Myrtle, in contrast to Daisy, is a woman who is entirely physical is not, as Godden maintains, a function of her lack of commitment to “the production of manners” or to the trappings of the leisure class. Her New York apartment, for example—“crowded to the doors with a set of tapestried furniture entirely too large for it, so that to move about was to stumble continually over scenes of ladies swinging in the gardens of Versailles”—strives to achieve the elegance of Daisy's house on Long Island. Like everyone else in the novel, Myrtle is a bracketed figure whom Nick “reveals” to us. The woman he presents is literally Daisy in-the-flesh, ominous because of her social aspirations and because of her almost manly sexuality.

Myrtle's purchases, made en route to the apartment that Tom has procured for her, point up her ambition and her ignorance: “a copy of *Town Tattle* and a moving-picture magazine, … some cold cream and a small flask of perfume,” and, finally, a puppy of an “indeterminate breed” (27). This, then, is a woman who has yet to learn the difference between mongrels and Airedales, between gossip magazines and the social register. In a text preoccupied with and intolerant of the racial and social hybridization of America, Myrtle's most unforgivable sin is perhaps her inability to distinguish a hybrid from a thoroughbred. Her lack of judgment applies not only to dogs but also, apparently, to men. Nick reports that Myrtle married her husband because she thought “he knew something about breeding, but,” she adds, “he wasn't fit to lick my shoe” (35). But Myrtle, of course, knows nothing of breeding. The testimony of her narrow escape immediately follows her
sister's narrative about an abortive affair with a Jew: “I almost married a little kike who'd been after me for years. I knew he was below me. Everybody kept saying to me: ‘Lucille, that man's way below you!’ But if I hadn't met Chester, he'd of got me sure” (34).

And yet, always conscious of the boundaries he transgresses, Nick too is a nativist:

As we crossed [my emphasis] Blackwell's Island a limousine passed us, driven by a white chauffeur, in which sat three modish negroes [sic], two bucks and a girl. I laughed aloud as the yolks of their eyeballs rolled toward us in haughty rivalry.

(69)

His conclusion: “Anything can happen now that we've slid over this bridge, … anything at all …” (69). Nick's is the laughter of terror, for the black men he depicts have literally passed him by. The encounter, it seems, is so disconcerting that the overtaking passengers are denied voice.

In *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, Houston Baker laments Fitzgerald's failure to place “his ‘pale well-dressed negro’ [the black man who identifies the car that kills Myrtle] in the limousine,”15 suggesting that had Fitzgerald done so he would have acknowledged the legitimacy of the Harlem Renaissance—the black writers of the 1920s, many of whom were indeed “pale.” He would, in short, have overturned the racial stereotype of black inarticulacy upheld in the text. Moreover, the presence of “pale-skinned” blacks confirms the worst fears of those who foresee the dissolution of Anglo-Saxon supremacy. For to be pale-skinned *and* African American is to be—like Myrtle's dog—a mongrel.

Nick's reaction to the blacks in the limousine recalls Tom Buchanan's unabashed racism:

Civilization's going to pieces. … I've gotten to be a terrible pessimist about things. Have you read ‘The Rise of the Colored Empires’ by this man Goddard? … Well, it's a fine book, and everybody ought to read it. The idea is if we don't look out the white race will be—will be utterly submerged. It's all scientific stuff; it's been proved. … It's up to us, who are the dominant race, to watch out or these other races will have control of things.

(13)

Though Tom misidentifies the author (the reference is to Lothrop Stoddard's *Rising Tide of Color against White Supremacy*, prominently displayed in Gatsby's library), his views are corroborated in the novel as a whole. Camouflaged in the discourse of the fall of civilization or of a remembered but unattainable past, Fitzgerald's subtext, to which Tom points, encodes a darker message. As Baker argues, Tom might be “a more honestly self-conscious representation of the threat that some artists whom we call ‘modern’ felt in the face of a new world of science, war, technology, and imperialism. … What really seems under threat are not towers of civilization but rather an assumed supremacy of boorishly racist, indisputably sexist, and unbelievably wealthy Anglo-Saxon males.”16

Myrtle's ineptitude when it comes to identifying the breed of dogs or men equates with Nick's inability to determine who Gatsby is. Nick says of his mysterious neighbor: “I knew I had discovered a man of fine breeding after I talked with him an hour. I said to myself: ‘There's the kind of man you'd like to take home and introduce to your mother and sister’” (73). As I shall demonstrate, this is an intricate textual moment. Arguably, it is at this point that Nick's readiness to welcome Gatsby to the nativist family, to extend a fraternal embrace, is at its most pronounced. Given his earlier reservations about his background, Nick's renewed conviction that Gatsby is indeed a “man of fine breeding” can be read as an ethnological sigh of relief:
I would have accepted without question the information that Gatsby sprang from the swamps of Louisiana or from the lower East Side of New York. That was comprehensible. But young men didn't—at least in my provincial inexperience I believed they didn't—drift coolly out of nowhere and buy a palace on Long Island Sound.

(49)

And thus when it is finally disclosed that Jay Gatsby is Jimmy Gatz and possibly more than merely casually connected with Meyer Wolfsheim (“a small, flat-nosed Jew” with tufts of hair in his nostrils and “tiny eyes” [69-70]), why Gatsby's ambiguous ancestry, his questionable past, is intolerable to Nick begins to make sense. To say that “Jay Gatsby of West Egg, Long Island, sprang from his Platonic conception of himself” (99) is to confirm that he is the worst kind of outsider. Gatsby, unlike Daisy and Tom (Nick's distant cousins), is of no relation. He is as much a threat to the “family”—to the “Middle West,” to the white cultural center—as Myrtle, the “black bucks” in the limousine, or Wolfsheim.

But complicating the deliberation over bringing Gatsby home is desire itself. Does Nick speak as a man, a woman, or both? Like Eliot's Tiresias, Nick is “within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life” (36)—capable, that is, of being both male and female, Jew and gentile, black and white. Insofar as The Great Gatsby is indebted to The Waste Land, its commitment to salvaging whatever is left of “civilization” (as with poem) is articulated by one “in whom the two sexes meet.”17 The androgynous Tiresias bears witness to a culture in decline. He attests to the imminent demise not only of Europe (as text) but also of its institutions (implicitly the Church) and the strictly enforced hierarchies that fostered them. The “typist home at tea time” is an outrage and a devastation precisely because she is a typist—reductio ad absurdum of Philomel.

If Nick is like Tiresias, he is also like the sexually neutral Winterbourne. When he looks at Daisy, when he “stud[ies]” her, Winterbourne's gaze is not that of a potential suitor, but instead that of a decorous cultural chaperone searching for a charge who will behave. Fitzgerald's revision of James's tale foregrounds the deeper narrative implications of her misconduct. As I have pointed out, Myrtle is Daisy's déclassé double. Just as she is socially presumptuous, she is also physically overwhelming: her clothing “stretche[s] tight over her rather wide hips,” and her figure is “thickish,” “faintly stout.” Nick observes that “she carried her surplus flesh sensuously as some women can. Her face … contained no facet or gleam of beauty, but there was an immediately perceptible vitality about her as if the nerves of her body were continually smouldering” (25-26). As Nick conceives it, Myrtle's sexuality is aggressive, masculine; her body authoritative. She is a match for Tom and thus a threat to Tom, who breaks her nose. Indeed, her “smouldering” presence is so disruptive that she has to be contained, locked up in Wilson's house. And when she breaks free, shouting “Beat me! … Throw me down and beat me, you dirty little coward!” she runs to her death. But killing her is not enough. Her “left breast … swinging loose like a flap [and her] mouth … wide open and ripped at the corners” (138), she is also mutilated, and her sexual power (in effect) neutralized.

There is an element of misogyny at work here that further problematizes the figuration of Nick. What values are assigned to him? Does the bald revulsion at female sexuality suggest homosexual panic? If it does, then The Great Gatsby affirms the cliché that for homosexuals women, appetitive and predatory, are terrifying. On these homophobic terms, Myrtle is loathsome because, defined only by body, she makes it impossible for Nick to romanticize male-female relationships, to see them as anything other than base, physical exchange. On the other hand, Nick's disgust with Myrtle is conceivably Winterbourne's frustration with Daisy laid bare. The stereotypical homosexual sensibility we confront, which James's work authorizes, is one repelled by a female figure whose gross ignorance and unfailing disobedience are the enemy of manners. Myrtle (desire incarnate) and Daisy (desire disembodied) are “monstrous doubles,” and thus one of them must be sacrificed. In other words, René Girard's theory of myth and ritual is in this context quite useful. For Myrtle can be read as a “surrogate victim” whose death results (or is meant to result) in the restoration of order to the
community.\(^{18}\)

*The Great Gatsby* co-opt James's figure of the hotel as a “synonym” for America's social disintegration. As James said of the Waldorf Astoria, “one is verily tempted to ask if the hotel-spirit may not just be the American spirit most seeking and most finding itself.”\(^{19}\) Indeed, in *Daisy Miller* the social critique of the hotel, which “represents the abolition of privacy and decency,”\(^{20}\) is buried in the discourse of the aesthetic. Describing the rooms the Millers have taken in Rome, Daisy defers to Eugenio, who considers them the best in the city. But the aesthetic judgments of an Italian courier are in James's hierarchicized world less than worthless. “Splendid” though they may be, these rooms are nevertheless public accommodation. Giving voice to the “mysterious land of dollars and six-shooters,” Daisy's brother Randolph makes it clear that the Millers are accustomed to a superabundance of gilded space: “We've got a bigger place than this. … It's all gold on the walls” (37). Indeed, Daisy's mother's imagination is the captive of the hostelry: “‘I guess we'll go right back to the hotel,’ she remarked with a confessed failure of the *larger* [my emphasis] imagination” (41). The cultural vision of Americans like these, then, is truncated. And yet the imaginative capability privileged in the text is smaller, not larger. The Millers are reproved for their attraction to the gigantic, the overstuffed, the overgilded, and the distinctly public. They are exhorted to narrow their scope, to exclude themselves from mass society—to be small.

When Daisy Buchanan decamps to her lover's house, Gatsby essentially shuts down the inn: “the whole caravansary had fallen in like a card house at the disapproval in her eyes” (114). In penetrating Gatsby's territory, then, Daisy is a potentially civilizing (privatizing) force:

> She was appalled by West Egg, this unprecedented “place” that Broadway had begotten upon a Long Island fishing village—appalled by its raw vigor that chafed under the old euphemisms and by the too obtrusive fate that herded its inhabitants along a short-cut from nothing to nothing.

(108)

Gatsby's sprawling house (and by extension all that occurs there) repels because it is a phenomenon rather than a “place,” an augury of things to come. It is a luxurious “roadhouse” to which all are admitted, a “factual imitation of some Hôtel de Ville in Normandy, with a tower on one side, spanning new under a thin beard of raw ivy, … and more than forty acres of lawn and garden” (5). The owner of this “colossal affaire” is a kind of aesthetic criminal whose “art” Nick condemns—a reaction immediately undermining the reliability of a narrator who announces in the ninth line of the text that he is “inclined to reserve all judgments” (1). For, if nothing else, *The Great Gatsby* is a litany of judgments of the most reactionary sort.

In contrast to Gatsby's ersatz residence, Nick's “small eyesore” of a house is the ideologically privileged trysting place for Daisy and Gatsby. It is a model of privacy. Though, as Gatsby deduces, Nick “doesn't make much money,” he is nevertheless perfectly capable of producing an afternoon tea that certifies his pedigree. Replete with lemons and lemon cakes and prepared by a female servant (unnamed, dismissed as "my Finn" [113]), the haute bourgeois tea that Nick serves to friends suggests that his house is a “home.” The parvenu Gatsby, on the other hand, is host to endless caravans of visitors whom he does not know. Klipspringer, for example, is a permanent but unidentified guest—a visible indication of the social phantasmagoria Gatsby's way of life represents, as are the nightly parties themselves. Gatsby's guests are “swimmers,” “wanderers,” anonymous “groups [that] change more swiftly, swell with new arrivals, [and] dissolve and form in the same breath,” “confident girls who … glide on through the seachange of … men pushing young girls backward in eternal graceless circles” (41, 46). Gatsby's parties play out the “Jazz History of the World,” the music Nick remembers from the first party he attends. Jazz is, in Nick's eyes, the music of commerce, its syncopations and rhythms, as Theodor Adorno argues, defined by the demands of the marketplace.\(^{21}\) Indiscriminate, catering to the masses, jazz, in other words, speaks for Gatsby.
Matthew Bruccoli insists that “The Great Gatsby provides little in the way of sociological or anthropological data,” which is another way of saying that its meanings transcend their historical context. Why dehistoricize the text? To safeguard its status as a “classic”? Consider, for example, the names of some of Gatsby's guests: Blackbuck, the Poles, Da Fontano, Don S. Schwartz, Horace O'Donovan, and the Kellehers. These clearly attest to Fitzgeraldian outrage at the new America, one in which so-called ethnics are ubiquitous—in which the citizens of East Egg, who form a “dignified homogeneity” in the midst of the “many-colored, many-keyed commotion” (45, 105), must contend not only with the inhabitants of West Egg but with all of New York.

“On week-ends … [Gatsby's] Rolls-Royce [later characterized as “swollen … in its monstrous length with triumphant hat-boxes and supper-boxes, and terraced with a labyrinth of wind-shield that mirrored a dozen suns” (54)] became an omnibus, bearing parties to and from the city between nine in the morning and long past midnight, while his station wagon scampered … to meet all [my emphasis] trains” (39). And ready to welcome the masses stands Gatsby—a fraudulent feudal lord in command of a serfdom of household staff charged with keeping the whole thing going: “on Mondays eight servants, including an extra gardener, toiled all day with mops and … garden-shears, repairing the ravages of the night before” (39). And “every Friday five crates of oranges and lemons … left his back door in a pyramid of pulpless halves. There was a machine in the kitchen which could extract the juice of two hundred oranges in half an hour if a little button was pressed two hundred times by a butler's thumb” (39).

The details of Gatsby's household evoke James's Newport “white elephants,” the enormous “cottages” of the summering rich that in The American Scene have replaced the quaint abodes James knew in his youth:

[I]t was all so beautiful, so solitary and so “sympathetic.” And that indeed has been, thanks to the “piers-on-of gold,” the fortune, the history of its beauty: that it now bristles with the villas and palaces into which the cottages have all turned, and that those monuments of pecuniary power rise thick and close, precisely, in order that their occupants may constantly remark to each other, from the windows to the “ground,” and from house to house, that it is beautiful, it is solitary and sympathetic.

The edifices that “rise thick and close” in Newport are in Gatsby faithfully reproduced: Nick's house is “squeezed between two huge places that rented for twelve or fifteen thousand a season” (5).

In Slouching towards Bethlehem, Joan Didion, also horrified by the crumbling of traditional values (although she attributes the erosion to the social upheaval of the 1960s), returns to James's Newport to report, quoting The American Scene almost verbatim, that “no aesthetic judgment could conceivably apply to the Newport of Bellevue Avenue,” where “the air proclaims only the sources of money” and where “the houses [like Gatsby's] are men's houses, factories, undermined by tunnels and service railways, shot through with plumbing to collect salt water, tanks to store it, devices to collect rain water, vaults for table silver, equipment inventories of china and crystal and ‘Tray cloths—fine’ and ‘Tray cloths—ordinary.’” On these elitist terms, Gatsby's house is the quintessential male (public) bastion that presumably could be gentrified under the supervision of a woman like Daisy, whose taste Nick both endorses and replicates. The contrast, in fact, between Daisy's house and her lover's is striking: it is an architectonic utopia,

a cheerful red-and-white Georgian Colonial mansion, overlooking the bay. The lawn started at the beach and ran toward the front door for a quarter of a mile, jumping over sun-dials and brick walks and burning gardens—finally when it reached the house drifting up the side in bright vines as though from the momentum of its run. The front was broken by a line of French windows, glowing now with reflected gold and wide open to the warm windy afternoon.
Daisy's house is not only a model of tasteful (though conspicuous) consumption, effortlessly marrying the best of Europe with the best of America, and subtly enshrining a woman who has “been everywhere and done everything.” It also embodies the natural elegance associated with Daisy Miller—as though she has finally forsaken the hotel. The Buchanan mansion is an extension of the landscape surrounding it: “The windows were ajar and gleaming white against the fresh grass outside that seemed to grow a little way into the house. A breeze blew through the room, blew curtains in at one end and out the other like pale flags, twisting them up toward the frosted wedding-cake of the ceiling, and then rippled over the wine-colored rug, making a shadow on it as wind does on the sea” (8).

Gatsby's house, by contrast, is “unnatural,” not simply because of the way it imposes itself on the landscape or because of who is invited there but also because of its interior. Rather than achieving a sanctified marriage with Europe, equated in East Egg with nature itself, Gatsby's “palace” is represented as the product of a cultural rape, as a kind of bastardized museum in which visitors wander through “Marie Antoinette music-rooms and Restoration salons” (92) unable to detect an organizing logic beneath the labyrinth of exhibits. The house is so clearly designed to accommodate the public that, during a private tour with Gatsby as guide, Nick suspects that there are “guests concealed behind every couch and table, under orders to be breathlessly silent until we had passed through” (92). The most significant room, given what it says about Gatsby, is the “Merton College Library” (92)—de rigueur for a self-invented Oxford man: “we [Nick and Jordan] tried an important-looking door, and walked into a high Gothic library, panelled with carved English oak, and probably transported complete from some ruin overseas” (45). Here a “middle-aged man, with enormous owl-eyed spectacles,” exclaims that the books are “absolutely real—have pages and everything, I thought they'd be a nice durable cardboard” (45-46). They are not. The pages, however, are uncut. Gatsby, as untutored as Daisy Miller, does not read: his books are merely part of the inventory.

The novel's climactic scene unfolds in the Plaza Hotel. As though guests at one of Gatsby's parties, the principal players in the text are “herded” into a single “stifling” room—their private drama acted out in what is effectively a theater. Tom and Daisy's marriage is a corporate merger. Gatsby (the Arrow Shirt man) and Daisy (whose voice itself sounds like money) are equally commodified. The reified “personal” relationships and disintegrating traditional values Nick perceives are symptomatic of a country that for him, as for Fitzgerald, has become uninhabitable. “Nowadays,” Tom says, “people begin by sneering at family life and family institutions, and next they'll throw everything overboard and have intermarriage between black and white” (130). Though Nick dismisses this outburst as “impassioned gibberish” (130), as the hypocritical response of a man who has suddenly transformed himself from “libertine to prig” (131), his own view of the American dilemma bolsters Tom's.

The celebrated concluding paragraphs of The Great Gatsby compose a reactionary social manifesto dressed up in the romantic rhetoric of loss. But a loss of what? Of innocence? Of the promise of spiritual perfectibility that the idea of America held out to its colonizers? As Baldwin suggests in “Stranger in the Village,” the answer depends on whether, ancestrally, one is a conqueror or one of the conquered. Readers who are not descended from the “Dutch sailors” invoked may wonder at Lionel Trilling's depoliticizing and still largely unquestioned assessment of a writer now unavoidable: “the root of Fitzgerald's heroism is to be found … in his power of love.”

As it turns out, Daisy was always a discursive failure. In both narratives, women are exhorted to save “America,” which is to say a particular textual tradition whose values and assumptions about what a culture should properly do and be are in jeopardy. Figuring America a cultural battlefield, James advocates evacuation, manning a textual lifeboat bearing the refugee of sanctified white womanhood. Awaiting Daisy stands the ultimately ineffectual Winterbourne, whose refined (homosexual?) sensibility, whose valorization of Europe (represented as the only culture) is crucial to James's work as a whole. However, Daisy's baggage, the conflicts of class and race with which—from the very beginning—she is ineluctably associated, proves too heavy; thus she is disciplined, and finally punished by death.
As an illustration of the sense of urgency underscoring the discourse of white American exiles, *The Great Gatsby* is clear enough. *Tender Is the Night*, however, to which I am about to turn, brings both Fitzgerald's social agenda and his ongoing dialogue with James into sharper focus. The opening paragraph, for example, depicting a hotel “on the pleasant shore of the French Riviera,” is James's synonym for America invoked yet again. Gausse's Hôtel des Étrangers is isolated from its surroundings: bounded on all sides by mountain ranges, pine forests, “the pink and cream … fortifications of Cannes,” and by the sea itself, where “[m]erchantmen crawled westward [i.e., to America, the land of commerce] on the horizon” (9). Inscribing a “littoral [cut off] from true Provençal France” (9) and populated by Americans as contemptible as the Buchanans, *Tender Is the Night* is a meditation on boundaries and thresholds.

Recalling James's nostalgia for the old Newport, Fitzgerald suggests that his Riviera was once a place of genteel beauty, where the “cupolas of a dozen old villas rotted like water lilies among the massed pines” (9)—was once untouched by the “pilers-on-of gold.” And there are further references to James—especially to *Daisy Miller*. Geneva, Zurich, Vevey, the Swiss cities dominating the map of Daisy's European experience, are Dick Diver's familiar haunts. As with Daisy, his education begins in Switzerland, and he also hails from the same American region. Daisy is from Schenectady; Dick is from Buffalo. But in Fitzgerald's text, Switzerland is more than the backdrop for a tragicomedy of manners dramatizing the differences between Europeanized Americans and parochial patriots: it is “the true centre of the Western World” (167).

**Notes**

3. Ibid., 116.
5. Ibid., x.
8. Bakhtin argues that discourse in the novel straddles two stylistic lines. Novels of the first type “eliminate their brute heteroglossia [the competing linguistic forces derived from everyday speech that Bakhtin maintains are unique to the novel], replacing it everywhere with a single-imaged, ‘ennobled’ language.” Novels of this category, then, homogenize difference. Novels of the second type, however, incorporate a multiplicity of “languages, manners, genres; … [they] force all exhausted and used-up, all socially and ideologically alien and distant worlds to speak for themselves in their own language and in their own style. …” M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 409-10.

And yet, just as the author's intentions are dialogically linked with these languages, they are also dialogically opposed to them, thereby energizing the text with unresolved conflict. The two styles of novelistic discourse Bakhtin identifies are sometimes present within the same text, and so the reader must contend not only with heteroglossia but also with oppositional modes of discourse. Such is the case with *Daisy Miller*. Bakhtinian theory, of course, assumes a democratic reader.

10. Ibid., 65.
13. Ibid.
16. Ibid., 4.
23. James, The American Scene, 212.

**Criticism: John F. Callahan (essay date fall 1996)**


*In the following essay, Callahan examines various manifestations of the idea of the American dream as it evolved in three Fitzgerald novels.*

Since the first stirrings of the F. Scott Fitzgerald revival in the 1940s, readers have been fascinated by the oppositions in his work and character. Critics from several different generations have noted how Fitzgerald used his conflicts to explore the origins and fate of the American dream and the related idea of the nation.1 The contradictions he experienced and put into fiction heighten the implications of the dream for individual lives: the promise and possibilities, violations and corruptions of those ideals of nationhood and personality “dreamed into being,” as Ralph Ellison phrased it, “out of the chaos and darkness of the feudal past.”2 Fitzgerald embodied in his tissues and nervous system the fluid polarities of American experience: success and failure, illusion and disillusion, dream and nightmare.

“I did not care what it was all about,” Hemingway's Jake Barnes confessed in The Sun Also Rises. “All I wanted to know was how to live in it.”3 Fitzgerald, who named and chronicled that brash, schizophrenic decade, was no stranger to the dissipation of values and the pursuit of sensation in the Jazz Age of the 1920s. For all that, he strained to know what life is all about and how to live in it. To him, Hemingway’s it was not simply existence and the soul's dark night of melancholia and despair. It also stood for an American reality that, combined with “an extraordinary gift for hope” and a “romantic readiness,”4 led to the extravagant promise identified with America and the intense, devastating loss felt when the dream fails in one or another of its guises.
Face to face with his own breakdown, Fitzgerald traced his drastic change of mind and mood in his letters and
*Crack-Up* pieces. From the conviction during his amazing early success in his 20s that “life was something
you dominated if you were any good,” Fitzgerald, at the end of his life, came to embrace “the sense that life
is essentially a cheat and its conditions are those of defeat, and that the redeeming things are not ‘happiness
and pleasure’ but the deeper satisfactions that come out of struggle.” Abraham Lincoln was Fitzgerald's
American exemplar of this “wise and tragic sense of life” (Turnbull, *Letters* [L] 96). And in *The Last Tycoon*
(*LT*) he associates Monroe Stahr's commitment to lead the movie industry closer to an ideal mix of art and
entertainment with Lincoln's creative response to the contradictions of American democracy embodied in the
Union.

Fitzgerald's invocation of Lincoln recalls the proud and humble claim he made to his daughter from
Hollywood. “I don't drink,” he wrote; then, as if freed from a demon's grasp, he recounted the inner civil war
he fought to keep his writer's gift intact: “I am not a great man, but sometimes I think the impersonal and
objective quality of my talent and the sacrifices of it, in pieces, to preserve its essential value have some sort
of epic grandeur.” “Some sort” he qualifies, as if preparing for the ironic, self-deflating admission in the next
sentence. “Anyhow after hours I nurse myself with delusions of that sort” (L 62, 61). But Fitzgerald did
preserve the “essential value” of his talent; the pages he left confirm that. Like Lincoln who lived only long
enough to sketch out what a truly reconstructed nation might look like, Fitzgerald was defeated in his attempt
to finish his last novel. Yet what he wrote is all the more poignant because, finished, *The Last Tycoon* might
have recast and reformulated the intractable oppositions of *The Great Gatsby* and *Tender Is the Night.*

“The test of a first rate intelligence,” Fitzgerald wrote in *The Crack-Up* (Wilson, *CU*), that posthumous
collection full of his sinewy, mature, self-reliant thought, “is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind
at the same time and still retain the ability to function” (*CU* 69). By *function,* Fitzgerald means more than
cope; he's affirming that readiness to act in the world with something approaching one's full powers—“a
willingness of the heart” combined with enabling critical intelligence. Fitzgerald's fictional alter egos, Jay
Gatsby and Dick Diver, lost this stance of simultaneous detachment and engagement, if they ever possessed it,
for they could live in the world only with a single, consuming mission. In his life, Fitzgerald, too, had to steel
himself against the tendency toward Gatsby's self-destroying romantic obsession, and like Diver, he had to
wrench free from the opposed, complimentary shoals of identification and alienation in his marriage with
Zelda.

After *Tender Is the Night* and before his fresh start in Hollywood in 1937, Fitzgerald reflected on his earlier
search for an equilibrium of craft, reputation, and power as expressed in the literary vocation and his large
personal ambition. “It seemed,” he remembered,

> a romantic business to be a successful literary man—you were not ever going to be as famous
> as a movie star but what note you had was probably longer-lived—you were never going to
> have the power of a man of strong political or religious convictions but you were certainly
> more independent.

To the end, like the vivid, still-evolving Monroe Stahr in *The Last Tycoon,* Fitzgerald stays in motion, keeps
the dialectic between life and craft going, if not to resolution—“Of course within the practice of your trade
you were forever unsatisfied” (*CU* 69-70)—at least in pursuit of new and unrealized novelistic possibilities.
“But I, for one, would not have chosen any other” (*CU* 69-70), he concludes, and keeps faith with his vocation
by writing about craft and character in the life of a gifted movie man, whose form Fitzgerald feared might
subordinate the novel, “which at my maturity was the strongest and supplest medium for conveying thought
and emotion from one human being to another,” to “a mechanical and communal art that, whether in the hands
of Hollywood merchants or Russian idealists, was capable of rendering only the tritest thought, the most
obvious emotion” (*CU* 78).
Meeting Irving Thalberg, Fitzgerald becomes more open to the craft of the movies as practiced in Hollywood. Like Fitzgerald the novelist, Monroe Stahr produces movies, not opportunistically (for the most part) but from within. There is a fluidity to Fitzgerald's conception of Stahr missing from Gatsby and his dream, so ill defined in its worldly guise, so obsessive and absolute in its fixation on Daisy; and missing also from the aspiring hubris of Dick Diver, trapped by his misguided, innocent mingling of love and vocation in his dream of personality in Tender Is the Night. Stahr, like the writer who created him, learns that daring to function can be a first step toward loosening the paralyzing grip of “opposed ideas.”

Fitzgerald's characters, like the seismograph alluded to in Gatsby, register changes in his sensibility. Not that Monroe Stahr is Fitzgerald; like the others, he is a composite character. “There never was a good biography of a good novelist,” Fitzgerald wrote in his notebook. “He's too many people if he's any good.” Nevertheless, Fitzgerald put into Stahr's character much of the awareness he came to have in the melancholy troubled years after Tender Is the Night. “Life, ten years ago,” he wrote in 1936, “was largely a personal matter.” Without telling how that's changed but making it clear that it has, Fitzgerald confronted his present imperative:

I must hold in balance the sense of the futility of effort and the sense of the necessity to struggle; the conviction of the inevitability of failure and the determination to “succeed”—and, more than these, the contradiction between the dead hand of the past and the high intentions of the future.

(CU 177, 70)

To be sure, Fitzgerald did not always hold these contradictions of mind and will, memory and imagination, in equilibrium. But increasingly, as he worked on The Last Tycoon during his last year and a half in Hollywood, he sensed a progression from his earlier novels—enough that he strove to set a standard mingling intelligence with “a willingness of the heart.” Intelligence identifies and holds in suspension “opposed ideas,” but the “ability to function” in the midst of what Keats called “uncertainties, mysteries, doubts” follows from that “willingness of the heart” Fitzgerald identified as a peculiarly intense American urge to do something about one's condition, to take risks for a better self, a better life, a better nation. “For example,” Fitzgerald wrote, illustrating his embrace of contradiction, “one ought to be able to see that things are hopeless and still be determined to make them otherwise” (CU 64). So he was. And as a writer, until the end of his life, Fitzgerald linked his pursuit of craft and personality, if not any longer simply happiness—“the natural state of the sentient adult is a qualified unhappiness” (CU 84)—with the unfolding story of America.

Perhaps because of Fitzgerald's struggles and his paradoxical, sometimes exhilarated serenity alongside the pain and loss reflected in the diminishing hourglass of his life, in The Last Tycoon he was able at least to break the stalemate between previously opposed ideas. For this reason, Fitzgerald's passing before he could finish The Last Tycoon is an incalculable loss, only to be guessed at from the drafts he left, however much in progress, and his rich, copious notes, charts, and outlines. With Hollywood as milieu and the producer Stahr as protagonist, the American dream becomes even more identified with the urge to integrate private and public pursuits of happiness than in Fitzgerald's other novels.

In The Last Tycoon Fitzgerald does for the American dream what Ralph Ellison argues every serious novel does for the craft of fiction. Even as a fragment, the work extends the range of idea and phenomena associated with the dream. As a man and a writer, he became at home in that country of discipline and craft he had discovered but, later lamented, did not truly settle down in it until it was too late. As he wrote to his daughter Scottie, a student and aspiring writer at Vassar, I wish I'd said “at the end of The Great Gatsby: ‘I’ve found my line—from now on this comes first. This is my immediate duty—without this I am nothing’” (L 79). In 1939 and 1940, The Last Tycoon did come first. But burdened with expenses, lacking the quick, lucrative Saturday Evening Post markets of his youth, lacking in any case the “romantic readiness” to write stories with happy endings, and in sporadic, failing health, Fitzgerald had to balance his novel with other work, and eke it out in
pieces. Nevertheless, he ended up a writer's writer. From that single window, he looked beyond his circumstances and saw the American dream not as a personal matter and no longer a nostalgic, romantic possibility but as a continuing defining characteristic of the American nation and its people. Far from being behind him, as Nick Carraway had claimed in *The Great Gatsby*, the dream, refigured in *The Last Tycoon*, is a recurring phenomenon in each phase, place, and guise of Fitzgerald's imagination of American experience.

The American story, Fitzgerald wrote late in life, “is the history of all aspiration—not just the American dream but the human dream. …” The story that Fitzgerald told was his version of a dream hauntingly personal and national. “When I was your age,” he wrote his daughter in 1938, “I lived with a great dream. The dream grew and I learned how to speak of it and make people listen.” Like Keats, who, Fitzgerald imagined, was sustained to the end by his “hope of being among the English poets” (*CU* 81), Fitzgerald aspired to be among the novelists. But, as he confessed to his daughter in a bone-scraping passage, he compromised his artist's dream by indulging the very thing that inspired it—romantic love. Of his marriage to Zelda, he wrote in retrospect, “I was a man divided—she wanted me to work too much for her and not enough for my dream” (*L* 32). The imbalance Fitzgerald attributed to Zelda was also his own tension and tendency. Nevertheless, what gave his life and work such fascination was exactly that dream of mingling craft and accomplishment with love—first with Zelda, and at the end in more muted fashion with Sheilah Graham, his companion in Hollywood.

In its American guise, the dream Fitzgerald sought to realize flowed from that most elusive and original of the rights proclaimed by the Declaration of Independence. Framed as an “unalienable” right by Thomas Jefferson and espoused by the other founders of this revolutionary nation, the “pursuit of happiness” magnified the American dream into an abiding, almost sacred promise. Going back to that scripture of nationhood, it is striking to note that although Jefferson amended John Locke's “life, liberty, and property or estate” to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” neither he nor any other signatory explained or remarked in writing on the change. But naming the “pursuit of happiness” an unalienable right confirmed the newly declared American nation as an experimental, necessarily improvisational society dedicated to the principle that every human personality is sacred and inviolable. Yes, blacks, women, Native Americans, and even indentured servants were excluded, but excluded then, not forever. For as Lincoln was to imply in the Gettysburg Address, the Declaration's eloquent language strained toward the proposition that all persons were free, and, therefore, implicated in and responsible for the nation's destiny. And the idea and covenant of American citizenship required that all individuals make themselves up in the midst of the emerging new society. And the process of creation would be vernacular, arising from native ground, the weather, landscape, customs, habits, peoples, and values of this new world in the making.

That was and remains the promise of America. But, Fitzgerald's novels remind us, things were never this simple. And as the late Ralph Ellison, who seems closer and closer kin to Fitzgerald, put it, “a democracy more than any other system is always pregnant with its contradiction.” One such contradiction unresolved by the Declaration or the ensuing Constitution, and played out since in national experience and Fitzgerald's novels, is between property and the “pursuit of happiness.” Certainly, as Eugene McCarthy has noted, the third unalienable right “undoubtedly included the right to pursue property as a form of happiness, or as ‘a happiness.’” For some the “pursuit of happiness” was simply a euphemism for property. Officially, the tension went unresolved and scarcely acknowledged until the 14th Amendment forbade the states to “deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law.” The less concrete, more elusive “pursuit of happiness” went unmentioned except by implication. Yet, for over 200 years, before and after passage of the 14th Amendment, Americans have sought to balance property's material reality with the imaginative possibilities hinted at in the phrase the “pursuit of happiness.”

What if we were to read *Gatsby, Tender Is the Night*, and *The Last Tycoon* as projections of that sometime struggle, sometime alliance between property and the pursuit of happiness? As human impulses, property and the pursuit of happiness are sometimes contradictory, sometimes complementary metaphors for experience.
Let property stand for the compulsion to divide the world and contain experience within fixed, arbitrary boundaries. And let the “pursuit of happiness” become imagination's embrace of the complexity, fluidity, and possibility open to human personality. In Jefferson's time, if not so strongly in Fitzgerald's or our own, the “pursuit of happiness” also implied individual responsibility for the “spirit of public happiness” that John Adams felt so strongly in the colonies, which he judged the American Revolution won almost before it began. Jefferson did not include the word public, but his phrase implies the individual's integration of desire with responsibility, self-fulfillment with the work of the world. In short, in this promissory initial American context, the pursuit of happiness was bound up with citizenship, and citizenship with each individual's responsibility for democracy.

The first thing to be said about Fitzgerald's novels is that these enactments of the American dream are expressed in the love affairs and worldly ambitions of Jay Gatsby, Dick Diver, and Monroe Stahr. In The Great Gatsby (TGG), Tender Is the Night, and The Last Tycoon, the matrix of the dream differs, but in each case, the hero is, like Fitzgerald, “a man divided,” yet he seeks to integrate love of a woman with accomplishment in the world. Telling his story to Nick Carraway after he has lost Daisy Fay for the second and last time, Gatsby remembers that when he first met her, he felt like the latest plunderer in the line of Dan Cody, his metaphorical father, and a mythical figure who, in Fitzgerald's interpretation, “brought back to the Eastern seaboard the savage violence of the frontier brothel and saloon.” Sensitive to the demarcations of background, money, and status, Gatsby

knew he was in Daisy's house by a colossal accident. However glorious might be his future as Jay Gatsby, he was at present a penniless young man without a past, and at any moment the invisible cloak of his uniform might slip from his shoulders.

Meanwhile, “he had deliberately given Daisy a sense of security; he let her believe he was a person from much the same stratum as herself.” Jay Gatsby pursues Daisy knowing that her sense of happiness and the good life depends on money and property. Nevertheless, “he took what he could get, ravenously and unscrupulously—eventually he took Daisy one still October night, took her because he had no real right to touch her hand” (TGG 76, 113). Ironically, Gatsby's lieutenant's uniform allows him proximity to Daisy simply as a man long enough to seduce her.

Until Gatsby makes love to Daisy, he projects little soul or feeling, only a self-absorbed passion mixed up with his urge to defy American boundaries of class, status, and money. The experience of love deeply moves and changes Gatsby, but so pervasive is the culture of material success that his new reverence and tenderness toward her are inseparable from money and possessions, and perhaps from Carraway's image of Daisy “gleaming like silver, safe and proud above the hot struggles of the poor”—Gatsby's struggles, maybe, as a boy and penniless young man in North Dakota and Minnesota. Earlier that same day in 1922, Gatsby calls Daisy's voice a voice “full of money.” But his subsequent words to Carraway about that experience of love in wartime 1917, a time that obscured boundaries of class and background in favor of a seemingly all-powerful fluidity and equality, convey the mystery and tenderness of his earlier emotion. “I can't describe to you how surprised I was to find out I loved her, old sport,” Gatsby tells Carraway in his sometimes too well-chosen words whose tone nonetheless carries a touch of wonder. “I even hoped for a while that she'd throw me over, but she didn't, because she was in love with me too.” The more vividly Gatsby remembers, the more the tricks of his voice yield to the feeling underneath. “She thought I knew a lot because I knew different things from her. … Well, there I was, 'way off my ambitions, getting deeper in love every minute, and all of a sudden I didn't care” (TGG 114, 91, 114).

Gatsby discovers that Daisy loves him because of his different experience, not despite it as he feared. He surrenders his ambitions, as yet inchoate, unfocused, adolescent, to his intense feeling for Daisy. But their love is an interlude, happening “in the meantime, in between time.” More vividly alive because of his love for Daisy, Gatsby “did extraordinarily well in the war,” becoming a captain and, following the Argonne, a major
given “command of the divisional machine guns” \((TGG\ 72,\ 114)\). He emerges as a leader. Although his ambitions are vague, thinking of other American trajectories, a pioneering future in politics or in some other new venture, aviation, say, or advertising, might have awaited Gatsby if Daisy had stayed true to her love for him.

Instead, Daisy Fay turns fickle and self-indulgent. Desperate for Gatsby to return, impatient and petulant over his mistaken assignment to Oxford, she must have her life “shaped now, immediately—and the decision must be made by some force—of love, of money, of unquestionable practicality—that was close at hand” \((TGG\ 115)\). Daisy's pursuit of happiness in the form of her dangerous, defiant love for Gatsby surrenders to the palpability of a safe, material, unequal propertied union with Tom Buchanan. Afterwards, on his forlorn lover's progress through the streets of Louisville, Daisy's hometown and scene of their love, Gatsby understands: To win Daisy he gathers money and property, the latter transient and garish, in the quick and illegal ways open to him—Meyer Wolfsheim and the rackets. After another interval of love inspired by the possibilities of human personality—remember, Daisy sees Gatsby's possessions for the Horatio Alger emblems that they are and responds only to the passion, will, and tenderness that lie behind them—the struggle over Daisy (and, parabolically, America) is fought on the field of property. Whose money is solid wealth, whose possessions land, oil, and the like? And whose property stays in the same hands for generations?

In \textit{Gatsby}, sooner or later human feelings are negotiated in relation to property or some other form of material reality subject to ownership. Gatsby's wonder of discovery, Daisy's magic of “bringing out a meaning in each word that it had never had before and would never have again” \((TGG\ 82)\), these unanticipated, intense moments of experience recede before Tom Buchanan's relentless revelation of the shady transience of Gatsby's wealth. But perhaps Gatsby, too, gives Daisy little choice between two opposed fixed ideas. When Tom Buchanan forces a showdown with Gatsby at the Plaza Hotel, the two men turn Daisy into a prized possession to be fought over on the basis of social and economic conventions. In effect, Buchanan invokes the \textit{droit du seigneur}. He is the lord, Gatsby the serf, Daisy the woman belonging to the vast American estate. Contending on that ground, Gatsby may well pay an emotional tithe to the poor boy from North Dakota, and again feel he has no right to touch Daisy's hand. In any case, the scene at the Plaza is an acrimonious “irritable reaching after fact or reason”\(^\text{11}\) without love. Who can blame Daisy for withdrawing after her perspective goes unheard by both men? On this occasion, Gatsby is no more able than Buchanan to consider Daisy a woman in her own right, a unique and equal person whose voice has had the power to give the words she sings singular feeling and meaning. For each man, Daisy is a possession; for Buchanan material, for Gatsby ideal. So Daisy, the actual woman, the flawed and vulnerable human personality, flees. Held to no standard of decency or accountability by either man after her hit-and-run killing of Myrtle Wilson, she once again chooses the conventional, worldly protection of Tom Buchanan.

Gatsby's dream of love corroded to nightmare, the passion ebbs from his work, such as it is. And no wonder. His flimsy network of “connexions” and sinister underworld deals in booze and bonds were all for love of Daisy. When she returns to Tom Buchanan and their leisure-class world, partly because of Gatsby's desperate bargain with the American underworld, and partly because of his narcissistic, romantic inability to comprehend her attachment to Buchanan, Gatsby is emptied of love and ambition alike. The heart and wonder are gone from him; there is no happiness to pursue. His time of love and “aesthetic contemplation” passed, Gatsby, Nick imagines, sees around him only a frightening physical landscape—“a new world, material without being real” \((TGG\ 123)\), an American world bleaker and, for all its glut of accumulations, more insubstantial than the spare, monotonous prairie James Gatz started from in rural North Dakota. For all his romantic gifts of personality, lacking a discerning critical intelligence, Gatsby seems destined to have served that same “vast, vulgar meretricious [American] beauty” of which Dan Cody is the apotheosis \((TGG\ 75)\).

“France was a land, England was a people, but America, having about it still that quality of the idea, was harder to utter.” In this passage from “The Swimmers,” a 1929 story later distilled into his \textit{Notebooks},
Fitzgerald evokes the anguished intense patriotism he finds in American faces from Abraham Lincoln's to those of the “country boys dying in the Argonne for a phrase that was empty before their bodies withered” (*CU* 197). For Fitzgerald that American “quality of the idea” finds most worthy expression in the impulse to offer the best of yourself on behalf of someone or something greater than yourself. Directed toward the world, a “willfulness of the heart” intensifies the individual's feelings and experience. In *Tender Is the Night* (*TITN*) as in *Gatsby*, the dream of love and accomplishment is distorted by the values of property and possession. Like Gatsby, Dick Diver has large ambitions: “...to be a good psychologist—maybe to be the greatest one that ever lived.” Dick's colleague, the stolid Swiss, Franz Gregorovius, stops short hearing his friend's pronouncement, as did the aspiring American man of letters, Edmund Wilson, when the undergraduate Fitzgerald declared: “I want to be one of the greatest writers who have ever lived, don't you?” Like Fitzgerald, Diver mingles love with ambition, though passively, almost as an afterthought: “He wanted to be loved too, if he could fit it in” (*TITN* 23).

Reminiscent of *Gatsby*, Diver's dream resides initially in a masculine world in which one man's ambition and achievement are measured against another's. But, as with Gatsby, experience changes the values implicit in Diver's equation. Stirred by professional curiosity, he meets Nicole Warren. Because of her youth and beauty, the patient becomes in Diver's eyes primarily a woman, though a woman imagined as “a scarcely saved waif of disaster bringing him the essence of a continent.” To the inexperienced Diver—“only hot-cheeked girls in hot secret rooms” (*TITN* 27)—Nicole is a figure for the romantic possibility of an America that, like the “fresh green breast of the new world” whose “vanished trees … had made way for Gatsby's house” (*TGG* 137) is, though violated and compromised, suggestive of innocence, vitality, and possibility, and above all, still worthy of love.

So Dick Diver gambles his “pursuit of happiness” on marriage to Nicole. But his desire to be loved—“I want to be extravagantly admired again.” Fitzgerald said as he was writing *Tender*—seduces him away from his scholarly writing as a psychiatrist. Once diverted from his work, he does not find happiness as curator of the leisure-class expatriate American world he and Nicole create on the Riviera, or as psychiatrist in charge of the clinic bought with Warren money, or as Nicole's husband, or, finally, “wolf-like under his sheep's clothing” a pursuer of women more in mind than in actuality. For Diver, like Gatsby, the pursuit of happiness becomes personally hollow in love, and professionally so in his work. Again, perhaps like Gatsby, only more so, Diver is more responsible than he knows for the dissolution of his dream of love and work.

For her part, Nicole, like Daisy, only more poignantly, veers between two selves. Cured, she embraces her heritage as her robber baron grandfather Warren's daughter; her white crook's eyes signify a proprietary attitude toward the world. More vividly and knowingly than before, she becomes the goddess of monopoly and dynasty described early in the novel. “For her sake trains began their run at Chicago and traversed the round belly of the continent to California.” Nicole, “as the whole system swayed and thundered onward,” is, in Europe, remote product and beneficiary of her family's multinational corporate interests. Like Daisy, Nicole “has too much money”; like Gatsby, Dick Diver “can't beat that” (*TITN* 113, 311).

Yet in *Tender Is The Night*, the matter is not so simple. Marrying Nicole, Dick takes on a task demanding a heroic and perhaps a too stringent discipline and self-denial. After the most violent and threatening of Nicole's schizophrenic episodes, he realizes that “somehow [he] and Nicole had become one and equal, not opposite and complementary; she was Dick too, the drought in the marrow of his bones.” Her personality reinforces rather than compensates for what is missing in him. Even more fatal for Diver's balance between husband and psychiatrist, “he could not watch her disintegrations without participating in them” (207). Underneath the historical overtones of the American dream gone terribly, incestuously, wrong, Fitzgerald explores the strained and, finally, chilling intimacy of a marriage turned inward against the autonomy and independence of each person. With slow excruciating inevitability, Diver's “willfulness of the heart,” so catalytic to his imagination, charm, and discipline, deserts him.
She went up to him and, putting her arm around his shoulder and touching their heads together, said:

“Don't be sad.”

He looked at her coldly.

“Don't touch me!” he said.

(TITN, 319)

Diver has come so far from his former love for Nicole, “a wild submergence of soul, a dipping of all colors into an obscuring dye” (TITN 235), that he now recoils from her touch. The Divers are no longer man and woman to each other. In truth, the conditions and pathology sustaining the marriage are played out. Nicole is rid of her incestuous dependence on Dick, and Dick seeks to recover the independence he sacrificed as Nicole's husband, doctor, and, above all, protector.

Discipline, spirit, and imagination attenuated if not broken, Diver returns to America a stranger. With Nicole now acting as Fitzgerald's chronicler, the last news of Diver tells of the “big stack of papers on his desk that are known to be an important treatise on some medical subject, almost in process of completion.” So much for his craft; as for the dream of love, he becomes “entangled with a girl who worked in a grocery store” (TITN 334). Homeless in spirit, Diver drifts from one lovely, lonely Finger Lakes town to another, and whatever dreams he has, he dreams in oblivion without his former promise and intensity of feeling and action.

Fitzgerald created his deepest, most realized novel out of his own predicament. His dissipation and need to write short stories for the Saturday Evening Post to sustain his and Zelda's standard of living seduced him away from his craft and to some extent his dream of love. Still, Fitzgerald bled out Tender Is the Night at La Paix—“La Paix (My God!)” (L 345)—in Rodgers Forge outside Baltimore. He brought his “big stack of papers” to completion. But when reviews were mixed and sales modest, also perhaps because, exhausted, he had no new novel taking shape in his mind, only the early medieval tale of Phillippe or The Count of Darkness, with its curiously anachronistic tilt toward Ernest Hemingway's modern code of courage, Fitzgerald sank deeper into drink and depression. Finally, as Scott Donaldson observes, Asheville, Tyron, and other North Carolina towns became suspiciously like the small towns of Diver's self-imposed exile at the end of Tender Is the Night.14

For more than three years after publication of Tender Is the Night, Fitzgerald continued to imitate the desolate trajectory he'd projected for Dick Diver. Everything was a struggle. Perhaps “to preach at people in some acceptable form” (L 63) and to show himself an unbowed Sisyphus, without the camouflage of fiction, he dove into the confessional Crack-Up pieces. To the chagrin of those who wished him well, and even some who did not, he wrote an even more exposed confession of faith than Tender Is the Night. His low point came with the appearance of “The Other Side of Paradise,” a portrait of the novelist as a broken-down man and a failed writer that appeared on his fortieth birthday in the New York Post in September of 1936. “A writer like me must have an utter confidence, an utter faith in his star,” he told the reporter. “But through a series of blows, many of them my own fault, something happened to that sense of immunity, and I lost my grip.”15 The reporter featured the empty bottles and the desolate hotel room more than Fitzgerald's words, however, and the self-inflicted blow of humiliation Fitzgerald absorbed seeing the piece in print prompted him to make an abortive gesture at suicide.

Only an offer from Hollywood less than a year later broke the pattern of waste, the spell of despair, and roused Fitzgerald from his uneasy, purgatorial hibernation. Slowly, tortuously, he came back to life as a man and a novelist. Taking another crack at Hollywood, where the “inevitable low gear of collaboration” (CU 78) had twice mocked his sense of artistic vocation, Fitzgerald renewed his “pursuit of happiness.” His theme was
another variation of the American dream. For as a place and an industry, Hollywood was at once the consequence and the purveyor of the dream, often an eager expression of the culture's lowest common denominator. Unlike his earlier moves, to the south of France to write *Gatsby* in 1924 and Baltimore to write *Tender* in 1932, Fitzgerald saw going to Hollywood as a lucky last chance to recoup his fortunes. He had a screenwriter's contract; perhaps if he got himself together another novel would take shape. In the meantime, riding west on the train in July 1937, Fitzgerald welcomed the chance to pay his debts, educate Scottie, care for Zelda, and keep himself. And Hollywood also offered a fresh start. “Of all natural forces,” he had written in *The Crack-Up*, “vitality is the incommunicable one” (*CU* 74). And he did not flinch from taking stock of his condition. “For over three years,” he wrote his cousin Ceci, “the creative side of me has been dead as hell” (*L* 419). So, he might have added, was the side of him that lived in relationships at a high pitch of intensity.

In Hollywood almost two years, Fitzgerald pursued once more his dream of love and craft. Cherished by Sheilah Graham who had her own life and ambition, Fitzgerald felt alive enough in his pores to revive the dream of being truly among the novelists. “Look,” he wrote his daughter late in October 1939 with a surge of the old vitality and self-confidence, “I have begun to write something that is maybe great.” And he went on to tell her with touching understatement: “Anyhow I am alive again” (*L* 61). In the last year of his life, Fitzgerald poured into Monroe Stahr and *The Last Tycoon* the sense that life was ebbing and his resolve to pursue happiness as a writer and a man to the end. Into Stahr he put exhaustion—the sense of death in the mirror—and readiness for love—“the privilege of giving himself unselfishly to another human being.” Fitzgerald's words for a love more mature than romantic. Into his new book, he put the passion to make *The Last Tycoon* “something new” that could “arouse new emotions, perhaps even a new way of looking at certain phenomena.” For him the “pursuit of happiness” now meant, in Francis Kroll Ring's words, “the pursuit of the limits of his craft,” which she, who knew him well, notes that he felt “he had not reached.”

Fitzgerald did not speak directly of the dream in *The Last Tycoon* as he had in *Gatsby*, *Tender Is the Night*, and, with occasional bitter nostalgia, the *Crack-Up* essays. But it was there in Monroe Stahr's pursuit of private and public happiness, there with a measure of caution and maturity as well as a dangerous, consuming intensity. Monroe Stahr is both outside and inside the mold of Fitzgerald's previous heroes. Like Gatsby, Stahr is self-made, a leader of men in Hollywood as Gatsby briefly had been in France during the Great War. But Stahr's ambition and creative power fuse with the public good; he does not become a crook or a gangster to advance his ideal, romantic pursuit of happiness. Neither does he confuse love with vocation. No, Stahr like Lincoln was a leader carrying on a long war on many fronts; almost singlehandedly he had moved pictures sharply forward through a decade to a point where the content of the “A productions” was wider and richer than that of the stage.

(*LT* 106)

Like Dick Diver, Stahr's mind puts him in select company, and also like Diver, Stahr is a man with a strong, specific sense of vocation. But unlike Diver, Stahr distills his passion into a sustained, disciplined appetite for his work. Stahr is also a Jew, whose identity as an American outsider is more fully, consciously felt and put to more palpable professional use than had been the case with either Gatsby or Diver.

Stahr makes it to the pinnacle in Hollywood—a world open to and largely created by Jews—by virtue of his brains, judgment, leadership, taste, and sense of craft and quality possible in the medium of film with its democratic accessibility and mass appeal. Compared to Lincoln by Fitzgerald, Stahr believes he's about to take a call from President Roosevelt in front of the woman he's just recently met and is fast coming to love. “I've talked to him before,” Stahr tells Kathleen before the phone call turns out to be from an agent whose orangutan is “a dead ringer for McKinley” (*LT* 83). But Fitzgerald, always sensitive to the feel of a decade's turning points, implies parallels between Stahr's protective role in the movie industry and Roosevelt's in government. “There is no world but it has its heroes,” he writes, “and Stahr was the hero.” He evokes Stahr's
staying power during the evolving phases of the movies, as well as in the making of an individual picture. “Most of these men had been here a long time—through the beginnings and the great upset, when sound came, and the three years of depression, he had seen that no harm came to them.” Stahr was perhaps a paternal employer, as Roosevelt was a paternal, protective President. Both men preside over transitional circumstances in ways more evolutionary than revolutionary by force of character and impersonal compassionate intelligence, and by taking a personal interest in the problems of their constituencies. “The old loyalties were trembling now,” Fitzgerald concludes in the passage describing Stahr mingling with those who work for him at the end of a day at the studio: “There were clay feet everywhere; but still he was their man, the last of the princes. And their greeting was a sort of low cheer as he went by” (LT 27).

Stahr dreams of and attains knowledge and success in Hollywood's ambiguous, often insincere world of entertainment, art, and profit, the solitary, Cartesian way. He “did his reasoning without benefit of books—and he had just managed to climb out of a thousand years of Jewry into the late eighteenth century.” About the past, Fitzgerald notes that Stahr “could not bear to see it melt away” (LT 118). Reading this you can't help recall Fitzgerald's elegiac prose about the early promise of America “where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night” (TGG 137), or those pioneering Virginia “souls made of new earth in the forest-heavy darkness of the seventeenth century” (TITN 222). In a word, Fitzgerald continues, Stahr “cherished the parvenu's passionate loyalty to an imaginary past” (LT 118). But, having faced Stahr's and his own nostalgia, Fitzgerald invokes checks and balances against the romantic pull of the past. In short, Stahr is able “to retain the ability to function” amidst the contradictions of democracy and corporate power and property. Fitzgerald, too, wanted to achieve in The Last Tycoon what he felt he and his contemporaries so far had not done with the novel. “I want to write scenes that are frightening and inimitable,” he writes in one of his notes.

Both Fitzgerald and Stahr are men whose creative powers flow more richly into the world when they are involved in a satisfying, intimate relationship with a woman. For all of Stahr's love affair with an “imaginary past,” Kathleen awakens his passion for life in the present. Despite his “definite urge toward total exhaustion,” when he and Kathleen touch, Stahr feels the abiding elemental world again; at the coast he comes alive to the rhythms of land and sea and sky. After he and Kathleen make love at his unfinished Malibu beach house—“It would have been good anytime, but for the first time it was much more than he had hoped or expected”—they watch countless grunion fish come to touch land “as they had come before Sir Francis Drake had nailed his plaque to the shore” (LT 92, 108, 152).

Stahr's love for Kathleen intensifies his confidence about his gifts and worldly aspirations in a way reminiscent of Fitzgerald. “I used to have a beautiful talent once, Baby,” Fitzgerald told young Budd Schulberg during the Dartmouth Winter Carnival debacle. “It used to be wonderful feeling it was there.” Page by page, Fitzgerald ekes out The Last Tycoon, his physical stamina no longer able to keep up with his mind. Nor keep up with his will. As Frances Kroll Ring, Fitzgerald's then 20-year-old secretary tells it, he'd take a weekend off when he needed money to pay bills. With single-minded discipline fired by a desire to have the coming week free for his novel, he would plot and write a Pat Hobby story for Esquire. But always the dream of realizing his promise as a pioneering American novelist was there, perhaps made more palpable by his love affair with Sheilah Graham and his dedication to her education, and, for that matter, to his daughter Scottie's education. The latter is especially poignant, for Scottie, of the same generation as Fitzgerald's narrator, Cecilia Brady, and his contemporary and intellectual conscience, Edmund Wilson, were Fitzgerald's two imagined readers of The Last Tycoon, and that connection kept him going on more than one desolate, discouraging occasion.

In the novel, Fitzgerald does not leave the connection between love and craft to speculation. While the grunion flop at their feet on the Malibu shore, Stahr and Kathleen encounter a black man who tells Stahr he
“never go[es] to movies” and “never let[s his] children go” (LT 92). Later, at home alone, Stahr recalls the man—“He was prejudiced and wrong, and he must be shown somehow some way.” The man had been reading Emerson, and for Stahr he becomes the representative responsible good citizen whose allegiance Stahr must win for his soul's sake, the movies' sake, and the sake of American culture, of which Stahr sees himself a guardian. “A picture,” Stahr thinks, “many pictures, a decade of pictures, must be made to show him he was wrong.” And Stahr immediately commits himself to a specific action. “[H]e submitted the borderline pictures to the Negro and found them trash. And he put back on his list a difficult picture that he had tossed to the wolves, … to get his way on something else. He rescued it for the Negro man” (LT 95). Here Stahr puts his corporate property and producer's power in service of a higher common good—democratic (e)quality. Here the “pursuit of happiness” expresses his best potential and the best of American popular culture. What's more, Stahr's responsiveness to the black man's criticism is bound up with his passionate and tender love for Kathleen. His power to act as a public man is perhaps brought to brief, occasional fullness by the experience of love and intimacy.

Yet Stahr, Fitzgerald takes pains to observe, was not born to love and intimacy. He worked hard to shape the raw materials of his personality into a sensibility capable of an intimate relationship. “Like many brilliant men, he had grown up dead cold.” Looking over the way things were,

he swept it all away, everything, as men of his type do; and then instead of being a son-of-a-bitch as most of them are, he looked around at the bareness that was left and said to himself, “This will never do.” And so he had learned tolerance, kindness, forbearance, and even affection like lessons.

(LT 97)

Not surprisingly, Stahr's impulses toward the private happiness of intimacy are not as natural or sure-handed as his pursuit of public happiness in the world in the form of work and power, competition and money.

For all his mingling of love and craft in what seems a mature pursuit of happiness, Stahr hesitates with Kathleen. Perhaps Fitzgerald would have changed somewhat the terms of his story; we do not know. What we do know is that Stahr waits, fatally it turns out, though he is sure in his heart and his mind. “He could have said it then, said, ‘It is a new life,’ for he knew it was, he knew he could not let her go now, but something else said to sleep on it as an adult, no romantic” (LT 115). What Stahr and Kathleen do not know is that outside forces are closing in. The man Kathleen calls “The American,” who rescued her from her old life's quagmire in London, is already speeding toward Los Angeles and the marriage ceremony they've agreed to, his train hours early. If there's something hasty, even amateurish about this twist of Fitzgerald's plot, so be it. To say he might have changed it or refined the terms is to remember that he too, like Stahr, did not have the luxury of time.

In what Fitzgerald did write, Stahr says good night to Kathleen, but keeps his feelings to himself. “We'll go to the mountains tomorrow,” he tells her with the public voice of the man in charge, the producer, as if that were all. For his part, Fitzgerald the novelist, unable to resist one of those asides that mark his relations with his characters, especially those he loves, reflects on Stahr's temporizing judgment: “You can suddenly blunt a quality you have lived by for twenty years” (LT 116).

This line does not belong entirely to Fitzgerald but to Cecelia Brady, his narrator, who also loves Stahr, and in the way of a woman, not a novelist. Here, too, Fitzgerald was breaking new and different ground from that traversed in previous novels. He gambled that this young woman, “at the moment of her telling the story, an intelligent and observant woman” (LT 140), could reveal Stahr's complexity as well as her own and that of Hollywood and American society in the transitional time of the Depression and the coming of the Second World War. Through Cecelia's sensibility as insider and outsider, Fitzgerald registers changes in what Ellison
has called the American social hierarchy. In *The Last Tycoon*, Stahr, a Jew not far from the shtetl, makes a black man his moviemaker's conscience, falls in love with an Irish immigrant, and has his story told by another woman, a young Irish American who, by virtue of her father's Hollywood money and her intelligence and grace, moves among the well-to-do on both coasts.

In Fitzgerald's fascinating, fragmentary notes and sketches for the novel's ending—three teenagers' discovery of the fallen plane and the personal effects of Stahr and other passengers—and epilogue—Stahr's lavish Hollywood funeral full of hypocrisy and intrigue—the dream fights on in life-affirming, life-denying variations. Whatever Fitzgerald might have done, we glimpse in Stahr what might unfold if the pursuit of private and public happiness were to fuse in a common responsiveness. The one transforms and intensifies the other; the self trembles, now fully alive.

Stahr, whether in conversation or the act of love with Kathleen, or in his renewed sense of aesthetic possibility in response to a black man's rejection of the movies, comes to know that his vitality depends on mingling passion and tenderness toward Kathleen with the pragmatic imagination of his producer's craft. Without one, the other falters, as Fitzgerald shows in his draft of the last episode he wrote and his notes for the novel's succeeding chapters. In the last months of his life, Fitzgerald struggled toward the same equilibrium beyond Stahr's grasp, but not his imagination, in his settled relationship with Sheilah Graham and the steadfastness with which he pursued the limits of his craft. Despite his efforts to finish *The Last Tycoon*, Fitzgerald left a fragment that is, for all its promise, “a brilliantly incomplete work that has all the limitations of being a draft and thus never fully conceptualized and polished by revision, where Fitzgerald always did his best work.” Nevertheless, Fitzgerald's fragment is a palpable reminder, at once mocking and reassuring, about his novelist's dream and the American theme.

“So we beat on,” to echo and recast Gatsby's ending, not necessarily “borne back ceaselessly into the past” (*TGG* 137). For in *The Last Tycoon*, there is a fluidity and ambiguity about property and the “pursuit of happiness” missing from the social structures underlying *Gatsby* and *Tender Is the Night*. Even more than *Tender Is the Night*, in its protean state *The Last Tycoon* appears a work of ceaseless fluctuations. Unlike *Tender*, *Tycoon*'s unfolding and denouement were to be governed by a moral and aesthetic principle underscored in Fitzgerald's notes. ACTION IS CHARACTER, he wrote in large block letters, and they are the last words in Edmund Wilson's edition of the fragment. As Fitzgerald's notes and outlines reiterate, Monroe Stahr was to struggle until the end. He would not await his fate passively like Gatsby or, like Dick Diver, abdicate to a private corner of America. Fitzgerald imagines Stahr a player to the last, and only the ironic contemporary deus ex machina of a plane crash would interfere with his decision to call off a retaliatory murder he's arranged in sick desperation. Gatsby operates in the shadows of American violence and power; Diver becomes a sleepwalking Rip van Winkle in a time of transition, but Stahr lives in the glare never believing that “things are [entirely] hopeless.” Rather, he is “determined [to the end] to make them otherwise.” Such, at least, is the impression conveyed by Fitzgerald's posthumous, very much in-progress fragment of a novel.

In Stahr's case and Fitzgerald's, the choices are contingent and pragmatic rather than ideal. It is no longer the case, as Fitzgerald once believed, that “life was something you dominated if you were any good” (*CU* 69). This romantic categorical imperative is long gone from his life and burned off the pages of *The Last Tycoon*. By 1940, life was the pursuit of equilibrium, and the dream has become an ability to put previously opposed ideas into relationship, what D. H. Lawrence, in praise of the novel, called “the trembling instability of the balance.” Perhaps this is why Fitzgerald, and his evolving patriot parvenu, Monroe Stahr, come to the American dream still with a “willingness of the heart.” Its promise was not happiness at all, as Jefferson and Adams realized so long ago, but the pursuit of happiness. The American experiment looked toward an ideal of individuals straining for self-realization with every nerve and muscle, every thought and feeling, in order to create what Ellison identified as that “condition of being at home in the world which is called love and which we term democracy.” For Fitzgerald the pursuit of happiness and the American Dream were inseparable.
Digging deeply into his experience and the nation's, Fitzgerald made Monroe Stahr's story and character express the complexity of American life, its contradictions and possibilities alike. "The writing gave him hope," Frances Ring remembers from Fitzgerald's last months, "that something good was happening, that he was whole again."25

Perhaps the sense of his powers returning prompted Fitzgerald's note to himself near the end. "I am the last of the novelists for a long time now,"26 he wrote, and who can know what he meant? Could he have meant that he was the last of his generation to keep faith with the nineteenth-century view of the novel as a testing ground for the experiment of American culture and democracy? Could he have meant his remark as a challenge to succeeding writers to pick up where he left off in exploring the American theme? Whatever he meant, even unfinished, The Last Tycoon has had the effect of leading readers and writers back to Fitzgerald's work knowing, as he knew, that the story of America has an endless succession of takes, but no final script.

Notes

2. Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man, 433.
3. Ernest Hemingway, The Sun Also Rises, 148.
4. The Great Gatsby, 4. Henceforth The Great Gatsby will be cited in the text as TGG.
5. The Crack-Up, ed. Edmund Wilson, 69. Henceforth The Crack-Up will be cited in the text as CU.
6. Andrew Turnbull, ed., The Letters of F. Scott Fitzgerald, 96. Henceforth the Letters will be cited in the text as L.  
9. Ralph Ellison, Going to the Territory, 251.
12. Tender Is the Night, 22. Henceforth Tender Is the Night will be cited in the text as TITN.
16. The Last Tycoon, 139, 141. Henceforth The Last Tycoon will be cited in the text as LT. (Matthew J. Bruccoli, editor of The Love of The Last Tycoon [1993] is correct to say that Edmund Wilson assigned the title of The Last Tycoon. Nevertheless, Bruccoli's evidence for his title is less than convincing; thus my decision to use the 1941 Wilson edition.)
17. Letter from Frances Kroll Ring to the author.
18. F. Scott Fitzgerald's Notes as quoted by Matthew J. Bruccoli in The Last of the Novelists: F. Scott Fitzgerald and The Last Tycoon, 156.
20. Frances Kroll Ring, Against the Current: As I Remember F. Scott Fitzgerald, 52-55.
21. This is a recurring phrase and theme of Ellison's, found in Shadow & Act, Going to the Territory, and in some of his unpublished or uncollected pieces included in Collected Essays.
24. Ralph Ellison, Shadow & Act, 105-06.
Works Cited


The Great Gatsby is valued for the vividness with which it renders an historical era; perhaps more than by any other American novel written in the 1920s, we are convinced that we hear the voices of people speaking from that decade before the advent of talking motion pictures. As narrator, Nick is the medium by which those voices are heard and, as principal speaker in the text, he serves as a translator of the dreams and social ambitions of the people who surround him. But the dilemma for readers of the novel is how to interpret Nick's voice: is he genuinely critical of Gatsby's romantic imagination and the culture that informed it, or does his suave talk conceal an essentially conservative nature?

Major statements on the novel in the last twenty years identify important elements of cultural criticism in the text. Ross Posnock's Lukácsian reading, grounded in Marx's account of commodity fetishism, views Fitzgerald (and the story's narrator) as primarily a critic rather than an exponent of the American Dream; his assurance of the speaker's critical purpose is such that he can claim “the novel's account of man's relation to society … profoundly agrees with Marx's great discovery that it is social rather than individual consciousness that determine's man's existence” (p. 202). Even Judith Fetterley, in her denunciation of the text's misogyny, allows that “certainly there is in the Carraway/Fitzgerald mind an element that is genuinely and meaningfully critical of the Gatsby imagination and that exposes rather than imitates it” (p. 99).

Less certain of the text's radical intent is a ‘queer’ reading by Edward Wasiolek who locates one of the novel's meanings in the conservatism of what he alleges to be Nick's repressed homosexuality. According to Wasiolek, Nick does not act on his intense feelings for Gatsby, but remains a voyeur, and he draws attention to a masturbatory image and rhythm in the last lines of the text (“So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past”) to suggest a regressive infantilism at the novel's center. And in a deconstructionist study that negotiates the competing claims of psychoanalysis, feminism, and Marxism, Gregory S. Jay suggests in passing that Nick's identification with Gatsby belongs to that conservative order of social bonding wherein women are viewed as possessions in male power games. But Jay also argues for the radical nature of the text asserting that The Great Gatsby is “a work of cultural criticism that enacts … the intellectual analysis of how the social subject can never be conceived, even ab ovo, as the inhabitant of a world outside commodification, exchange, spectacle, and in speculation” (pp. 164-65). Then Jay asks, concerning the moment in the text when Daisy weeps over Gatsby's shirts, does Nick reproduce the scene for us to read critically, or does he endorse Daisy's emotion—her thrill and sense of loss at both the reach and the limits of Gatsby's imagination? In other words, he asks (as if uncertain about the large claims he has made of the text's design), where does Nick stand?
In this essay we shall approach the question of critical intent and execution through an examination of the novel's style. We shall use traditional accounts of English syntax to describe Fitzgerald's at sentence level, but we shall also use techniques from discourse analysis and linguistic pragmatics that will help us invesitage stylistic features that operate beyond the sentence, in the arena of language as socially situated, as utterance addressed and received both within the text and as an exchange between reader and writer. One of the major criticisms of stylistics, voiced strongly by Stanley E. Fish, is that observable formal patterns are in themselves without value, or else that stylistics assigns them value in a wholly arbitrary fashion, without regard to contexts of reception and reader expectation (p. 70). Respectful of such criticisms, we point out that our analysis is inspired by advances in critical linguistics that insist that style is motivated—by context, by differentials of position, by political interest. Instead of presenting observed features of Fitzgerald's style as isolated formalities, we locate them in larger contexts, and explain how these contexts motivate the book's wordings. First we situate our findings in a consideration of mode in the novel: in the naive (or folk) romance mode as it is historically manifested in the American Dream, and in its ironic version manifested in this narrator's account of flagrant partying that convenes the tokens of social class in America. Then, after examining certain ways of speaking that adhere to the narrator's midwestern origins, we will claim that language in *The Great Gatsby* provides us with evidence for the multiple, seemingly contradictory readings of the book. We will show that alongside the expose of American materialism—the irresponsible behaviors of the wealthy class, the corruption in business practice—there remains a conservatism, a resistance to change, and that both are evident in the book's language. In the manner of Nick's speaking, we find evidence that the critical inclination of *The Great Gatsby* is not just towards reform but towards restoration—restoration of a social order that has been confused and disturbed by reconfigurations of power and property, by the dishevelling forces of the age.

I

The novel's narrator, Nick Carraway, tells two stories: one about his fabulous neighbor, the other, less obviously, about himself. The story he tells of Jay Gatsby, in its barest outlines, follows the pattern of romance, that reading of the individual life as an identity quest. Joseph Campbell and Northrop Frye have both described the structure of romance narrative and the trajectory of the hero's progression: from obscure origins he or she journeys into the unknown where an enemy, a lover, and a mentor all play crucial roles in identifying who the hero is and where he or she fits into the world. More recently, Michel Foucault defines succinctly the essence of the romance mode when he writes that the modern man is not the man who attempts to discover his personal secrets and his hidden truths; rather “he is the man who tries to invent himself,” who is compelled “to face the task of producing himself” (p. 42). For such an individual, writes Foucault, the high value of the present is indissociable from an eagerness “to imagine it otherwise than it is” (p. 41). Foucault uses the term “modern man” rather than romance hero, but his concept of modernity is not tied to an historical epoch. Rather, he suggests that modernity be considered an attitude, a mode of relating to contemporary reality that can be found in other periods of history, consisting essentially of “the will to ‘heroize’ the present” (p. 40). Issues of identity, the nature of power and, in Foucault's terminology, an engagement with the Other—these all lie at the heart of the romance mode and bear on any reading of Gatsby's story.

Stretched over much of the narrative is the mystery of Gatsby's origins: rumored to be a nephew or a cousin of Kaiser Wilhelm, and claiming himself to be the scion of a wealthy, English-educated family, Gatsby, Nick learns eventually, is actually James Gatz, the son of “shiftless and unsuccessful farm people” from North Dakota (p. 104). Gatsby's rejection of these humble origins is signaled by a name change, an “immigrant” surname anglicized and a formal first name made familiar and fashionable sounding. This reinvention begins when Gatsby is seventeen, when he leaves home and family behind and moves into a world of “reveries,” where on moonlit nights “the most grotesque and fantastic conceits haunted him in his bed” (p. 105). Historically, this transformation takes place in the era when the robber barons were the model for power and success. For Gatsby, born on the margins, Daisy Fay is the embodiment of both success and the unknown; her privileged social status renders her a mysterious cynosure of sexual attraction, wealth, and social belonging.
and when he kisses her she becomes the incarnation of his dreams and “unutterable visions” (p. 117). Nick writes that in loving her Gatsby “committed himself to the following of a grail” (p. 156); that Daisy was “[h]igh in a white palace the king’s daughter, the golden girl” (p. 127). But Gatsby does not meet the test of wealth in Daisy's society (that specifically American measure of the romance quest), and he loses her to a rival suitor, Tom Buchanan. The spell Daisy casts with her voice—that “low, thrilling” siren's voice with its “singing compulsion” (p. 14) that “couldn't be overdreamed” (p. 101)—has been broken when Gatsby can say bluntly to Nick, “Her voice is full of money,” and Nick recognizes that indeed its “inexhaustible charm,” “the jingle of it, the cymbals' song of it” was simply that—the seductive power of riches (p. 127). Situated at the heart of Gatsby's story is the metanarrative central to American culture—the deeply conservative ideology of capitalism, the story of rags to riches, of power, love and fame achieved through personal wealth.

It is the narrator's role to discredit this myth. The story he tells of Gatsby bereft of this illusion is a story of violence, despair, and ghostliness—a fantastic dream, distorted and grotesque, like a “night scene by El Greco” (p. 185). Gatsby, he reveals, has no wise mentor to lead him on his journey; older men like Dan Cody and Meyer Wolfsheim have shown him the path of deceit and felony, and he follows it until one of the “ghosts … gliding toward him through the amorphous trees” (p. 169) takes his life. Gatsby does not emerge from his journey a hero reborn with the power to bestow boons on his fellows; Nick describes instead a wasteland, the valley of ashes, which grows while the obscure movements of the ash-grey men in the dumping grounds are watched over by the blinded eyes of Dr. Eckleburg. Nick tells of Gatsby's father entering the narrative not to reveal that his son was of distinguished parentage, but to offer another kind of testimony, a book and a schedule for improvement—the humble fragments of a national myth (the Ben Franklin, Horatio Alger formula) that has deluded his ambitious son.

On the level of plot then the sophisticated narrator seems to impugn the American dream, its illusions and excesses—he refers scornfully to Gatsby's “appalling sentimentality” (p. 118) and to the “foul dust” that “floated in the wake of his dreams” (p. 6). But syntactically, in some of the most beautifully wrought and memorable lines of the novel, Nick Carraway demonstrates not scorn but, rather, ready sympathy for Gatsby and for those ideological presuppositions that underlie his ambitions. Nick tells Gatsby's story in what Bakhtin would describe as a lyrical style, “poetic in the narrow sense,” without dialogue, the words sufficient unto themselves, “suspended from any mutual interaction with alien discourse.” This lyricism is accomplished grammatically in the continuation of sentences seemingly reluctant to end, sentences which go on after a syntactic core has delivered its message. Offering a profile of the narrative style Fitzgerald has given Nick, we suggest that, characteristically, the first part of the sentence, sometimes just an independent clause, does the work of the plot, moving the narrative forward in time and place and event, but a second part, often syntactically unnecessary, can go on to evoke feelings and indefinite excitements and to suggest matters that exist only in the realm of possibility and the imagination. These sentence endings are the site of poetic invention, which imagines the world “otherwise than it is,” cultivates heightened sensation, and registers the romantic conceits and aspirations of ambition.

In Nick's way of speaking, the core of the narrative sentence establishes focus on time, place, event; drawn-out endings evoke accumulations of romantic sensitivity. Consider Nick's account of Gatsby's entry into his dream world:

For a while these 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.

(p. 105)

This sentence begins, characteristically, with a time-adverbial, establishing duration and “reveries” as what is being talked about, then elaborates itself, through a second-start “they,” into apposition—syntactically...
unnecessary, surplus, but seemingly engendered by sensitivity to words like “imagination” and “reverie.” The tenuous subject of reverie and the imagination is then extended to even more tenuous matters in a “hint” and a “promise,” but in the lush and improbable ending of the sentence occurs the “fairy's wing” that connects directly to the embodiment of Gatsby's dreaming, Daisy Buchanan, whose maiden name is Fay, an archaic variant of fairy. Nick hereby conveys an aura of magical destiny to Gatsby's adventure, as does the ending of another trailing sentence where Daisy is described as “gleaming like silver, safe and proud above the hot struggles of the poor” (p. 157). In this instance we glimpse something of the feudal heart of the American myth of riches.

The most evocative sentence endings are frequently constructed as elaborate appositives; they adumbrate the poetry of wealth and possessions. Nick describes in this way Gatsby's romantic excitement as a young army officer when he first views Daisy's house:

> There was a ripe mystery about it, a hint of bedrooms more beautiful and cool than other bedrooms, of gay and radiant activities taking place through its corridors, and of romances that were not musty and laid away already in lavender, but fresh and breathing and redolent of this year's shining motor-cars and of dances whose flowers were scarcely withered.

(p. 155, emphasis added)

Everything contained in the appositive is suggestive, an elaboration of the mystery that surrounds Daisy, heightened especially by the ephemeral and transient nature of time present. Nick's own sensitivity to the passage of time is revealed in another sentence ending that evokes both the wonder and pathos of the romantic imagination:

> At the enchanted metropolitan twilight I felt a haunting loneliness sometimes, and felt it in others—poor young clerks who loitered in front of the windows waiting until it was time for a solitary restaurant meal—young clerks in the dusk, wasting the most poignant moment of night and life.

(p. 62, emphasis added)

In these sentence endings is gathered the emotional excitement that accumulates around ambition, money, romantic love, the ripeness of the moment, and the longings and commotion they generate.

The sentence's residual momentum, or surplus, or even exorbitance, can carry across the sentence boundary, producing a variant on the appositional structure: the sentence fragment. Here Nick reflects on Gatsby's statement that Daisy's voice is “full of money” (a statement that might have just as easily thrown things into a more cynical mood):

> It was full of money—that was the inexhaustible charm that rose and fell in it, the jingle of it, the cymbals' song of it. … High in a white palace the king's daughter, the golden girl. …

(p. 127, ellipses in original)

The double appositional construction—“the jingle of it, the cymbals' song of it” in apposition to “the inexhaustible charm that rose and fell in it”—here is perhaps itself inexhaustible, endlessly responding to itself: ellipsis points signify the sentence's resistance to closure, suggesting that the sentence (like the dream) has no conclusion, once this particular syntactic resource and these wordings of romance are in play (all of which seem to enable Nick to beg the question raised by the first part of the sentence—the hard fact of Daisy's wealth, a sturdy economic actuality). The abundance of this appositional surplus spills over the receding
sentence boundary, its momentum sufficient to begin a new story, in a syntactic fragment, itself partly appositional, that floats free to gesture to romance in its purest form, the fairy tale of the hero striving and attaining, sights set on the transformative goal: “High in a white palace the king's daughter, the golden girl.” Such sentence-ending elaborations summon a virtual world of romance and possibility to attend the characters' actions and the plot's episodes, but they reveal at the same time that the myth of culture at work in the narrative is one that affirms a deeply conservative view of America—an ideology of class and property, of racial hierarchy, of women as possessions. In his reflection on Daisy's voice then, and in numerous sentences where a sharp-eyed view of events gives way to the romance of self-propagating invention, we see that Nick is both “repelled” and “enchanted” (p. 40) by Gatsby's America, that his style of speaking registers two views simultaneously.

II

That way of speaking directs us to the complexities of Fitzgerald's intention and style. In his ironic rendering of Gatsby as romance hero, Nick would appear highly critical of capitalist aspiration, but the language of this ironic narration reveals that he can be as conservative and elitist as the myths he would discredit. The tension between the naive and ironic aspects of the romance mode, between what Nick describes as Gatsby's “appalling sentimentality” (p. 118) and his own “incredulous laughter” (p. 170), would seem to describe the source of the novel's critical element. But a careful examination of the language of the text reveals that Nick's irony does not always undercut the American Dream upon which Gatsby's fantastic world is founded; rather it locates Nick with the privileged denizens of the moneyed class and in a position to detach himself and look from a distance on the “foul dust” that gathers in Gatsby's wake.

Nick's ironic stance is most prominent in his representation of others' speech, as he works through the linguistic resources available for such representation, and especially as he does so on those occasions when the domains of romantic possibility and suggestion have turned sour: when he has ventured too far into the actual world occupied by Gatsby and Daisy, when the voices of others rise and collide, when he portrays himself at the afternoon get-together in Myrtle's apartment, or in Meyer Wolfsheim's company, or lingering until the end of one of Gatsby's gaudy parties.

While the wordings of naive romance evoke the ambition of the individual, the hero reconnoitering the boundaries of aspiration and seeking position and recognition within their circumference, an ironic version of the same story deflects the romantic trajectory by making audible the dissonance of the social order. Nick has an ear for these dissonances, the words and accents of daily usage, and the sociohistorical stratifications they embody. He renders these words and accents through a range of means that syntax offers for the expression in a single sentence of many voices at once: through alterations between direct and indirect reported speech; between reported speech and the naming of the speech act; between reported speech and speech simply absorbed into the narrative utterance, detectable only through what Bakhtin calls “intonational quotation marks” (p. 14, and passim). In every instance the sentence offers ways of entertaining the ghosts of other sentences. In its ironic dimension, cultivating the discrepancy between what is said and what is intended, The Great Gatsby renders not the attainment of the individual, nor the collective unity of “the republic” (Gatsby, p. 189), but “all the contradictory multiplicity of an epoch” (Bakhtin, p. 156), language saturated with the conditions of the historical era—“even of the hour” (Bakhtin, p. 263)—and with the rankings and calibrations of the social order: the “multiplicity of social voices and [the] wide variety of their links and interrelationships” (p. 263). Bakhtin observes (especially pp. 68-69, 76, 296) that the novelist's way of incorporating speech artefacts into narrative marks their degrees of solidarity with or distance from the narrator's point of view. In moments when Nick comes into intimate contact with brute matters, he practices speech habits of distancing, and his feeling of superiority and attitude of reserve become apparent in the differentials between the formality of his own words and the words he reports or reproduces. In the following sentence, Nick finds a delicate, arm's-length way of saying that the people in Myrtle's apartment were rapidly getting drunk: “The bottle of whiskey—a second one—was now in constant demand by all present, excepting
Catherine, who ‘felt just good on nothing at all’” (p. 39). Some wordings here are Nick's: “a second one” indicates his measure of excess consumption; “in constant demand by all present” converts the loud, indulgent talk of the partiers to a formal register that names that aggregate speech act as demand. Then, in the same sentence, words appear that are not Nick's at all, and are isolated by quotation marks: Catherine “‘felt just as good on nothing at all.’” This construction tells us more than just that Catherine does not drink. As artefacts, her words come with “conditions attached” (Bakhtin, p. 75); they are words that have been attracted, as Bakhtin says, into the “orbits of certain social groups” (p. 290); words that are the alien language, their alien status being, as Bakhtin also says (pp. 278, 287), what produces art that is not “poetic” (or lyrical), but novelistic. Nick's way of handling Catherine's words, exposing them as artefacts of a lower social class, as not his way of speaking, executes his social distance from the figures he is closeted with, asserts his attitude of superiority.

As the paragraph continues, Nick reports on the partiers' plans for a meal “Tom rang for the janitor and sent him for some celebrated sandwiches that were a complete supper in themselves” (pp. 39-40)—and similarly manipulates the distance between himself and the cohort of drinkers. He tells us that the sandwiches are “celebrated”; the term at once represents a flow of talk about the sandwiches and concentrates it into a speech act the name of which comes, ironically, from a register more formal than that from which the talk itself issued. (The ironic discrepancy in speech registers could be seen as projected into the setting itself, for Tom's mistress's cramped apartment contains furniture “tapestried” with “scenes of ladies swinging in the gardens of Versailles” [p. 33].) But the relative clause that concludes the sentence appropriates the original register by identifying the sandwiches as a “complete supper in themselves,” and giving a more commonplace account of the sandwiches and their advocates. In these two sentences, the narrative voice traverses the social order. Nick's formal wordings elevate him above what is a sordid scene—a drunken, adulterous, and eventually violent afternoon—while his appropriation of the language indigenous to the locale, to the eating, drinking and sexual behaviors of “certain social groups” in New York in the 1920s, imprints that alien experience in his own sentences.

Nick finds himself in such circumstances again at the end of one of Gatsby's parties. Then he calls the drunkenness a “reluctance to go home” (p. 56). Translating local arguments, he describes the evening as “rent assunder by dissension” (emphasis added), and the complaining of the women in raised voices as “sympathizing” with each other” (emphasis added), in each case containing disorderly speech in elevated names of speech acts. There follows a passage whereby Nick allows us to hear the women directly, just as he previously allowed us to hear words directly from Catherine's mouth:

“Whenever he sees I'm having a good time he wants to go home.”

“Never heard anything so selfish in my life.”

“We're always the first ones to leave.”

(p. 56)

Nick gives the gist of their conversation in a form of indirect reported speech as “the wives' agreement that such malevolence was beyond credibility” (p. 57). By abstracting the women's speech and introducing it in the context of Nick's abstract, educated and literaryspeech, the narrative schematizes the ironic discrepancy between the word and its setting. From the social information concentrated in the women's direct speech, we know that they are not the kind of people who would say: “I am reluctant to go home”; “I sympathize with you”; “this malevolence is beyond credibility.” Nick is the kind of person who talks this way, and, doing so, he reserves his advantage, imposing another speech stratum on the sociolect of others, but still leaving that sociolect to show through.
When the evening deteriorates into total confusion and disorder and Nick joins the crowd around the car wreck, he similarly distances himself with ironic wordings: “The sharp jut of a wall accounted for the detachment of the wheel which was now getting considerable attention from half a dozen curious chauffeurs” (p. 58). Now the ironic wordings achieve a conspicuous effect that perhaps has been immanent all along—an effect of high politeness. Buried in this formal statement is an account of drunk driving—somebody drove into a wall. But the formality politely suppresses agency, and very elaborately, at the cost of some linguistic effort expended to assign active-voice subject position to a non-agent (“jut of a wall”) and to nominalize the only trace of the event itself (detach > “detachment”), and thus eliminate the grammatical necessity of a doer of the action. The high politeness—distancing and ironic—of this account of drunk driving is later supported by Nick’s specialty, indirect speech reporting gist, the gist emanating from the speech of a social class distinct from the class of people excited by the accident. “At least half a dozen men, some of them little better off than he was, explained to [the driver] that wheel and car were no longer joined by any physical bond” (p. 60). We know that men who were “little better off” than the driver would not say “wheel and car [are] no longer joined by any physical bond.” This refined gist measures the long social distance that separates Nick from the scene in which he is involved.

Especially at moments like this, when the world of romance has left him stranded in ugly confusion, Nick works most rigorously on capturing and transforming the speech of others. In so doing he asserts his social distance and superiority not only from working class people like the contemptuous butler (p. 119) or the maid that spits (p. 94), but from the fashionable society of party-goers that collect around Gatsby. By their names they are identified as the *nouveau-riche* and he stands with Gatsby, apart from them, at a distance. But at these moments, the heteroglot voices of a turbulent, unceasingly transient, contradictory social order persist in his ears. Rumor and reputation resound; notoriety and slander amplify the publicity of the newsstands; medleys of popular lyrics play over and over, and even sandwiches are “celebrated.” Speech seethes with forces that Nick most acutely reports by naming a pathological speech act that echoes compulsively:

> There was the boom of a bass drum, and the voice of the orchestra leader rang out suddenly above the *echolalia* of the garden.

(p. 54, emphasis added)

The utterance of the age—echolalia, dense with the disturbed sound of the historical moment—this is what Nick flees from at the end of the novel, the El Greco nightmare of history, not the romantic dream of the king’s daughter, “gleaming like silver, safe and proud above the hot struggles of the poor” (p. 157). In turn we too are invited—again by the style—to make a judgment, to see Nick from a distance, recognizing the political limits of his elitist stance while valuing his capacity to see and hear, and to report on the world around him, with such acuity.

**III**

Thus far we have examined the elaborate sentence endings which poeticize Gatsby’s dream—the American myth of belonging through wealth—and we have considered Nick’s ironic voice, the conservative, restraining expressions that reveal his disapproving fastidiousness and sometimes superior attitude. But beyond the voices of his social habitat, and even his refined, ironic translations of them, Nick attends to another order of experience, one that is stable, profound, original, timeless. When Nick tells his story he has returned home to the Middle West where he “wants the world to be in uniform and at a sort of moral attention forever” (p. 6). In this light of return we shall consider yet another feature of style that complicates our estimate of Nick and his judgment of the world around him.

At the beginning of his story, Nick tells us of his unusually close relationship to his father and conveys a certain pride in the Carraway clan, said to be “descended from the Dukes of Buccleuch” (p. 7). He also turns
over in his mind a piece of advice from his father: “Whenever you feel like criticizing anyone … remember
that all the people in this world haven't had the advantages that you've had” (p. 5). Nick amplifies this counsel
in a snobbish generalization, claiming that “a sense of the fundamental decencies is parcelled out unequally at
birth” (p. 6). Mr. Carraway's homily, his word of caution, has made a strong impression on his son. And it
seems that it is the form as much as the content of the homily that impresses Nick, for, although his
amplification somewhat distorts his father's intention, his speech habits can often exactly preserve the voice of
the father. Despite his relative youth and his taste for partying, Nick makes a number of similar
generalizations about life:

There is no confusion like the confusion of a simple mind.

(p. 131)

No amount of fire or freshness can challenge what a man will store up in his ghostly heart.

(p. 101)

There [is] no difference between men, in intelligence or race, so profound as the difference
between the sick and the well.

(p. 131)

In linguistic terms such statements are maxims, that is, proverbial generalizations about human nature and
human experience drawn from long reflection on the order of things. Occasionally they occur in The Great
Gatsby as independent propositions, but more frequently they are imbedded in longer sentences, sometimes
compressed into referring expressions as when Nick says that he is going to become “that most limited of all
specialists, the 'well-rounded' man.” Insisting on the wisdom of this paradoxical observation, he continues to
generalize, adding: “This isn't just an epigram—life is much more successfully looked at from a single
window, after all” (pp. 8-9). Such statements and expressions are not only general in reference (“most,” “a
man,” “life”), they have no specific time reference, their truth being neither particular nor contingent. They
are somehow above, or beside, the narrative order of events and establish in the text the speaker's recourse to
an order of permanent values beyond the resounding echolalia and even its ironic representation.

Maxims also convey a speaker's claim to knowledge, his or her access to established authority and steady
truths, and recognizing this, Aristotle said that while maxims were an effective tool for orators, young
speakers should not use them. Aristotle's advice acknowledges an incompatibility between lack of
experience and wise sayings, yet Nick is very prone to thinking in maxims, despite his youth and his resolve
to stay all judgments. Their incongruence draws our attention to that very divided nature of the novel's
narrator who on the one hand is a heedless party-goer, imagining glamorous encounters with women in
darkened doorways, but on the other hand is an apprentice in the banking and bond business and a judicious
observer of human behavior. Nick describes this doubleness when he says of himself at the squalid party in
Myrtle Wilson's apartment: “I was within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the
inexhaustible variety of life” (p. 40). The voice of the maxim, grounded in paternal authority and wisdom, is a
regulating device for Nick—solemn, stable, even magisterial—negotiating the extravagance and moral
confusion of West Egg and New York, those “riotous excursions” to which he is so irresistibly drawn. For
example, when trying to understand Jordan Baker's behavior early in their relationship, Nick observes that
“most affectations conceal something eventually, even though they don't in the beginning” (p. 962). And
reflecting on the rumor that she has cheated in a major golf tournament, he makes the sexist claim that
“Dishonesty in a woman is a thing you never blame deeply” (p. 63). Nick most often speaks in this voice
when under pressure; he says “I am slow thinking and full of interior rules that act as brakes on my desires”
(pp. 63-64). The posture of the maxims, distributed in the text beyond particular sentences and situations,
signals for the reader something regressive in Nick's character, which in turn is at work in the shaping of his narrative.

An examination of style in *The Great Gatsby* reveals strata of social and political attitudes so complex that we are perhaps no longer surprised that on the one hand Nick satirizes Tom Buchanan and his class by having him quote admiringly from the racist writer, Lothrop Stoddard ("The Rise of the Coloured Empires" by this man Goddard" gives "scientific" evidence that "Civilization's going to pieces," says Tom [p. 17]), while on the other hand, in the novel's famous last scene, Nick tells us in romantic wordings of a Long Island that flowered once for Dutch sailor's eyes—"a fresh, green breast of the new world" (p. 189)—a pastoral and Nordic vision of America's origins that echoes directly Stoddard's ideal. Such contradictions or conflicting motivations are grounds for the interpretive perplexities that Nick's story arouses. While readers have long recognized that Nick is critical of the American scenes he describes, the focus and extent of his criticism continue to confound, as readers estimate Nick's position in the social configurations of the age: where has Fitzgerald located him? Where do Nick's interests lie?

Even as Nick's story defies the romance of wealth and status, and shows its sordid actuality, that core myth of American culture still excites a stylistic homage that sympathizes with Gatsby's aspirations. Nick can imagine the American romance; he recognizes its compelling song—a naive theme of folk consciousness, at once vulnerable and resistant to criticism. Nick's own career is not motivated by this theme—but he can hear its allure and entertain its enchantments.

Were this the sum of the novel's stylistic resources—exposé balanced by fascination—we might read Nick as a disinterested observer, sensitive to both the decadence of the age and its heady momentum, allowing each their weight. But another salient feature of his story-telling voice—his ironic representation of others' voices—begins to situate his interests, and thereby limit the scope of his critical vision. The dialogic ironies of speech locate Nick in a socially elevated position, this trick of rank or hierarchy deriving from his acute sense of social differentials—conditions that make it impossible for the naive (or folk) hero to ever really transform himself, for he will always bear the marks of his humble origins. This order of social observation secures an elite point of view, and indemnifies privileged interests.

Invoking an appreciation of social rank, these ironic gestures complicate the critical attitude of the narrative. But they might only hint at some confusion of critical intent—were it not for the voice of maxim and authority that pervades the narrative. While this voice could seem innocent or disinterested—it consults timeless principles to evaluate people's behavior—Fitzgerald shows, in his arrangements for Nick's story-telling, that this sober voice itself issues from an identifiable position in the social-order: Nick's well-placed family. Near the myth of rags-to-riches and the self-made man, endlessly replicating itself in the material imagination, there is another myth—equally conservative but more covert: the myth of a distinguished class aloof from the strivings of the marketplace, its own "rags" phase long forgotten and its riches converted to moral authority. As Fitzgerald represents it, Nick's position in the social order is not one from which visions of reform are likely to develop. In fact, social change is clearly problematic from this point of view—where change incurs consternation, and where there is more of an inclination towards restoration than towards reform.

These circumstances are embodied in Nick's voice; it is Nick's voice that reveals complications of interest that are perhaps inherent in certain traditions of American cultural criticism. In other words, style in *The Great Gatsby* is not a motionless, unitary condition, or object of afterthought, but is substance itself, incessantly shifting, forming, and engendering the novel's political and psychological complexity.

**Notes**

11. Foucault, p. 41.
12. These suggestions carried in sentence endings have inspired one critic to write: “The memories of legend and fairy tale that permeate the book lift *The Great Gatsby* out of time and place as if the novel were a story celebrated for ages in song, folklore, and literature, a story deeply rooted in the psyche of the western world.” See John Kuehl, “Scott Fitzgerald: Romantic and Realist,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 1 (1959): 413.
13. In some ironic versions of romance, what is audible in the language is the clash of warring philosophical assumptions that underpin the social order. Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* provides a striking example. At the center of that text is the story of Kurtz's self-invention in terms of Victorian philanthropy, his self-fashioning as “an emissary of pity, and science, and progress” dedicated to “weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways.” But Marlow's ironic account of Kurtz's quest brings into play the language of another point of view that interrogates the assumptions and purposes of imperialist cultures and exposes beacons of progress to be “whited sepulchres.”
that indicates forms of expression genealogically tied to formal written texts, to studied, “respectable” and prestigious utterance, in contrast to oral and often stigmatized vernaculars situated in everyday occasions. One conspicuous sign of literariness is Nick's characteristic use of words from a very sophisticated part of the lexicon: “meretricious,” “adventitious,” “peremptory,” “vinous,” “echolalia,” etc.

In English, suppressed agency is a common resource of politeness. For example, out of respect for and deference to a distinguished but clumsy dinner guest, one could report to a server that “some wine has been spilled.” Brown and Levinson's classic and comprehensive account of politeness (“Universals in Language Usage: Politeness Phenomena,” in Questions and Politeness: Strategies in Social Interaction [Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1978]) explains phenomena such as agentless expressions as part of larger sociolinguistic systems devoted to mitigating face-threatening acts. According to this kind of analysis, Nick's suppression of agency in a situation embarrassing to the unidentified driver is as an expression of respect a face-saving strategy. But, since Nick clearly does not estimate Gatsby's guests as deserving respect or deference, we must take another step, and recognize his politeness as ironic. Moreover, analyses of politeness such as Bourdieu's (1991) reveal politeness as the enactment not only of deference but also of domination, social superiority, and ranked distance between speaker and addressee. (So agentlessness can often serve a dominant speaker's execution of a directive speech act, as in “The door has been left open.”)

15. For a comprehensive description of the “historical moment” in which the novel was written, see Ronald Berman's The Great Gatsby and Modern Times (Urbana and Chicago: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1994).

16. Aristotle describes the use of maxims as “suited to speakers of mature years, and to arguments on matters in which one is experienced. In a young man, uttering maxims is—like telling stories—unbecoming; and to use them in a realm where one lacks experience is stupid and boorish.” See Aristotle, The Rhetoric, trans. Lane Cooper (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1960), p. 152.

Criticism: Jeffrey Hart (essay date summer 1997)


[In the following essay, Hart examines the rivalry between Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway, with specific reference to The Great Gatsby and The Sun Also Rises.]

My argument can be put briefly. Hemingway wrote The Sun Also Rises (1926) as a direct rejoinder to The Great Gatsby (1925): he created it as an aggressive defense of his own style against Fitzgerald's—and, derivatively, of his own view of reality. With The Sun Also Rises he declared almost open war against a rival whom he suddenly saw as formidable far beyond his expectations. Until Gatsby appeared, Hemingway had considered Fitzgerald merely a popular writer and, as a rival, a pushover.

The title The Sun Also Rises engages in a hostile way one of Fitzgerald's most prominent recurrent images in Gatsby, the romantic moon. Hemingway means to assert that the Sun, not the Moon, the earth, not the sky, constitute the essential truth of experience. This sun-moon argument includes the obvious idea that the sun stands at the center of the actual solar system while the moon merely reflects the sun—thus defining his relation to Fitzgerald. This is to say that the sun represents the major tradition in literature, the romantic moon merely reflects a subordinate one. In The Sun Also Rises Hemingway relentlessly pressed his war against Fitzgerald.

Fitzgerald and Hemingway both published major works in 1925. The Great Gatsby was released in April. Then In Our Time appeared in October. When Hemingway forged In Our Time, partly out of earlier material,
he had every reason to think it a strong enough book despite its provenance and form to move him past Fitzgerald in the literary standings. And Hemingway, as we know, thought in such terms.

Fitzgerald had emerged suddenly in 1920 with *This Side of Paradise*, and his early success was part of his legend. He then wrote short stories, some of them excellent, and then finished his second novel, *The Beautiful and Damned* (1922). The stories were reprinted in two collections, *Flappers and Philosophers* and *Tales of the Jazz Age*. Fitzgerald, who was earning large sums of money from magazine publication, had a wide audience.

Hemingway played tortoise to Fitzgerald's hare. After the war he worked as a journalist and experimented with a new way of writing, also frequenting avant-garde circles in Paris. He published, almost secretly, two privately printed pamphlets, *Three Stories and Ten Poems* (July 1923; 300 copies) and then *in our time* (January 1924; 170 copies).

This minimal publication did attract enough attention in avant-garde circles for Edmund Wilson to review the two pamphlets in the influential *Dial* magazine of October 1924, and he did so with special attention to Hemingway's style, which he called “a limpid shaft into deep waters,” a strikingly apt description of what Hemingway was trying to achieve. Two of the three stories in the first pamphlet and the brief vignettes that constituted the second pamphlet came forward into *In Our Time* in 1925.

Working slowly and with great discipline at his craft, Hemingway would have been justified in thinking that the 1925 edition of *In Our Time* was far superior to anything Fitzgerald thus far had written. *In Our Time* is a powerful work, not quite a novel but much more than a collection of stories; and it has multiple interconnections with Eliot's *Waste Land* (1922). To use Hemingway's lingo, this book should have knocked Fitzgerald out of the ring. Meanwhile Fitzgerald was generously promoting Hemingway as a writer and reviewed *In Our Time* with astute praise in the *Bookman* for May 1926.

In October 1925, when *In Our Time* appeared, Hemingway was no longer competing with the early works of Fitzgerald. He was competing with *The Great Gatsby*, another matter altogether. As Hemingway—like everyone else—surely noticed, *Gatsby* was an enormous advance over everything else Fitzgerald had written. Eliot, who is present in *Gatsby* in many ways, wrote that it “seems to me to be the first step that American fiction has taken since Henry James.”

During that famous summer of 1925 Hemingway made his trip to Pamplona and then wrote *The Sun Also Rises* with what was, compared to his usual practice, great speed. He wrote it with Fitzgerald and *The Great Gatsby* much on his mind. His rapid composition may indicate anger and denied ambition; it surely indicates his mastery of his own style and ability to manage a longer form. Under Fitzgerald's sponsorship, Hemingway had broken with Boni and Liveright and moved to Charles Scribner's Sons and Maxwell Perkins. *The Sun Also Rises* appeared in October 1926.

In many obvious ways this novel is full of rage directed at Fitzgerald, who had shown nothing but goodwill and generosity toward Hemingway.

In *The Sun Also Rises* Robert Cohn, like Fitzgerald, has gone to Princeton—then a citadel of the WASP aristocracy. Cohn is a Jew, Fitzgerald a Catholic, and thus comparable outsiders at Princeton. Cohn's Jewishness can be read as a denigrating comment on Fitzgerald's Catholicness. Cohn tries unsuccessfully to be a gentleman, another comment directed at Fitzgerald. Fitzgerald, who was a hero-worshipper and who idolized Princeton athletes, was himself a failed football player. Cohn has had his Jewish nose flattened in the ring and thus “improved.”
Cohn (read Fitzgerald) is a romantic and a bad novelist. His failure as a writer is owing to his romanticism and bad taste. He admires bad novels (The Purple Land) while Jake Barnes (Hemingway) knows that Turgenev has the right stuff.

Throughout the novel Cohn displays atrocious manners. Like Fitzgerald he is a sloppy drunk. He talks too much, is bad with women, and women despise him. He is “unrealistic” about women. That this was Hemingway's opinion of Fitzgerald is abundantly demonstrated in A Moveable Feast, as in the notorious chapter “A Matter of Measurements.”

Hemingway had been befriended and promoted by Sherwood Anderson. In The Torrents of Spring (1925) he had launched a devastating attack on Anderson. The Sun Also Rises represents another such attack, this time against Fitzgerald, a much more formidable opponent.

Hemingway's attack is not only personal but also stylistic and moral. He would have framed it as moral realism versus romantic illusion.

Fitzgerald's central achievement as a writer is to use all the resources of language to capture the magnificence of the moment. In This Side of Paradise, he writes on the first page: “Beatrice Blaine! There was a woman!” But having said that, the very young writer must come through to show that this is so. Throughout this flawed early novel, the young writer sets himself such celebratory dares and must rise to the proof, often moving into prose poetry. Fitzgerald's prose wants to move toward and even into celebratory song.

Hemingway's prose, as the emotions it deals with grow more and more intense, moves toward total silence. At the end of The Sun Also Rises words fail:

“No, Jake,” Brett said, “we could have had such a damned good time together.”

“Yes,” I said. “Isn't it pretty to think so.”

Prose arias about Princeton, Dutch sailors, and the Riviera could not possibly live in that stylistic environment.

Gatsby provides a bravura demonstration of Fitzgerald's style and moral vision. It begins with a soggy bromide from Nick's father: “Whenever you feel like criticizing any one, just remember that all the people in this world haven't had the advantages that you've had.” Nick apparently thinks so highly of this verbal legacy that he treasures it. Indeed he is rather bromidic himself as we follow him through the wild events of the story. But his gift for cliché is challenged by what happens around him, and his capacity for eloquence finally issues forth in his last great song about the Dutch sailors, the virgin American continent, and history.

No doubt what provokes this eloquence in Nick is his total experience during that strange, even visionary summer of 1922; but its most immediate source is Jay Gatsby himself. He speaks seldom, but when he does his lines are startling: “Her voice was full of money”; “Can't repeat the past? Why of course you can”; he declares also that Daisy's love for Tom Buchanan was merely “personal.” At such moments Gatsby presses weirdly, magically, against ordinary expectations, even as does his half-crazy project of returning to 1917.

That Gatsby is a prince of language and can pass this power on to his demi-disciple Nick is a comment on Fitzgerald's own style. This aspect is hardly ever discussed by critics, but it is the essence of the Fitzgerald performance. He too is able to go off the charts, in scene as well as in phrase, perform in an almost crazy way, writing something zany that is also perfect, as he does, for example, in the scene in which the wheel comes off the car and the drunk can only suggest, “Put her in reverse,” and “No harm in trying”; or the scene in Nick's cottage before the appearance of Daisy, when Gatsby's head tilts back the clock on the mantle and almost
causes it to fall; or the old timetable on which Nick wrote the now-graying names of Gatsby's remarkable guests “that summer.” Such brilliant zaniness often occurs in Fitzgerald in the smaller scale of a sentence:

The snow of twenty-nine wasn't real snow. If you didn't want it to be snow, you just paid some money.

“That's nothing at all. My father has a diamond bigger than the Ritz-Carlton Hotel.”

“Eatin' green peach. 'Spect to die any minute.”

There was something ineffably gorgeous somewhere that had nothing to do with God.

And dozens more. Often a single such touch redeems an otherwise mediocre magazine story. They are so striking that they gave rise to the suspicion that Fitzgerald thought of them when he was half in the bag. That his style can press up to the edges of sanity and maybe beyond Fitzgerald acknowledges in his great story “Absolution” when he gives us in Father Schwartz a visionary stylist who has slipped over the line: “Well, go and see an amusement park. … It's a thing like a fair, only more glittering. Go to one at night and stand a little way off from it in a dark place—under dark trees. … It will all just hang out there in the night like a colored balloon—like a big yellow lantern on a pole.”

Nick Carraway moves from the banalities of his father into the magical world of Gatsby and his language. This central characteristic of Fitzgerald's style is Keatsian and, behind that, Shakespearian. Throughout Hamlet the prince says all those remarkable things while his friend Horatio remains a steady but pedestrian Senecan stoic out of Wittenberg University. But, with the death of the prince, Shakespeare gives Horatio some of the best lines in the play, far beyond anything he could articulate earlier. It is a conversion: “Goodnight, sweet prince, / May flights of angels sing thee to thy rest.” So much for the Senecan stoic.

Keats, it is hardly necessary to argue, was a poet of great importance to Fitzgerald, and in The Great Gatsby the nightingale's song is heard only in a Keatsian moonlight.

Reading Gatsby in the spring of 1925, Hemingway could not have missed the large thematic role played by the moon, sailing into that novel from folklore, romantic tradition, and most immediately from Keats's Endymion. Gatsby himself, it has often been pointed out, seems weakened in the daylight scenes but lives much more powerfully after dark; and throughout the action he is associated with moonlight at especially important moments.

In Endymion the hero falls in love with Cynthia the moon goddess, and this poem has not only thematic resemblances to Gatsby but narrative parallels as well. The moon illumines the poem as much as it does Fitzgerald's novel.

And lo! from opening clouds, I saw emerge
The loveliest moon, that ever silver'd o'er
A shell for Neptune's goblet; she did soar
So passionately bright, my dazzled soul
Commingling with her argent spheres did roll
Through clear and cloudy, even when she went
At last into a dark and vapoury tent—

When Endymion at last meets the moon goddess, she somehow brings the spirit of the moon with her to the bottom of a well as if to protect it from the violations of daylight:

When, behold!
A wonder fair as any I have told—
The same bright face I tasted in my sleep,
Smiling in the clear well. My heart did leap
Through the cool depth.

The moon is as important in Gatsby as it is in Endymion, which Fitzgerald probably could recite from memory. The Gatsbian moon first appears in that remarkable sentence when Nick first glimpses Jay Gatsby: “The wind had blown off, leaving a loud bright night. … The silhouette of a moving cat wavered across the moonlight, and turning my head to watch it, I saw that I was not alone—fifty feet away a figure had emerged from the shadow of my neighbor's mansion, and was standing with his hands in his pockets regarding the silver pepper of the stars.”

Gatsby, as the first chapter ends, has “stretched out his arms” toward the green light at the end of Daisy's dock. At the end of This Side of Paradise, the last time we see Amory Blaine, he is under the stars, stretching out his arms toward them and toward Princeton. The similarity of the postures is striking; and in his essay “Princeton” (1927) Fitzgerald wrote about his university in lyrical and ideal terms that could easily express the emotions of Gatsby in the scene just described.

One of Gatsby's parties ends with that amazing scene in which a wheel is broken off a car driven by the drunken driver. This is a parodic version of Gatsby himself. At the same time Gatsby is bidding farewell to his multitude of guests: “A wafer of a moon was shining over Gatsby's house, making the night fine as before, and surviving the laughter and the sound of his still glowing garden. A sudden emptiness seemed to flow now from the windows and the great doors, endowing with complete isolation the figure of the host, who stood on the porch, his hand up in a formal gesture of farewell.”

In the flashback to Gatsby's boyhood in chapter 6, we learn that Jay Gatsby was born out of James Gatz under the light of the moon: “A universe of ineffable gaudiness spun itself out in his brain while the clock ticked on the wash-stand and the moon soaked with wet light his tangled clothes upon the floor. Each night he added to the pattern of his fancies.” That clock ticking on the washstand recalls the clock alluded to earlier.

The moon appears again in chapter 6, but this time as a “pale, thin ray of moonlight” over one of Gatsby's parties, as Nick and Daisy stand watching a movie director slowly kiss the cheek of his star actress. The scene is a pale version of genuine romance.

Five years earlier, in 1917, when Lt. Gatsby was in love with Daisy in Louisville, “they had been walking down a street when the leaves were falling, and they came to a place where there were no trees and the sidewalk was white with moonlight. They stopped here and turned toward each other.” There we have the “moment,” with the moon turning the sidewalk white. The leaves are falling, but the lovers are oblivious of time.

The Gatsbian moon is much more than the conventional moon of romance, and its full significance becomes clear only after Gatsby himself is dead in his swimming pool and is wreathed by the fallen leaves of autumn. Nick returns, perhaps for the last time, to the North Shore of Long Island and thinks about Gatsby. Absolutely everything in this coda is important. Nick notices “on the white steps, an obscene word scrawled by some boy with a piece of brick.” Nick erases the word. (J. D. Salinger after World War II could print that but had Holden Caulfield erase it.) Then Nick wanderers down to the shore and reflects: “Most of the big shore places were closed now and there were hardly any lights except the shadowy, moving glow of a ferryboat across the Sound. And as the moon rose higher the inessential houses began to melt away until I gradually became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes.” Given the extensive preparation for this, the phrase as the moon rose higher is inevitable. The phrase flowered once reaches back to Daisy, Myrtle, the Carraways, and much else. But, though Jay Gatsby is dead, his moon still rises; and now Nick, no longer the
That he is the “son” now of Gatsby is indicated by his inclusive “we” when he says that “tomorrow we ... will stretch out our arms farther.” When he had first glimpsed him, Gatsby was stretching out his own arms toward Daisy's green light, and at that point Gatsby was the son of Amory Blaine, who had stretched out his arms toward Princeton. For all the irony with which he surrounds the words “we ... will stretch out our arms farther” at the end of *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald will not give it up. It is of the essence, and it informs his style, which itself is always stretching beyond, with Fitzgerald's taking risks Hemingway could not imagine.

What we are to understand, as that moon rises over Long Island at the end of *Gatsby*, is that this end is not the end. The moon of imagination that transformed James Gatz into Jay Gatsby will continue to rise everlastingly, the imagination transforming things for better or worse according to its own quality. This is Fitzgerald's “answer” to Eliot's *Waste Land*, which he had written into this book as the Valley of Ashes and which he calls the “waste land.” As against Eliot, Fitzgerald says that this moon, rising in the night sky, is a permanent force, not a force for romantic illusion. Though Gatsby mistakenly worshipped his Daisy, Fitzgerald wrote in *Gatsby* that the moon is the power of the transforming imagination.

Fitzgerald probably would not have been surprised by the prophetic grasp of *The Great Gatsby* as the transforming imagination did indeed transform the Valley of Ashes, known as Flushing Meadow. Jay Gatsby was a product of money and imagination. The New York World's Fair of 1939 and 1940 arose out of the Valley of Ashes, a landfill, as a triumph of money and imagination, its Trylon and Perisphere, designed by Wallace Harrison and André Fouilhoux, a culmination of the modernist movement in architecture and an emblem of transcendent optimism. Today, with the great fair gone, the Valley of Ashes has been once again transmogrified into the National Tennis Center, named after Louis Armstrong, a jazz musician who had no interest in tennis. Fitzgerald would have understood these startling changes completely.

Hemingway first met Fitzgerald at the Dingo Bar in the rue Delambre, Paris, in late April or early July 1925. The meeting occurred after the publication of *Gatsby* but before the publication of *In Our Time*. It seems probable that Hemingway had read *Gatsby* by the time of the meeting. However that may be, Hemingway's account of the meeting in *A Moveable Feast* is venomous at Fitzgerald's expense.

During the next summer Hemingway made his trip to Pamplona, gathering the material that would go into *The Sun Also Rises*. He completed the novel rapidly, and delivered the typescript to Maxwell Perkins at Scribner's in February 1926.

Then an episode occurred that must have been excruciating for Hemingway. By the spring of 1926 *The Sun Also Rises* was going into galley proof at Scribner's. Hemingway and his wife, Hadley, visited the Fitzgerals at Juan-les-pins on the Riviera. The Fitzgerals did not like their place, the Villa Paquita, and turned it over to the Hemingways. Fitzgerald read a carbon copy of the typescript of *The Sun Also Rises*, and he wrote Hemingway a long and surgically professional memorandum on the faults of the novel, which by then was in galleys in New York. Hemingway must have been appalled, but he swallowed his pride and made the changes Fitzgerald recommended, including the major cut of about the first twenty pages of the typescript, which dealt at length with Cohn. In New York the galleys had to be reworked to incorporate the changes. “I can't imagine,” Fitzgerald wrote, “how you could have done these first 20 pps. so casually. You can't play with peoples attention.”

Both the title of the novel and the epigraph from which it comes are puzzling in relation to the novel. The quotation from Ecclesiastes is about the everlastingness of the earth, which, Hemingway said, is the subject of the novel. But this is only partly true, if at all true. The novel is about ragged and painful human relationships; about transitoriness, love, and suffering; and about the courage of endurance and silence in the face of
overwhelming emotion. The original title of the novel was *Fiesta*, which, with suitably ironic overtones, does seem more appropriate than the eventual title. Why Hemingway changed the title we cannot know. The one we have, however, may glance obliquely at *The Great Gatsby*, as if to say that, well, if the moon of imagination rises there, the sun of realism will rise here. The title can be seen as an assertion of moral realism (Hemingway) as against the supposed illusions of romance (Fitzgerald). We may think that as the moon rose over Gatsby's Long Island the sun will now rise triumphantly over Hemingway's Spain and in the mind of Jake.

Was there a winner in this contest that Hemingway imagined? The moon of transforming imagination did rise over Fitzgerald's Valley of Ashes, and constituted Fitzgerald's oblique answer to Eliot's *Waste Land*; but Hemingway has his own answer to Eliot. Jake Barnes is a wounded Fisher King, but there is no Grail in his blighted kingdom. With his Old Testament name, Jacob, and his residual dried-up Catholicism, and his sexual wound, Jake cannot unite himself with the pagan Brett. The old Christian-pagan Western synthesis has been shattered, and though Jake tries to pray, he cannot heal the wound in his own heart and in the heart of Western civilization. Still he does fish in that cool stream near the monastery of Roncesvalles (he cannot reach the Chapel Perilous); he does sustain the stoic code of the soldier, and he knows the power of silence. Unlike Cohn, Jake is a gentleman. He is a wounded and emotionally shattered veteran, but also a reconstructed Western man.

Furthermore Hemingway asserted his Lady Brett against Fitzgerald's Golden Girls, and she more than held her own. Such figures as Lauren Bacall, Humphrey Bogart, Edwin R. Murrow, and many other post-1920s figures would be unthinkable without Hemingway, as would the hard-bitten journalism of World War II.

After 1926 Hemingway long remained a master of the short story and wrote one more novel at the peak of his powers, *A Farewell to Arms* (1929). As a world figure Hemingway rose like the sun during the 1930s, becoming a modern Byron and a media star. Despite the gorgeous ruin of *Tender Is the Night* and whatever we make of the fragments of his Hollywood novel, *The Last Tycoon*, Fitzgerald never achieved again the near-perfection of *Gatsby*.

Hemingway seemed to forget about the power of silence, compression, and deep suggestion, becoming more and more prolix until—despite a few brilliant recoveries—he managed to achieve the verbal elephantiasis of the manuscript of *The Garden of Eden*. During the 1930s he continued his war against Fitzgerald, insulting him in “The Snows of Kilimanjaro,” often wise-cracking about him as a writer who had passed from adolescence to senility without ever becoming an adult, and taking some nasty shots at him from the grave in *A Moveable Feast*.

And yet, in 1926, who won? In *The Great Gatsby* Fitzgerald had written an even stronger novel than *The Sun Also Rises*. He even had improved *The Sun Also Rises* with his last-minute and immensely important corrections. When Hemingway first read *The Great Gatsby* early in 1925, he may well have sensed that what Fitzgerald was doing was beyond him and been furious. Then he published *The Sun Also Rises* and proved Fitzgerald's achievement was beyond him.

**Criticism: Bert Bender (essay date December 1998)**


*[In the following essay, Bender discusses the influence of theories of evolutionary biology—including eugenics, ideas of accident and heredity, and Darwin's notions of sexual selection—on Gatsby and other Fitzgerald works.]*
They talked until three, from biology to organized religion, and when Amory crept shivering into bed it was with his mind aglow …

(Fitzgerald, *This Side of Paradise*)

Readers familiar with F. Scott Fitzgerald's early work might recall that in those years just before the Scopes trial he wrote of Victorians who “shuddered when they found what Mr. Darwin was about”; or that he joined in the fashionable comic attacks on people who could not accept their “most animal existence,” describing one such character as “a hairless ape with two dozen tricks.”1 But few would guess the extent to which his interest in evolutionary biology shaped his work. He was particularly concerned with three interrelated biological problems: (1) the question of eugenics as a possible solution to civilization's many ills, (2) the linked principles of accident and heredity (as he understood these through the lens of Ernst Haeckel's biogenetic law), and (3) the revolutionary theory of sexual selection that Darwin had presented in *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871). As I hope to show in the following pages, his concern with these issues underlies such well-known features in the Fitzgerald landscape as his insecurity in the “social hierarchy” (his sense of its “terrifying fluidity”), his emphasis on the element of time, his interest in “the musk of money,” his interest in Spengler and the naturalists, and his negative portraiture of male violence.2 The principles of eugenics, accidental heredity, and sexual selection flow together as the prevailing undercurrent in most of Fitzgerald's work before and after *The Great Gatsby*, producing more anxiety than love from the tangled courtships of characters he deemed both beautiful and damned.

“LOVE OR EUGENICS”

By his second year at Princeton (in 1914), before he began to read the naturalists, Fitzgerald had taken in enough of the evolutionary view of life to see its relevance to the most fascinating subject for any youth of eighteen—sex. In “Love or Eugenics” he playfully wondered whether young men are most attracted by women of vigorous stock, with “plenty of muscle, / And Avoirdupois to spare,” or by modern flappers who know the value of “good cosmetics.”3 But Fitzgerald grew a good deal more serious about the biology of sex before he left Princeton in 1917. In the scene from *This Side of Paradise* in which Amory and his friend Burne Holiday talked about biology until Amory's mind was “aglow,” the two came naturally to the question that gave eugenics its pressing relevance, the idea that “The light-haired man is a higher type,” as Burne puts it (128). When Burne (patterned on Fitzgerald's friend Henry Slater) “voluntarily attended graduate lectures in philosophy and biology” (131), he might have heard Princeton's famous Professor of Biology, Edwin G. Conklin, lecture on phylogeny (with attention to Darwin and sexual selection) and ontogeny (with emphasis on Conklin's particular interest in eugenics). Conklin published a detailed outline for the course in General Biology (*Laboratory Directions in General Biology*), and ended the section on ontogeny with this note: “All members of the class are invited, but not required, to fill out a Family Record blank, giving details of their own heredity for the use of the Committee on Eugenics.”4

Even if Fitzgerald or Burne/Slater never read this invitation, it is clear from *This Side of Paradise* that the subject was quite palpably in the air at Princeton, no doubt heightening what Fitzgerald's biographers have described as his insecurity in the social hierarchy. Indeed, Fitzgerald was so attuned to the subject of eugenics and heredity that he included a further brief, playful scene in his next novel: a young man accused of being an “intellectual faker” responds with the challenge, “What's the fundamental principle of biology?” When his accuser guesses, “natural selection?” the young man corrects him: “Ontogony recapitulates phyllogony” (*sic, Beautiful and Damned* 153-54).

The profound social consequences of this “fundamental principle” are reflected in much of Fitzgerald's work. Articulated by Ernst Haeckel, the idea was that a species' evolutionary development (phylogeny) is recapitulated in the individual's embryological development (ontogeny), revealing in the human embryo's gill slits, for example, our ancestral relationship with fish. But, as Stephen Jay Gould notes, “Recapitulation
served as a general theory of biological determinism” with a terrible appeal to many Americans who felt the pressure of immigration from Ireland and especially southern Europe. The American paleontologist E. D. Cope “preached [it as the] doctrine of Nordic supremacy”; the “inferior” groups (including “races, sexes, and classes”) were arrested in development at the level of the white male's child. Just as the white embryo's development recapitulated the human descent from lower forms, so did the white child's development recapitulate the development of the lower or “childlike” races (who were supposedly arrested at that stage) until, triumphantly, the white males, at least, would go on to exhibit their superiority as a race.⁵

One begins to see how the study of heredity might have appealed to Princetonians of those years, some of whom, like Fitzgerald, were so disturbed at seeing “the negroid streak creep[ing] northward to defile the nordic race” that they were overly receptive to popular and less scientific writers like Lothrop Stoddard.⁶ Stoddard (cited as Goddard by Tom Buchanan in Gatsby) welcomed the time when “biological knowledge will have so increased” that eugenicist programs might “yield the most wonderful results”; in the meantime, he advised, “migrations of lower human types like those which have worked such havoc in the United States must be rigorously curtailed. Such migrations upset standards, sterilize better stocks, increase low types, and compromise national futures.”⁷ As Fitzgerald wrote to Edmund Wilson from Europe in the summer of 1921, “Raise the bars of immigration and permit only Scandinavians, Teutons, Anglo Saxons + Celts to enter” (Letters 47).

**THE RIDDLE OF THE UNIVERSE: ACCIDENT, HEREDITY, AND SELECTION**

Since Fitzgerald referred to Haeckel's “biogenetic law” and, as a reviewer, complained of another writer's “undigested Haeckel,” it will be worth considering what he seems to have gathered from his own copy of Haeckel's *The Riddle of the Universe at the Close of the Nineteenth Century* (1900).⁸ Although Fitzgerald's critics have never discussed it, The Riddle of the Universe is much more reliable in suggesting the outlines of Fitzgerald's thought than is the text most frequently cited in this regard, Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West* (even though it did not appear in English until 1926). In a way, the books are similar in providing different but sweeping senses of destiny: Spengler's in his advocacy of “Goethe's form-fulfillment” as destiny (rather than Darwin's causality), and Haeckel's in his closing with Goethe's lines: “By eternal laws / Of iron ruled, / Must all fulfil / The cycle of / Their destiny.”⁹

But, in general, Haeckel's book does much more to bring together the two subjects about which Amory and Burne talked until their minds glowed in *This Side of Paradise*—“biology” and “organized religion.” *The Riddle of the Universe* deals with many of the key biological terms that figure in Fitzgerald's work before, in, and after *Gatsby*—like accident, egg, descended, specimen, instinct, struggle, adaptation, selection, extinction, and the name of Darwin, himself, whom Haeckel praises as “the Copernicus of the organic world.”¹⁰ But Haeckel's particular attraction for Fitzgerald lay in his solution to the “riddle” of man's “place … in nature” by explaining the related principles of accident, heredity, and selection (62).

Of these three, Haeckel emphasizes the role of heredity, advancing it in a larger context that dispenses with the “superstition” or “primitive” religion of revelation. Yet he explains “the embryology of the soul” and calls for a “new monistic religion,” “scientific” and “realistic,” that will be revealed in “the wonderful temple of nature” (chs. 8 and 19; p. 382). None of this pertaining to the soul or the “new monistic religion” resembles anything that I know of in Fitzgerald, but Fitzgerald certainly seems attuned to Haeckel's criticism of primitive Christianity (which he would have especially appreciated after reading Harold Frederic's examination of it in *The Damnation of Theron Ware*, one of his favorite books); and in *Gatsby*, especially, he emphasizes the role of accident in ways that suggest that he was quite familiar with Haeckel's (and, ultimately, Darwin's) discussion of it. Haeckel, going well beyond Darwin's point about chance or accidental variation, insists that “all individual forms of existence … are but special transitory forms—accidents or modes—of substance”: “nowhere … in the evolution of animals and plants do we find any trace of design, but merely the inevitable outcome of the struggle for existence, the blind controller, instead of the provident God, that effects
the changes of organic forms by a mutual action of the laws of heredity and adaptation” (216, 268-69).

In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald gives us, in place of a provident God, the gazing “eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg” that were set there by “some wild wag of an oculist” who “then sank down himself into eternal blindness.” These are the eyes that peer out over the bleak figure of George Wilson when he is told that his wife Myrtle was killed in an “accident,” and that provoke him to insist repeatedly, “God sees everything.” Fitzgerald's emphasis on “accident” becomes overwhelming in the closing pages of the novel, including Nick's remark that Gatsby “knew that he was in Daisy's house by a colossal accident,” and most resoundingly in his last image of the dead hero afloat in his pool: “A small gust of wind that scarcely corrugated the surface was enough to disturb [the water's] accidental course with its accidental burden” (156, 170).

As a story of modern love, *Gatsby* is squarely within the tradition of American fiction that began to appropriate Darwin's theory of sexual selection immediately after *The Descent of Man*, beginning with W. D. Howells's *A Chance Acquaintance* (1873). This is not to suggest that Fitzgerald had Howells particularly in mind, but he depicted Gatsby and Daisy in this way as they leave together after the confrontation between Gatsby and Tom Buchanan: “They were gone, without a word, snapped out, made accidental, isolated like ghosts even from our pity” (142). Rather than Howells, the American writers most on Fitzgerald's mind during these years were Frederic, Dreiser, Frank and Charles Norris, and Wharton—to name only a few who were quite self-consciously engaged in critiquing “love” from their various biological points of view. But, again, it would seem that the most immediate theoretical support for Fitzgerald's own critique of love was *The Riddle of the Universe*, where Haeckel refers to Darwin's theory of sexual selection. Here, writing of the “eros” or “powerful impulse that … leads to … nuptial union,” Haeckel emphasizes: “the essential point in this physiological process is not the ‘embrace,’ as was formerly supposed, or the amorousness connected therewith; it is simply the introduction of the spermatozoa into the vagina” (138-39).

Such remarks provide the kind of biological insight into modern love that caused many characters in American fiction at around the turn of the century to question “love” and motherhood as Edna Pontellier did in *The Awakening*. Witnessing “the scene of torture” as her friend gave birth, Edna thought of her own experience in “awakening to find a little new life to which she had given being, added to the great unnumbered multitude of souls that come and go”; and she feels “a flaming, outspoken revolt against the ways of Nature” (ch. 37). In *This Side of Paradise* similar insights provoke Amory's agonizing questions, “How'll I fit in? … What am I for? To propagate the race?” (215). And they lead his friend Eleanor to complain of the “rotten, rotten old world” where she remains “tied to the sinking ship of future matrimony.” Then, voicing Fitzgerald's sense that the struggle of sexual selection is far more disturbing than what the Freudian craze had suggested in its apparent invitation to promiscuity, she remarks: "I'm hipped on Freud and all that, but it's rotten that every bit of real love in the world is ninety-nine per cent passion and one little soupçon of jealousy.” Amory (already depressed about his purpose in life as a male) agrees that this “rather unpleasant overpowering force [is] part of the machinery under everything” (238).

Before going on to analyze what drives the “machinery” of “love” in *The Great Gatsby* (i.e., the process of sexual selection, as Fitzgerald construed it), there is a final important point—the essential point—to make about Fitzgerald's interest in *The Riddle of the Universe*. Everything is determined by the accident of heredity—“the soul-blending at the moment of conception [when] only the latent forces of the two parent souls are transmitted by the coalescence of the erotic cell-nuclei” (142). Intent on showing his theory's “far-reaching consequences” regarding “our great question” of man's place in nature, Haeckel notes that “the human ovum, like that of all other animals, is a single cell, and this tiny globular egg cell (about the 120th of an inch in diameter) has just the same characteristic appearance as that of all other viviparous organisms” (62). Thus Haeckel concludes not only that the “law of biogeny” demonstrates our heritage back through “the ape” and all the “higher vertebrates” to “our primitive fish-ancestors,” but that it “destroy[s] the myth of the immortality of the soul” (65, 138). For Fitzgerald, though, Haeckel's conclusion that “each personality owes its bodily and spiritual qualities to both parents” raises questions not only about man's place in the universe,
but in the social hierarchy; for it demonstrates—as “in the reigning dynasties and in old families of the nobility”—that all individuals are held “in the chain of generations” (138, 143).

For these reasons more than anything else, the imagery of eggs figures memorably in Fitzgerald's work, not only in the absolute barrier that exists between “East Egg” and “West Egg” in The Great Gatsby, but in such earlier works as the unsuccessful play he produced in 1923, The Vegetable. There, one of the characters, Doris, explains that she plans to marry a man named “Fish,” and Fitzgerald heavily underscores both “Fish” and “egg.” “Fish? F-i-s-h?” another character (Jerry) asks. When Doris explains that “these Fishes are very nice,” he warns that she might have to live “right over his father's place of business.” Doris is attracted not only by Mr. Fish’s “wonderful build,” but by his habit of calling her “adorable egg.” Confused again, the character Jerry asks, “What does he mean by that?” and Doris explains, “Oh ‘egg’ is just a name people use nowadays.” After Jerry asks again, “Egg?” Doris wonders, “Does your father still read the Bible?” This apparently trivial exchange has its place in the play's larger plot, which tracks the vegetable-hero's failed accidental ascent to the presidency of the United States and his ultimate career as a postman. As the hero finally explains about postmen, “They not only pick 'em out—they select 'em” (134).

Even though Fitzgerald's work with the egg idea couldn't save The Vegetable, he did not give up on it. Before he wrote the play he had commented to Edmund Wilson that he thought Sherwood Anderson's The Triumph of the Egg was “a wonderful title” (Letters 49), and he made something much more serious of it in Gatsby than his readers have sensed. Aside from the East and West Egg material, he includes two other odd but meaningful scenes. In the first, sitting in the New York apartment where Tom Buchanan meets with Myrtle Wilson, Nick notes that “the only picture was an over-enlarged photograph, apparently a hen sitting on a blurred rock. Looked at from a distance however the hen resolved itself into a bonnet and the countenance of a stout old lady beamed down into the room” (33). Moments later Nick realized that it was a “dim enlargement” of Myrtle's mother that “hovered like an ectoplasm on the wall” (34). “Ectoplasm” is a succinct comment on Myrtle Wilson's place in the social and evolutionary hierarchies, its two meanings (according to the Random House Dictionary) being (1) “the outer portion of the cytoplasm of a cell,” and (2) “the supposed emanation from the body of a medium.” According to Haeckel, “the skin layer, or ectoderm, is the primitive psychic organ in the metazoa … the tissue-soul in its simplest form” (160).

The other “egg” scene in The Great Gatsby serves to gloss the well-known passage in which Tom Buchanan exclaims “violently” that “’The Rise of the Coloured Empires’ by this man Goddard” shows how “Civilization's going to pieces” (17). Fitzgerald seems to discredit Tom's belief that “it's all scientific stuff; it's been proved” (17); but, through Nick's observation as he and Gatsby enter the city, Fitzgerald suggests his own anxiety about the Rising Tide of Color. Crossing over the Queensboro Bridge, Nick sees “a dead man” pass “in a hearse” accompanied by friends with “the tragic eyes and short upper lips of south-eastern Europe”; then “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” (my emphasis; 73). Nick's own anxiety is clear here when he stops laughing and thinks to himself, “Anything can happen now that we've slid over this bridge”; “Even Gatsby could happen, without any particular wonder,” he concludes. But this is before Nick meets Gatsby's father, Mr. Gatz, or learns that Gatsby's “parents were shiftless and unsuccessful farm people [and that] his imagination had never really accepted them as his parents at all” (104).

Gatsby's effort to create himself—to spring “from his Platonic conception of himself”—can only fail in the biological universe that Haeckel described (104). And, if Gatsby is a true “son of God” who “must be about His Father's Business, the service of a vast, vulgar and meretricious beauty,” it is in the sense that he is destined to pursue Daisy's beauty according to the laws of sexual selection. This force of beauty drives many of Fitzgerald's young men, as Dexter Green is “unconsciously dictated to by his winter dreams” of Judy Jones (“Winter Dreams,” Stories 150). Even at age eleven, Judy was “beautifully ugly as little girls are apt to be” who “are destined … [to] bring no end of misery to a great number of men”; “she was arrestingly
beautiful ... [and the] color and the mobility of her mouth gave a continual impression of flux, of intense life, of passionate vitality” (147, 152). “The thing ... deep in” Dexter that compelled his response to Judy persisted until he was much older and realized that “long ago, there was something in me, but now that thing is gone. Now that thing is gone, that thing is gone” (161, 168).

By 1922 Fitzgerald had freed himself somewhat from his earlier hero's conclusion in This Side of Paradise that “the problem of evil” was “the problem of sex” and that “inseparably linked with evil was beauty” (280). In The Beautiful and Damned beauty is simply part of the “machinery under everything”—an engine of sexual selection; and Fitzgerald identifies “life” itself as “that sound out there, that ghastly reiterated female sound”: “active and snarling,” it moves “like a fly swarm” (Beautiful and Damned 150, 260). In The Great Gatsby, Fitzgerald anoints both Daisy and Gatsby with the power of beauty, as I will explain below; but, in both their cases, as in the “intense vitality” of Myrtle Wilson (which contains no “gleam of beauty”), the underlying force is simply “life” (35, 30). This is Fitzgerald's ultimate subject in The Great Gatsby: “the full bellows of the earth [that was blowing] the frogs full of life” at the moment on that evening in late spring when “the silhouette of a moving cat” drew Nick's eye to Gatsby for the first time (25). Later, when Nick leaves Daisy and Gatsby alone during her first visit to his house, he sees that they are “possessed by intense life” (102).

In the following section I explain how Fitzgerald dramatizes the process of sexual selection in the stories of Tom and Daisy Buchanan, Daisy and Gatsby, Myrtle and George Wilson, and Nick and Jordan Baker. But it will help at this point to sketch in the main features and implications of the tangled web of conflicted life in which all the players exist. First, everyone is subject to the anxieties that arise in the general, unending struggle for life. In Fitzgerald's presentation of the evolutionary reality everything is subject to change: accidents happen at any moment, men and women must struggle to win and then keep their mates, the “tide” of “lower” racial groups is on the rise, and civilizations themselves rise and fall. Moreover, in the individual’s development through life, according to Haeckel, his or her “psychic activity” is subject to the same pattern of progress and decline. In Haeckel's five stages of “man's psychic activity,” the “new-born” develops “self-consciousness,” the “boy or girl” awakens to “the sexual instinct,” the “youth or maiden” up to “the time of sexual intercourse” passes through “the ‘idealist’ period,” the mature man and woman engage in “the founding of families,” and then “involution sets in” as the “old man or woman” experience “degeneration.” As Haeckel dismally concludes, “Man's psychic life runs the same evolution—upward progress, full maturity, and downward degeneration—as every other vital activity in his organization” (146-47). Rather in this key, Nick Carraway on his thirtieth birthday looks forward to only “the promise of a decade of loneliness, a thinning list of single men to know, a thinning brief-case of enthusiasm, thinning hair.” Having just witnessed the disastrous confrontation between Gatsby, Tom, and Daisy, who “loves” them both, he remarks, “So we drove on toward death through the cooling twilight” (143).

Second, in this universe of accident and change, every individual and every individual's “house” or line is fixed at the moment of conception—as in “the Carraway house,” for example, “in a city where dwellings are still called through decades by a family's name” (184). And third, although people like Myrtle and Gatsby are not only free but compelled to enter the struggle of sexual selection (their only means of elevating themselves in the social and evolutionary hierarchies), they nor any other characters in Fitzgerald's fiction can break the bonds of what Haeckel calls “the chain of generations” (143). As Fitzgerald put it in “The Unspeakable Egg” (1924), the comic story he wrote while Gatsby was in press, although a young woman might have her choice of “attractive eggs” and unattractive ones, the “unspeakable egg” itself determines that even in “Umerica, a free country,” there aren't really any “chauffeurs and such that marry millionaires' daughters.”

**SEXUAL SELECTION IN THE GREAT GATSBY**

While Fitzgerald's understanding of heredity and ontogeny seems to have originated in his informal exposure to such ideas at Princeton and his reading in The Riddle of the Universe, his familiarity with the theory of sexual selection probably came as much from the novelists he admired as from biologists like Conklin or
Haeckel. Both of these biologists briefly discuss the “secondary sexual characters” (like “the beard of man, the antlers of the stag, the beautiful plumage of the bird of paradise”) that, Haeckel remarks, “are the outcome of sexual selection” as Darwin had explained (Riddle of the Universe 139). For lengthier discussions of the theory of sexual selection, including courtship behavior, Fitzgerald might have turned to any number of sources, from The Descent of Man to Havelock Ellis's Sexual Selection in Man (a volume collected as part of his Studies in the Psychology of Sex), or Upton Sinclair's The Book of Life (1921). It is important to realize that, had he turned to these three, he would have seen distinctly different versions of the sexual reality. Ellis, for example, built on Darwin's theory but then strove to elevate the psychology of sex into the art of love and ultimately a transcendent religion in which the human's animal nature is scarcely perceptible; and Sinclair strove to emphasize the human's “supremacy over nature by his greater power to combine in groups”—as in “primitive communist society.”17 No less than the theory of natural selection, the theory of sexual selection was (and continues to be) susceptible to various interpretations, as different writers construed evolutionary theory in ways that reflected their particular points of view regarding gender, class, race, or political ideology, as well as their particular spiritual or psychological anxieties.

Whatever his sources, it is clear that Fitzgerald focused on the key principles of sexual selection that previous American novelists from Howells to Edith Wharton had depended upon in constructing their own plots of courtship and marriage. Seeing the process in general as he put it in This Side of Paradise, as the “rather unpleasant overpowering force that's part of the machinery under everything” (238), he emphasized the female's power to select the superior male, and the male's struggle to be selected. Both the male and female in Fitzgerald's fiction wield the power to attract, often through music or dance, the female through her physical beauty and the beauty of her voice, and the male through his strength or ornamental display. And like so many American novelists who had also worked with the Darwinian materials, Fitzgerald embraced Darwin's observation that civilized human beings select for wealth or social position. Also, as in Darwin and the many realist and naturalist novelists who took up his theory, the successful male is compelled to exhibit superior strength and to contest his strength with competing males in what Darwin called “the law of battle” for possession of the female. Finally, as part of a more recent development in literary interpretations of Darwin's theory, Fitzgerald was interested in (and considerably frightened by) the new woman's aggressive sexuality—her occasional desire for more than one man and her recognition that she must engage in sometimes deadly competition with other females to win her man.

Working essentially with these points in The Great Gatsby, then, Fitzgerald constructed a plot with a fully natural ending: Gatsby fails in his romantic quest and remains a “poor son-of-a-bitch” because he denies his genetic identity and ignores the laws of sexual selection. Moreover, while Tom Buchanan retains physical possession of Daisy, his hand covering hers in “an unmistakable air of natural intimacy,” he continues in his “alert, aggressive way … his head moving sharply here and there, adapting itself to his restless eyes.” And Nick, having exhibited much anxiety and ambivalence in his own sexual relations, having witnessed the violent, chaotic drama involving Gatsby, the Buchanans, and the Wilsons, and having realized that the most profound “difference between men … [is] the difference between the sick and the well”—Nick withdraws alone into the middle-west of his youth, “half sick between grotesque reality and savage frightening dreams” (183, 152, 186, 131, 154).

Fitzgerald takes his first step toward this natural ending with his epigraph. Here, carrying forward his interest in the sexual “machinery under everything” (from This Side of Paradise), he focuses immediately upon the essential workings of sexual selection—the male's struggle in dance or ornamental display to be selected and the female's power to select:

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!"

211
But before Nick enters into the story of Gatsby's effort to win Daisy, he begins by referring to his own "clan's" descent and telling of his own participation in a "counter-raid" in the "Teutonic migration known as the Great War" ("the last love battle," as Fitzgerald later termed it). Resulting in his feeling at "the ragged edge of the universe," Nick's war experience has made him a wounded veteran in the larger sexual struggle about which Tom Buchanan is so anxious—that "the white race will be—will be utterly submerged" in the rising tide of color, and ultimately that he stands to lose his wife to a "crazy fish" like Gatsby (7, 17, 110). If you “sit back and let Mr. Nobody from Nowhere make love to your wife,” Tom complains, you might as well “throw everything overboard and have intermarriage between black and white” (137).

In his first chapter, then, Fitzgerald identifies his other main characters and sets them adrift in the fluid, evolutionary universe wherein—as Nick remarks in the famous last line—“we [all] beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past” (189). Tom Buchanan, Daisy, and Gatsby all “drift” in and out of the novel as the dead Gatsby finally does in his swimming pool, where Fitzgerald surrounds him with other “poor ghosts” who “drifted fortuitously about” in this “new world” (169). Telling how by “chance” he had rented his house near the “pair of enormous eggs” in that “strangest [of] communities in North America” to which Tom and Daisy had also “drifted” (and where Daisy will joke about “accidentally” arranging Nick’s marriage to Jordan Baker), Nick begins to picture a tumultuous reality of high winds and rampant growth (9, 10, 23).

The “great bursts of leaves growing … just as things grow in fast movies” are driven by the same cosmic force that blows the “frogs full of life” and causes the Buchanans’ “lawn [to start] at the beach and [run] toward the front door for a quarter of a mile, jumping over sun-dials and brick walks in burning gardens—finally when it reached the house drifting up the side in bright vines as though from the momentum of its run” (8, 25, 11). Developing this theme, Fitzgerald writes that the “fresh grass … seemed to grow a little way into the [Buchanan] house,” suggesting that, like all life, it emerged from the sea and is related to the life force within the Buchanan line. Later in the novel Nick describes how “the Buchanans' house floated suddenly” into view (149). This household's vital force throbs in “the enormous power of [Tom’s] body” with its “great pack of muscle shifting” beneath his coat; and it has produced the child about whom Nick remarks, “I suppose she talks, and—eats, and everything” (11, 21). Moreover, it is reflected in the “paternal contempt” of Tom's “gruff” voice, which seemed to say, “I'm stronger and more of a man than you are” (11). Within pages we learn of the first incident in which this dominant male, a “hulking physical specimen,” uses his “cruel body” to injure each of the three women in his life (16, 11). He is responsible not only for Daisy's “black and blue” knuckle in this scene, but also for another woman's broken arm (82), and he will go on to break Myrtle Wilson's nose (41). Ultimately, Fitzgerald's point is that Tom's brutal sexual power is alive in his "house" and that it is determinant in his struggles with both George Wilson over Myrtle and with Gatsby over Daisy. By contrast, no such force resides in Gatsby's fake "ancestral home" (162). Indeed, the futility of Gatsby's romantic denial of his biological identity and the violence of sexual selection is reflected in his well-trimmed lawn (which soon grew to be as long as Nick's after Gatsby's death) and the “thin beard of raw ivy” that covers his “tower” (188, 9).

Despite Tom's brutal strength, however, neither he nor any other individual in Fitzgerald's evolutionary world can rest secure. Frequently drawing attention to Tom's prehensile power, as Darwin referred to it (the male's physical tools—secondary sexual characters—for capturing and holding the female, as in the lobster's claws), Fitzgerald notes that Tom “broke [Myrtle's] nose with his open hand,” that “he put out his broad, flat hand with well-concealed dislike” when introduced to Gatsby, and finally that “his hand [fell] upon and covered” Daisy's, signaling the end of his struggle with Gatsby. By contrast at this conclusive moment, Nick leaves Gatsby “with his hands in his coat pockets … watching over nothing” (153). Still, Fitzgerald emphasizes that in this world where “there are only the pursued, the pursuing, the busy and the tired” (85), Tom must be ever vigilant. As Nick observes in chapter one, even with two women, “something was making [Tom] nibble at the edge of stale ideas as if his sturdy physical egotism no longer nourished his peremptory heart,” and when we see him last he continues in his “restless,” “alert, aggressive way, his hands out a little from his body as if to
fight off interference” (25, 186).

Also one of the “pursuing,” Gatsby expresses his “restlessness” as well: “he was never quite still; there was always a tapping foot somewhere or the impatient opening and closing of a hand” (68). When told that “you can't repeat the past,” he looks around “wildly, as if the past were lurking here in the shadow of his house, just out of reach of his hand” (116-17); and, since Gatsby's past moment with Daisy is out of reach largely because of the inherent deficiency of his “house,” Fitzgerald presents Gatsby in a precarious state of balance: “he was balancing himself on the dashboard of his car with that resourcefulness of movement that is so peculiarly American” (68).

For similar reasons, in chapter one Fitzgerald depicts another of his main characters, the equally unattached and restless Jordan Baker, as “the balancing girl”; she had a way of holding her “chin … as if she were balancing something on it which was quite likely to fall” (13). Supplementing the precariousness of her social situation as a single woman who is both pursuer and pursued is her notably androgynous nature. A “small-breasted girl with an erect carriage” who looks “like a young cadet” and whom Fitzgerald identifies as the other athlete in his group, she displays, “a flutter of slender muscles in her arms” within the same sentence that captures the bright “lamp-light [on Tom's] boots” (15, 22). As others have noted, Jordan's androgyny appeals to Nick, who “enjoyed looking at her,” and seems part of Fitzgerald's effort to reveal Nick's own sexual ambivalence (15).

As Nick explains in chapter one, one of the reasons he went “east [to] learn the bond business” was to escape the rumors that he was engaged (7, 24), and during his time in the east he breaks off with two other women. With a history of being “privy to the secret griefs of wild, unknown men” whose “intimate revelations” sometimes “quiver[ed] on the horizon … marred by obvious suppressions,” Nick will go on to tell of one of his most intimate moments in the east—when he reaches out to touch Mr. McKe, the “pale feminine man from the flat below” Tom's and Myrtle's. Minutes later, Nick and McKe “groaned down in the elevator” together on the way to McKe's flat (5-6, 34, 41-42). And, immediately after the strange brief scene in which Nick stands beside McKe's bed (where “between the sheets, clad in his underwear,” he shows Nick some of his photographs), Nick finds himself “half asleep in the cold lower level of the Pennsylvania Station” (42). Aside from the possible reflections of Fitzgerald's and Nick's vague homoerotic desire that others have sensed in this scene, it would seem that Fitzgerald's emphasis on “down,” “below,” and “lower,” represent another dimension in his view of the social and evolutionary hierarchy.

Further suggested by Tom's remark when meeting Nick unexpectedly at lunch, “How'd you happen to come up this far to eat?” Fitzgerald's references to up and down in regard to Nick's biological activities suggest his susceptibility to degeneracy (78). This possibility is further suggested in the uncorrected galleys, where Nick tells of having written the names of Gatsby's guests (names like Bull, Fishguard, Hammerhead, and Beluga) on an “old time-table [that was] degenerating at its folds.” That is, as a reference to Nick's sexual identity, the idea that he “groaned down in the elevator” suggests more than his possible moral degeneration, as someone like Max Nordau would emphasize. Rather, Jordan's androgyny and Nick's sexual ambivalence reflect on one of the darker aspects in the evolution of sex that Darwin brought to light in The Descent of Man: that “it has now been ascertained that at a very early embryonic period both sexes possess true male and female glands. Hence some extremely remote progenitor of the whole vertebrate kingdom appears to have been hermaphrodite or androgynous” (1: 207). Fitzgerald was certainly aware of this idea from his having read of Dr. Ledsmar's Darwinian experiment about hermaphroditism in plants (in The Damnation of Theron Ware), and probably from having read Haeckel's discussion of such “rudimentary structures” as “the nipple and milk-gland of the male” (265). At any rate, an important result of Fitzgerald's presentation of these possibilities in The Great Gatsby is that they contribute to Nick's being repelled by the chaotic nature of sex.

“Half sick between grotesque reality and savage frightening dreams,” he withdraws from both the brutal male force that nevertheless fascinates him in Tom Buchanan, and from “the secret griefs of wild, unknown men,” though they fascinate him as well (he frequently “feigned sleep” when the “intimate revelation was quivering
on the horizon" [154, 5-6]). He let one “short affair with a girl” “blow quietly away” when he was confronted with a violent male: “her brother began throwing mean looks in my direction” (61). Similarly, although he had come east to learn “the bond business,” when he found himself confined with the unlovely couples Tom and Myrtle and the McKees, Nick “wanted to get out and walk eastward toward the park.” But “each time [he] tried to go [he] became entangled in some wild strident argument which pulled [him] back” (40). Still a resoundingly Darwinian term in the early 1920s, “entangled” in this scene soon leads to the outburst of Tom's violence (when he breaks Myrtle's nose) that causes Nick to leave with the “feminine” McKee. As the scene in McKee's apartment ends, Fitzgerald suggests in the titles of the first two pictures in McKee's portfolio that Nick's underlying story has to do mostly with “Beauty and the Beast” and “Loneliness” (42).

If Tom's brutal male power represents the “beast” in Fitzgerald's imagination, Daisy's voice is the deadly instrument of beauty. At the end of This Side of Paradise Amory had begun “to identify evil with … strong phallic worship” and concluded that “inseparably linked with evil was beauty,” as in “Eleanor's voice, in an old song at night … half rhythm, half darkness” (280). There is certainly something of Eleanor's struggle with her female nature that lingers in Daisy: as Eleanor cried, “why am I a girl? … tied to the sinking ship of future matrimony,” Daisy wept when she learned that her baby was a girl, thinking “the best thing a girl can be in this world [is] a beautiful little fool” (Paradise 237, Gatsby 21). But even as she is aware of her biological entrapment (as Hemingway would later refer to it in A Farewell to Arms23) she cannot refrain from voicing what is perhaps the most alluring appeal in American literature. Playing on Darwin's analysis of the sexual appeal of music and the voice, many writers had invested the female voice with such power, as in W. D. Howells's Lydia Blood and James's Verena Tarrant.24 But, whatever Fitzgerald's sources for this idea (Darwin, Haeckel, or any of the many “Darwinian” novelists), no writer dramatizes it more fully. He introduces the musical theme as part of the scene of natural history wherein the grass grows up from the beach into the Buchanan “house” and a sea “breeze … rippled over the wine-colored rug, making a shadow on it as wind does on the sea” (12). Then Daisy began asking Nick questions in her low, thrilling voice. It was the kind of voice that the ear follows up and down as if each speech is an arrangement of notes that will never be played again. Her face was sad and lovely with bright things in it, bright eyes and a bright passionate mouth—but there was an excitement in her voice that men who had cared for her found difficult to forget: a singing compulsion, a whispered “Listen,” 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.

(13-14)

In his innumerable references to Daisy's voice, Fitzgerald identifies it as the principle instrument with which she casts her spell over Gatsby, compelling his belief in the kind of love that cannot exist in Fitzgerald's view of life. As Nick notes even in this first scene, “the instant her voice broke off, ceasing to compel my attention, my belief, I felt the basic insincerity of what she had said” (22). But the “deathless song” of Daisy's “voice held” Gatsby “with its fluctuating, feverish warmth because it couldn't be over-dreamed” (101). And when Gatsby tells Nick that “her voice is full of money,” Nick immediately realizes that “the inexhaustible charm that rose and fell in it [was] the cymbals' song of … the king's daughter, the golden girl.”25

As Daisy consciously or unconsciously wields her irresistible power, she becomes further entangled in the web of sexual struggle. When Gatsby left for the war after their brief romance, she had “suddenly” begun to date other men, only to find that, with her “evening dress tangled among dying orchids on the floor beside her bed … she wanted her life shaped … by some force,” which soon proved to be the “force … of Tom Buchanan” (158-59); and even when she has not only Tom but possibly Gatsby, she looks back at Gatsby's house as she leaves the party, wondering, “what would happen now in the dim incalculable hours? Perhaps some unbelievable guest would arrive, a person infinitely rare and to be marvelled at, some authentically radiant young girl who with one fresh glance at Gatsby, one moment of magical encounter, would blot out
those five years of unwavering devotion” (115). She is instinctively aware of “the first law of woman”—that she is a competitor in the sexual arena, as Fitzgerald had treated this subject in 1924 in “Diamond Dick and the First Law of Woman.” Diana (“Diamond Dick”) Dickey's “nickname survived”—“she had selected it herself”—and she lived up to it by threatening a sexual competitor with a revolver (The Price Was High 69). “I think you've got my man” (82), she explains; “I wasn't made for anything like love” (79). No less a hunter than this Diana, or perhaps even Hemingway's Margot Macomber, Daisy is implicated in Myrtle Wilson's “accidental” death, as Fitzgerald suggests in Nick's concern that if “Tom found out that Daisy had been driving … he might think she saw a connection in it—he might think anything.”

Gatsby himself can never conceive of such a grim possibility, for he is determined to deny his origins and wants to believe “that the rock of the world was founded securely on a fairy's wing” (105). Nor can he accept the other part of his reality, as suggested in Fitzgerald's epigraph—that he was destined to perform the lover's dance in the biological struggle to be selected. He is always acted upon by the natural laws he cannot accept, as when the “universe of ineffable gaudiness spun itself out in his brain” one night as “the clock ticked” and his “tangled clothes [lay] upon the floor”; then “an instinct toward his future glory” led him on his way, first to St. Olaf College, and finally to his second opportunity to be selected by Daisy (105). Even then, “as if he were on a wire,” he seems unaware that his most effective moment comes, as Fitzgerald's epigraph and Darwin's theory suggest, when he proudly displays his ornamental attractions—the “many-colored disarray … [of] shirts with stripes and scrolls and plaids in coral and apple green and lavender and faint orange with monograms of Indian blue” (91, 97-98). Not too subtly invoking the Darwinian idea when he has Gatsby explain that “a man in England … sends over a selection of things at the beginning of each season,” Fitzgerald illustrates how effective is the power of beauty in sexual selection: “‘They're such beautiful shirts,’ [Daisy] sobbed, her voice muffled in the thick folds … ‘I've never seen such—such beautiful shirts before’” (97-98).

Certainly the most splendid peacock in American literature, Gatsby repeatedly wears his famous pink suit, has his man Klipspringer perform “The Love Nest” on the piano, and, in general, “deck[s] out [his illusion] with every bright feather that drifted his way” (100-01). Nothing could be gaudier to attract the female's eye for ornamental beauty unless it is perhaps the taxi cab that appeals to Myrtle Wilson: “she let four taxi cabs drive away before she selected a new one, lavender-colored with grey upholstery [in which the party] slid out from the mass of the station into the glowing sunshine” (31). The image of phallic power and beauty is evident here, as it is in “Gatsby's gorgeous car … [of] rich cream color, bright with nickel, swollen here and there in its monstrous length with triumphant hatboxes,” and so forth (68). But as Fitzgerald suggests in the line from “Ain't We Got Fun?” (“nothing's surer / The rich get richer”), despite Gatsby's gorgeous ornamentation and phallic appeal, he is no match for Buchanan when they finally confront each other “with competitive firmness” (101, 138).

Gatsby manages moderately well in the dance, with his “graceful, conservative fox-trot” (112); and Tom reveals himself to be no more impressive at this natural feat, in which, as Fitzgerald knew in This Side of Paradise, people are “selected by the cut-in system at dances, which favors the survival of the fittest” (58). More restrained in this dance with Daisy than at the first raucous event that Nick attended, Gatsby conceals his instinctive sense that music and dance can be effectively combined in what Darwin called “love-antics and dances” (Descent of Man 2: 68). There he had requested that the orchestra play the “Jazz History of the World,” and it achieved its desired effect: “girls were putting their heads on men's shoulders … and swooning backward … into men's arms” (55). The trouble is, such primitive performances tend also to arouse the combative instincts that are inherent in the struggle for reproductive success. In a passage that Fitzgerald cut from the galleys, the “Jazz History of the World” is something like H. G. Well's evolutionary Outline of History, providing “a weird sense that it was a preposterous cycle after all”—one “discord” after another. In the novel, the scene ends with one “fight” leading to several others, and the frenzy of “dissension” and “flank attacks” subsides only when two “wives [are] lifted kicking into the night.”
Of course, this is the way the struggle will end in *The Great Gatsby*, with the stronger male prevailing not so much for his beauty or “love,” as Gatsby might have hoped, but for the superior physical and financial strength that inheres in his “house.” Other American novelists had reached similar conclusions but in different ways: some of Howells's heroes in the 1870s, for example, who prevail over rival males because women select them for their *moral* as well as financial strength; or James's Basil Ransom, who prevails over weaker males (as well as a female competitor) because of his physical and *mental* power; or Harold Frederic's Joel Stormont Thorp because of his combined “never-force” and physical and financial strength, as well as the woman's attraction to his “frank barbarism of power”; or Edith Wharton's Cobham Stilling, in her story “The Choice,” because of his sheer physical strength without financial wealth (Mrs. Stilling possesses the wealth).  

Unlike any of these, Fitzgerald's plot is quite in accord with “the fundamental principle of biology” that he alluded to in *The Beautiful and Damned*, the “ontogenic fact” that in the “tiny globular egg cell” one is already bound within “the chain of generations” (Haeckel 63, 62, 143). Representing a different “strata” from Daisy's, Gatsby “had no real right to touch her hand”; and when she saw his “huge incoherent failure of a house,” it simply fell “in like a card house at the disapproval in her eyes” (156, 188, 120). For such reasons Fitzgerald suggests in his closing paragraphs that there never has been a “new world,” only the “old unknown world.” The “fresh, green breast of the new world … pandered in whispers” to the first sailors, compelling their unwanted “aesthetic contemplation”; and beauty is still part of the “machinery under everything” that derives us toward an “orgastic future” (189). “The essential point,” as Haeckel remarked, “is not the ‘embrace’ … or the amorousness connected therewith; it is simply the introduction of the spermatozoa into the vagina” (139). Thus the imagined “pap of life” at which Gatsby would “gulp down the incomparable milk of wonder” is destroyed by the “accident,” and by the grotesque reality of Myrtle's “left breast … swinging loose like a flap” (117, 145).

Notes

The “Fitzgerald Book Lists” in the F. Scott Fitzgerald Papers at Princeton University indicate that Fitzgerald owned and had signed a copy of *The Riddle of the Universe*, but that volume is not now contained in the University's Department of Rare Books and Special Collections. These book lists include no volumes by Darwin. In his enthusiastic review of Dos Passos’s *Three Soldiers*, Fitzgerald cited Owen Johnston's *The Wasted Generation* as an example of a current war story that paled by comparison, in part because “it abounded with … undigested Haeckel” (*In His Own Time*, 123).


9. Some of these words and other key terms in the Darwinian lexicon (like *tangle*) are traceable in Andrew Crosland, *A Concordance to F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby* (Detroit: Gale, 1975); *Riddle of the Universe* 252. As Haeckel notes here, he had first referred to Darwin in this way in 1868—long before Freud's more famous remark that after Copernicus' first great blow to human narcissism (by showing that the earth is not at the center of the universe), Darwin dealt the second or “biological blow” by proving the human's animal nature (Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey [London: Hogarth Press and The Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1953-74] 17, 141).


12. P. 237; another example of Fitzgerald's biological critique of sexual love and motherhood is contained in these remarks about the character Gloria in *The Beautiful and Damned*: “She knew that in her breast she had never wanted children. The reality, the earthiness, the intolerable sentiment of child-bearing, the menace to her beauty—had appalled her. She wanted to exist only as a conscious flower, prolonging and preserving itself. Her sentimentality could cling fiercely to her own illusions, but her ironic soul whispered that motherhood was also the privilege of the female baboon. So her dreams were of ghostly children only” (392-93).

13. P. 104; as many critics have remarked, Fitzgerald's earlier story, “Absolution” (1924), represents a preliminary effort to deal with the problem of his and his characters' origins. As I would put it, Rudolph in that story exemplifies the kind of anxiety about his fixed evolutionary state that Gatsby and other characters in Fitzgerald experience. Rudolph confessed his sin “of not believing I was the son of my parents” and so imagined himself as Blatchford Sarnemington, a character who then “established dominance over him” (F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald* [New York: Scribner's, 1969] 187, 189). As Haeckel might remark of such figures as Rudolph and especially Gatsby, the “boundless presumption of conceited man has misled him into making himself ‘the image of God,’ claiming an ‘eternal life’ for his ephemeral personality, and imagining that he possesses unlimited ‘freedom of will’” (15).

14. P. 12; elsewhere, in many places, Fitzgerald is far more explicit in suggesting the human link to fish and the sea. In “The Swimmers” (1929), for example, the character Henry Marston enjoys swimming...
and feeling like a “porpoise,” and he thinks that Americans could better deal with their restlessness if they had developed “fins and wings”; he comments ironically on the American idea that we could “leave out history and the past,” “inheritance or tradition” ([1973], 201). Similarly, in Tender Is the Night, Fitzgerald remarks that “Nicole had been designed for change, for flight with money as fins and wings” (311).

P. 41, 122, 152; discussions of other writers' work with the male's prehensile power are indexed in The Descent of Love, where, on pp. 143 and 191, for example, I discuss Henry James's use of these materials in The Portrait of a Lady. In his initial discussion of this male “secondary sexual character,” evolved in order for the male to gain an “advantage … over other individuals of the same sex and species, in exclusive relation to reproduction,” Darwin writes that “when the male has found the female he sometimes absolutely requires prehensile organs to hold her” (Charles Darwin, The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex, 2 vols. in 1 [1871; Princeton University Press, 1981], 1, 256).


20. Ernest Hemingway, A Farewell to Arms (1929; New York: Scribner's, 1932), 139, 320.

21. Discussions of Howells's, James's and other novelists' uses of Darwin's observations about the sexual appeal of music and the voice are indexed in The Descent of Love. Whether Fitzgerald caught it or not, Darwin referred to Haeckel's “interesting discussion of this subject,” agreeing that “women … possess sweeter voices than men,” but concluding “that they first acquired [these] musical powers in order to attract the opposite sex” (Descent of Man, 2, 337).

22. P. 127; among the innumerable parallels in Fitzgerald's story of a naive male's destruction in an encounter with the sexual reality, compared with Harold Frederic's in The Damnation of Theron Ware, are Celia Madden's several musical performances and Theron's fascination with “Miss Madden's riches”; the “glamour” of wealth “shown upon her,” the “veritable gleam of gold” (The Damnation of Theron Ware or Illumination, Vol. 3 of The Harold Frederic Edition [1896; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985], 254). Both Fitzgerald and Frederic work with Darwin's point that human beings select for wealth and social position.

23. P. 152; in Fitzgerald's story “The Dance” (1926) another sexual struggle between women ends in murder because “all the girls are good friends … except when two of them are try'n to get hold of the same man” (Bits of Paradise, 154).

24. P. 36; something of Fitzgerald's early attraction to the evolutionary view of life is evident in the interest he showed in Wells's Outline of History, Being a Plain History of Life and Humankind, which, he remarked in 1920, was “Most absorbing!” (Correspondence of F. Scott Fitzgerald, eds. Matthew J. Bruccoli and Margaret M. Duggan [New York: Random House, 1980], 73).

25. Pp. 56-57; for similar remarks by Fitzgerald on the role of music and dance in sexual selection, see “The Dance,” which is set in a small town where life's affairs and scandals “live on all tangled up with the natural ebb and flow of outward life” (Bits of Paradise, 140).

26. P. 127; among the innumerable parallels in Fitzgerald's story of a naive male's destruction in an encounter with the sexual reality, compared with Harold Frederic's in The Damnation of Theron Ware, are Celia Madden's several musical performances and Theron's fascination with “Miss Madden's riches”; the “glamour” of wealth “shown upon her,” the “veritable gleam of gold” (The Damnation of Theron Ware or Illumination, Vol. 3 of The Harold Frederic Edition [1896; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985], 254). Both Fitzgerald and Frederic work with Darwin's point that human beings select for wealth and social position.

27. P. 152; in Fitzgerald's story “The Dance” (1926) another sexual struggle between women ends in murder because “all the girls are good friends … except when two of them are try'n to get hold of the same man” (Bits of Paradise, 154).

28. P. 36; something of Fitzgerald's early attraction to the evolutionary view of life is evident in the interest he showed in Wells's Outline of History, Being a Plain History of Life and Humankind, which, he remarked in 1920, was “Most absorbing!” (Correspondence of F. Scott Fitzgerald, eds. Matthew J. Bruccoli and Margaret M. Duggan [New York: Random House, 1980], 73).

29. Pp. 56-57; for similar remarks by Fitzgerald on the role of music and dance in sexual selection, see “The Dance,” which is set in a small town where life's affairs and scandals “live on all tangled up with the natural ebb and flow of outward life” (Bits of Paradise, 140).

Discussions of these examples are indexed in The Descent of Love.

Criticism: James D. Bloom (essay date spring 1999)
In the following essay, Bloom draws parallels between Fitzgerald and singer Bob Dylan's life and works, arguing that both were anti-prophets who made myths of themselves and at the same time undermined those myths.

AFFINITIES

“You’ve been through all of F. Scott Fitzgerald's books. You’re very well read. It’s well known.” So runs a memorable line in Bob Dylan’s “Ballad of a Thin Man” on his 1965 album Highway 61 Revisited. Not only did this song provide “an instant catchphrase for the moral, generational, and racial divisions” that, in Greil Marcus’ formulation, separated the cognoscenti from the “squares” (8-9); this album also marked Dylan's controversial introduction to LP buyers of his paradigm-shifting hybrid, “folk rock.” Brian Morton's 1991 novel, The Dylanist, describes the appeal of this watershed: “Dylan gave … hope: He showed that you could make your life a work of art” (91). Morton's protagonist “loved the way” Dylan “remained fluid, reinventing himself endlessly, refusing to be trapped by other people's expectations.” Reflecting the pervasiveness of this appeal, Fred Goodman's social history of rock-music business declared Dylan “unquestionably the most influential artist of his generation” (96).

In view of Dylan's singular impact on his generation, his citation of Fitzgerald points to the aspiration and the achievement that place both writers among the select few, among a handful of modern writers who turned themselves into generational idols and their work into durable models. Dylan's famous 1965 breakthrough (the momentum of which persisted through his 1975 album Desire) clinched this icon status. The decisive point in this breakthrough occurred at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival, when Dylan scandalized fans by marrying his signature acoustic folk protest style with a seemingly more “commercial” electric rock-and-roll idiom. Ratifying this sea-change, Dylan framed this “folk-rock” assault on generic boundaries with the release of two albums, Bringing it all Back Home and Highway 61 Revisited. Fellow protest folksinger Phil Ochs' reaction to one cut on Highway 61 illustrates this impact: “Phil, a huge fan of Dylan to begin with, was thunderstruck by this latest composition,” entitled “Mr. Tambourine Man.” Ochs believed that “Dylan, already being labeled a spokesperson for his generation … had suddenly in the course of one song, come dangerously close to becoming a generation's poet” (Schumacher 82). Beyond such claims for Dylan as the 1960s generational poet, which invite obvious comparisons with Fitzgerald's status as a generational novelist in the 1920s—another youth-centered decade, and beyond coincidental geographical parallels—each artist's bourgeois Minnesota origins, the affinity between the two artists rests most significantly on a shared career narrative and cultural critique. Dylan's early song, “North Country Blues,” a reminder of their shared Minnesota background, sums up this shared aesthetic as the discovery that “there ain't nothing here now to hold them.” This poetics of unmooring lies at the heart of what Ronald Berman characterizes as “the movement in Fitzgerald … toward existential heroism” (World 114) and the product of this movement: an art that recurrently depicts inconclusive arrivals, such as Tender is the Night hero Dick Diver's incessant beginnings of a “career … like Grant's in Galena” consisting well into middle age of “biding his time … in one town or another” (315), with each town-to-town movement impelled by the decision Dylan affirms in “A Hard Rain's Gonna Fall,” as the decision to keep “goin' on out,” the commitment reaffirmed throughout his songs, to “move on to the next hope” with “hard-eyed … skepticism” (Edmundson 54) in the face of whatever defeat or humiliation looms.

CAREERS

This sort of language also greeted the 2020 publication of Fitzgerald's first novel, This Side of Paradise, and the later turns in Fitzgerald's career that came to be regarded as betrayals by many of his fans (Mangum 3-7).
This Side of Paradise came “to influence us profoundly,” according to the publisher, autobiographer, and self-appointed generational spokesman Donald Friede. Fitzgerald “set the pattern for the mood of the day,” laying a “solid foundation for the basic philosophy of the whole decade. … We were never the same again” (180). Favoring Dylan, English critic Michael Gray made the Fitzgerald-Dylan parallel explicit in suggesting that “there is a sense in which, more fully than Fitzgerald, Dylan created a generation” (5). Similarly, David Dunaway argues that “for the generation coming-of-age in the 1960s … there was no comparable … influence” to Dylan's. Dunaway elaborates by associating Dylan with earlier, cultural paradigm-shifters in an account recalling Fitzgerald's meteoric rise between 1920 and 1925. “Like that of Rimbaud, Dylan's recognition came impossibly fast, but being a god turns out to be a short-lived occupation.” Consequently, Dylan “has spent many years of his life trying to get to where he once was. To find another writer who so thoroughly affected his time, one has to probe in history—Voltaire, Shakespeare, Dickens” (154).

Dunaway's potted history of cultural change recalls Nick Carraway's mid-novel rhapsody in The Great Gatsby equating the eponymous hero with “a son of God” (105) as well as his closing summary of his own “awkward unpleasant” (185) effort to return home. Dunaway's view of Dylan points to Gatsby as the center of Dylan's debt to Fitzgerald's legacy and underscores the lasting vitality of that legacy. Dylan's seizure of this legacy constitutes an enrichment, in contrast to the appropriations of it that became especially marked during the Reagan-era plutocracy revival—the Jay McInerney era to chroniclers of American fiction. A Gatsby-like Roaring 20s look (derived from a 1974 screen adaptation starring Robert Redford as Gatsby) briefly colored fashion advertising in the early eighties (Hurowitz), and at the end of the decade Calvin Klein turned to Gatsby—along with Madame Bovary and The Sun Also Rises—to caption print-ads for a new fragrance called Obsession (Foltz), while New York Times columnist Anthony Lewis more solemnly devoted an entire column to the Reagan administration's uncannily Gatsby-like “emptiness” and the way it “corrupted the American Dream.” Four months earlier a Times editorial argued that “the eighties aren't so far past the twenties” inasmuch as “Jay Gatsby would be right at home today” in the company of Michael Milken and Ivan Boesky. More recently, an Atlanta antiques shop called Gatsby's drew national media attention when it bought the auctioned belongings of convicted CIA mole Aldrich Ames.

Unlike such merchandising ventures, Dylan's citation of Fitzgerald goes beyond name-dropping and glamour-mongering. In the context of Dylan's larger body of work, his Fitzgerald line belongs to an oeuvre-saturating acknowledgement of his debt to Fitzgerald and a profitable reinvestment of that legacy. In sarcastically singling Fitzgerald out as an index of cultural arrival, a measure of cultural-capital, Dylan prompts listeners to the songs of his most influential and most conspicuously literary period, between 1964-1975, to account for Fitzgerald's endurance as artistic resource and incitement.

This affiliation extends beyond obvious biographical parallels between the two Minnesota college dropouts who grew up non-Protestant in America's Lutheran heartland before heading east to triumph as artists, to transform radically their respective media, and to become generational icons. Dylan's pursuit of this Fitzgeraldian agenda seems most evident in his refashioning of Bobby Zimmerman into Bob Dylan. This move recalls how Jimmy Gatz, also a fugitive from the Lake Superior littoral, where he fatefully rescued a grateful tycoon's yacht, began refashioning himself into Jay Gatsby. The extent to which Dylan “sprang from a Platonic conception of himself” (106) and thus the extent to which Dylan, like Fitzgerald, regards “the crafting of identity as demiurgic activity” (Weinstein 131) resonates in Martha Bayles' image of “Zimmerman hanging around every coffeehouse in Greenwich Village, playing for pennies and promoting a mythic identity as 'Bob Dylan,' a precocious drifter who had spent his youth traveling the highways and byways and learning his music directly from the folk” (210-217). This mythic identity contrasts markedly with the prosaic stability of Dylan's Hibbing, Minnesota, boyhood in “the Jewish mercantile middle class of America's Midwest” (Friedlander 136) and his brief stint at the University of Minnesota before departing for Greenwich Village in 1960.
Such transformations involve efforts to ride the zeitgeists of their respective decades—in Gatsby’s becoming a sporty Anglophile bootlegger and in Dylan's becoming an indignant bohemian iconoclast. “By taking a new name,” biographer Justin Kaplan notes, “an unfinished person may hope to enter into more dynamic—but not necessarily more intimate—transactions, both with the world outside and with his or her ‘true soul,’ the naked self.” The description of Gatsby's self-transformation in chapter 6 of the novel stresses its lack of “intimacy” and the extent to which both Gatsby himself as well as his various audiences only got to regard him at a distance: as an “invention,” as a “conception,” as a “legend,” and as “news” (103-104). This chapter also emphasizes the turbulence or “dynamism” of Gatz's metamorphosis with such verbs as “spin” and “rock” and “tangle,” complemented by images of Gatsby as a master of “bracing” outdoor manual labor (104-105).

ROMANTIC READINESS

As a commentator on his own pursuit of such dynamic transactions and on the conditions shaping it, Dylan also takes on attributes of Nick Carraway, the commentator and Fitzgerald alter-ego, who records Gatsby's transformations. Like Dylan, Gatsby changes his name, with Carraway registering both Gatsby's “dynamic transactions” and his own repression of intimacy. In the confession that opens Gatsby, Carraway remembers joining in disparaging college friends' “quivering … revelations” with an insistence that “the world be in uniform and at a sort of moral attention forever” (6). With its refrain, “I was so much older then / I'm younger than that now,” Dylan's 1964 song “My Back Pages” even more emphatically enunciates a similarly divided stance. After the singer recalls his quest for a world “at moral attention” by picturing himself “in a soldier's stance,” he stresses in the last stanza his once overly vigilant antipathy to intimacy: “my noble guard stood hard when abstract threats / Too noble neglect / Deceived me into thinking I had something to protect.”

Dylan's confession early in “My Back Pages” of having “dreamed / Romantic facts of musketeers / Foundationed deep somehow” pointedly aligns his persona with the most pronounced effort Gatsby's narrator makes: finding or making “something gorgeous” out of “everything for which I have unaffected scorn” (6). The tension this effort produces helps account for Carraway's admittedly “rather literary” (8) voice. This voice swerves repeatedly in its account of Gatsby, sometimes displaying and sometimes chastening its own romantic excesses. In their self-satisfied version, these excesses appear as “romantic readiness” (6) and, in the censorious version, as “appalling sentimentality” (118). Such responses to Gatsby, to “the romantic speculation he inspired” (48), reflect the narrator's own susceptibilities to sentimental and romantic constructions. These surface in his early attraction to Jordan Baker, to “the way the last sunshine fell with romantic affection upon her glowing face” (18)—an attraction for which he later fastidiously censures himself—and in the voyeuristic rhapsody his “restless eye” prompts as it “picks out the romantic women on Fifth Avenue” and follows home in “the enchanted metropolitan twilight” as “loitered” with fellow solitaries “in front of windows” (61-62). Recurrently showing Nick as a window-gazer (182, 184), Fitzgerald has him evoke and embody here the romance of voyeurism and resigned exclusion that the Japanese novelist Haruki Murakami's appreciation of Dylan locates at the core of his achievement: “His voice,” which sounds “like a kid standing at the window watching the rain” (345), like the rain repeatedly filtering Nick's and the reader's closing glimpses of Gatsby (180-183). This romance of voyeurism abounds in Dylan's writing, though perhaps nowhere as effusively and self-reproachfully as in the 1966 Blonde on Blonde cut, “Visions of Johanna,” which opens with the singer observing “Louise and her lover so entwined” and then tempting listeners with rumors of “the all-night girls' escapades out on the E train,” only to deride, after a drawn-out harmonica interruption, his Carrawaysque alter-ego as a “little boy lost” who “takes himself so seriously” while recalling her “farewell kiss to me.”

Despite the Dylan singer's projecting this voyeuristic self-regard onto an alter-ego and despite Nick's self-reassurance that “no one would ever know or disapprove” of his Romanticized voyeurism, of course both the reader or listener and retrospective narrator or singer “know,” though perhaps only Fitzgerald's narrator “disapproves.” While Nick's seemingly conclusive abandonment of the ambiguous metropolis for the straightforward Midwest—the “city” in the “West” where “dwellings are still called through decades by a
family's name”—appears to confirm this censure, the confounding of any linear sense of arrival and departure at the end of *Gatsby* erodes the moral high ground on which Nick strives to stand, both in abandoning Eastern urban “sophistication and in reproaching his “younger and more vulnerable” (5) self.

**AMERICAN TIME-SPACE**

The contrast between Carraway, the decamping narrator, and Fitzgerald, his doggedly metropolitan author, also anticipates Dylan's narrative geography and the array of inconclusive arrivals and provisional departures this geography contains. One of Dylan's geographical narratives transforms an abandonment of the Midwest, which Dylan also views retrospectively and metonymically as simply “the West,” into a disheartening inescapable “story of the West.” “Talking New York,” the very first song on Dylan's first album concerns a guitar-toting young man “ramblin' outta the wild West / Leavin' towns that” the singer claims to “love the best” as he “come into New York town.” Just as his incredulity at “buildings goin' up to the sky” echoes Carraway's memorable view of “the city rising up across the river as the city seen for the first time” (73), so too Dylan's image of his West as a congeries of towns in “Talking New York” calls to mind Carraway's confession of his preference for “the bored, sprawling, swollen towns beyond the Ohio” over the “superiority” of the East (184). Dylan plays with familiar East-West “superiority/inferiority” tensions in showing the song's hero “in one of them coffee-houses” in Greenwich Village where the proprietor unwittingly affirms the narrator's western authenticity by rejecting him, telling him “You sound like a hillbilly / We want folksingers.” Calling someone a “hillbilly,” as Cecelia Tichi observes, encapsulates a broad historical and sociological narrative by which a monied, mannered, urban East has sought to exclude by disparagement and condescension a presumably vulgar, upstart, disruptive West (133-34). Carraway invokes this narrative with the realization that *Gatsby* “has been after all a story of the West, after all—Tom and Gatsby, Daisy and Jordan, and I were all Westerners, and perhaps we possessed some deficiency in common which made us subtly unadaptable to Eastern life” (184).

In an ironic turn at the end of “Talking New York,” the singer's return to the West, his announcement that he “headed out for them western skies” becomes self-canceling, like the first ending, the autobiographical homecoming ending of Nick Carraway's own narrative. After this first ending seems to resolve Nick's own autobiographical plot, Fitzgerald shows Nick recollecting a return to New York on business about a year after Gatsby's murder. This return prompts the novel's actual conclusion, Carraway's famous transhistorical meditation, his evocation and imaginative replacement of the suburban Long Island landscape where most of *The Great Gatsby* takes place (189).

Deferred and alternative endings abound in Dylan's songs, often turning on his signature switches between guitar and harmonica self-accompaniment. More memorably, endings turn on Dylan's management of lyrics and narrative, as in “The Ballad of Frankie Lee and Judas Priest.” In a false farewell reminiscent of *Gatsby*, Dylan's would-be Village folksinger in “Talkin' New York” welcomes the “western skies” to which he retreats with the phrase “Howdy, East Orange”—naming a suburban New Jersey city about ten miles from Manhattan, far closer to Times Square than even West Egg. This desire for and irreparable exile from the West surfaces comically in a single line on Dylan's next album, *Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*, in “Bob Dylan's Blues.” The line,

*The Lone Ranger and Tonto*
*They are ridin' down the line*
*Fixin' everybody's troubles*
*Everybody's 'cept mine*

sardonically deprives the singer of the superior virtue and justice public mythmakers customarily attribute to the West.

In a more elegiac vein, “Bob Dylan's Dream” on Dylan's next album, situates the Dylan persona “on a train
going west,” a stance identical to Carraway’s evoking “vivid memories” of school friends on Chicago-bound trains at the end of *Gatsby* (183). Here Dylan’s narrator recollects “the first few friends I had” and the way “we longed for nothin’ and were quite satisfied” in their illusion of immunity from “the world outside” and the conviction that “we could never get old.” Dylan’s narrator seems to buy into Gatsby’s illusion that “of course you can repeat the past” (116) until midsong, when he points out that the “chances” of recovering this state “really was a million to one” and in closing merges this Gatsby stance with the chastening Carraway position that opens this exchange, the reminder that “you can’t repeat the past” (116). Just as Fitzgerald lets the gap between a diminished present and an irretrievable past linger by having both Carraway and Gatsby repeat the phrase, “can’t repeat the past,” Dylan’s recorded vocal and instrumental performance reinforces this gap. It punctuates each intimation of his diminished present by interrupting the vocal’s steady guitar accompaniment with fermata harmonica solos.

Though elegiac strains in both works make time and history appear intractable, both Dylan’s songs and *Gatsby* present space and geography as easily manipulated. Gatsby’s striking relocation of San Francisco to a transcontinental “midwest” (67) and the drunken displacement of Biloxi to Tennessee (134) later in *Gatsby* belong to the same cartographic revisionism whereby Dylan places East Orange under “western skies.” Dylan also indulges in such remapping in “Just Like Tom Thumb Blues,” which sets a redundantly bilingual “Rue Morgue Avenue” in Juarez, and in “Bob Dylan’s 115th Dream,” which shifts the Mayflower landing to “the Bowery slums.”

Dylan elaborates this Gatsbyesque move most extravagantly at the close of his 1975 ballad “Tangled Up In Blue,” a trans-American odyssey like *Gatsby*. The song opens with the singer “headin’ out for the East Coast” and then abandoning a “car we drove as far as we could” somewhere “out West” and then working “in the great north woods and drifting down to New Orleans.” It ends with the narrator “still on the road headin’ for another joint.” All this map-scrambling moves, like Fitzgerald’s most accomplished prose, “in two directions at once” (McInerney 26), and culminates, like *Gatsby*, in giving the last word to the narrator’s sententious recognition that “the past was close behind.” Thus Dylan’s remembered odyssey ultimately fails, though providing much pleasure, in the form of verbal pyrotechnics, instrumental exuberance, and vocal surprise in reaching this realization. This argument between extravagance and fatalism gives narrative and descriptive credence to his closing realization that he and whomever he encountered on his odyssey “just saw” all the pursuit and evasion the song renders “from a different point of view.” With the acknowledgment of this contingency, the singer achieves a Carraway-like distance on his own odyssey. This distance promises liberation from youthful parochialism, the code of the Carraway “clan,” (7) or from the “illusion” that Dylan, voice dropping, associates with “all the people we used to know” at the end of “Tangled Up in Blue.”

This distance also provides both writers with the same sort of rhetorical leverage by turning their residual attachment to a lost home in the West into a distant, even Olympian, vantage point for viewing Americanness *tout cort*. According to David Minter, “Fitzgerald made the history and myths of the U.S.—promises kept and betrayed—his own” (112). Dylan claims a similar agenda as the omniscient first-person narrator who tells the history of American violence in “God on Our Side,” on his third album. Dylan follows Carraway in postulating the midwestern perspective as the national one: “My name it ain’t nothing, my age it ain’t less, the country I come from they call the midwest.”

This critical, even jeremiadic, distance presents all of U.S. history as a fiction, a story, a collection of hegemony-making books. In the last verse of “With God on Our Side,” Dylan admits that “words fill my head” rather than facts or convictions. A similar recognition informs both the self-referential epigraph to *Gatsby* and the opening paragraphs, which show the narrator mulling over his father’s words, along with his subsequent timetable name-scribbling (64). Dylan’s sense of reality as verbal construct appears most succinctly in “Love Minus Zero/No Limit”:

In the dime stores and bus stations
As Carraway illustrates at the end of *Gatsby*, the advantage of such a conviction lies in the susceptibility of “reality” to revision, critique, and erasure: “an obscene word, scrawled by some boy with a piece of brick, stood out clearly in the moonlight and I erased it, drawing my shoe raspingly along the stone” (188). Central to both writers' sensibilities is the understanding that the power of erasure and revision, which rest on an appreciation of the constructedness of our verbal and ideological universes, at once provokes and disciplines romanticizing impulses.

In Dylan's songs and in *Gatsby* this preoccupation with words extends to larger verbal packages, books. Early in “With God on Our Side” Dylan sings, “the history books tell it, they tell it so well the cavalry charged and the Indians fell,” while the next verse announces via poetic inversion, “the names of the heroes I was made to memorize.” The penultimate verse appeals to the most canonic book of all, citing the Bible's account of Judas betraying Jesus, but it leaves an opening for the reader to step outside its ordained constructions and those of school history books, by reminding the listener, “you'll have to decide whether Judas Iscariot had God on his side.” From Tom Buchanan's proto-Nazi reading recommendations in chapter one (17) to Gatsby's bookish self-fashioning as reflected in the Franklinesque plan-making that Mr. Gatz presents to the narrator before Gatsby's funeral and in the Hopalong Cassidy dime novel in which the narrator finds Gatsby's life-plan, a similar awareness of how books and words make people and peoples—or nations—pervades *Gatsby*. Fitzgerald plays on the distinctly American reverberations in the word “West” by inscribing Hopalong Cassidy, as does Dylan with recurring references to the dime-novel and Hollywood West: to the Lone Ranger, to the Cisco Kid, to cavalry-and-Indian battles.

Dylan's most conspicuous stress on the verbal and imaginative construction of America comes in “Bob Dylan's 115th Dream,” which provides a critical retrospect on the familiar stock of formative discovery and settlement narratives with references and allusions that recall the “Dutch explorers” and the “New world” that “pandered” to these explorers' utopian fantasies in Carraway's closing meditation. Dylan's singer frames his announcement, “I think I'll call it America I said as we hit land” (emphasis added), with references to “riding on the Mayflower” and to “Captain Arab” (for Ahab) “saying boys forget the whale.” The song closes with the narrator's abandonment of the New World, leaving “Arab stuck on some whale,” out West and “married to the deputy sheriff of the jail.” Dylan's dream song saves for last “the funniest thing,” his final encounter with “three ships” whose captain “said his name was Columbus,” to whom the singer “just said, ‘Good luck.’”

Standing at once beyond and within such constructions of self and nation, both Fitzgerald's narrator and the recurring voice of Dylan's first, most influential, decade strive for and achieve a cosmopolitan perspective that takes them and their audience beyond the U.S. western substratum of their work. The cover picture of Dylan's suggestively titled 1965 album *Bringing It All Back Home* depicts the artist very much at home, viewing the album's owner from a worldly rather than a parochial vantage point. Shot in “an old Victorian mansion” along the Hudson, this mockingly Gatsbyesque “stagy cover photo” situates the performer in “a setting” that was “elegant and chic” with Dylan looking “alert and interested … [.] not detached as he had been on his previous albums” and projecting an “image of choice—the sophisticated Bob Dylan—the jet-setter, arbiter of taste … [.] not some hayseed folksinger” (Spitz 272). The most emphatic announcement of Dylan's integrating worldliness—politics and commerce—with the imperatives of artistic expression appears in the foreground of this cover. A cover-within-a-cover picture of *Time* features President Lyndon Baines Johnson as man-of-the-year standing out in a field of competing covers, a blurred Jean Harlow magazine and a fanned-out pile of albums by blues and folk artists who influenced Dylan. The pairing here of the “respectable” history-producing *Time*, which with its ubiquitous, Big Brother-like “staring covers” threatened, according to Allen Ginsberg, to “run” every American's “emotional life” (“America”), with down-market fanzine, recalls Fitzgerald's agenda in “evoking newspapers, magazines, and their influence” in *Gatsby*: to
indict the way the mass-circulation magazine “represents coerced common judgment” (Berman, *World* 135; *cf. Gatsby* 48, 103) or, as the *a clef* Dylan figure in Scott Spencer’s novel, *Rich Man’s Table*, puts it:

What kills you is the consensus, what you read in the papers and hear on the television, it's an invisible fence of received wisdom, and government-inspected ideas, it's the conspiracy of common knowledge. Common knowledge is worse than lies. Common knowledge eats the truth and then shits it out and buries it.

(236)

In the background of this album cover, holding a bent elbow over LBJ's face, a swarthy raven-haired young woman in a short-sleeved red peignoir points a cigarette at an off-white neoclassical mantle while looking defiantly at the camera. Her pose intimates stereotypically Old World worldliness, if not decadence. Evidence of Dylan's attention to pitting clichés of European sophistication and corruption against equally compelling, equally hackneyed, ideas of American innocence and ignorance surfaced comically in the utopianly titled talking blues, “I Shall Be Free,” on Dylan's second album, in which the singer imagines:

Well, my telephone rang it would not stop.
It’s President Kennedy callin’ me up.
He said, 'My friend Bob, what do we need to make the country grow?'

Posing as presidential confidant, the sort of mysteriously influential role popularly imputed to Gatsby (*Gatsby* 48, 103), Dylan recalls his counsel:

I said, 'My friend, Jack, Brigitte Bardot, Anita Ekberg, Sophia Loren."
(Put ‘em all in the same room with Ernest Borgnine.)

A similar though subtler play on images informs the *Bringing It All Back Home* cover: In contrast to the woman's pose, Dylan faces the camera with a weary gaze, his lips on the verge of pout. He wears all muted colors and shares the foreground of the photo with a gray long-haired kitten set between his hands and staring straight at the camera and with a Cold War-style yellow and black “fallout shelter” sign turned on its side and partly blurred by the overexposure-induced circle of light that serves as an inner frame for the photo. This mise-en-scène seems to aim at the “continuous and cumulative effect” Lionel Trilling ascribed to Fitzgerald's *Gatsby* style, which weds “tenderness” with “a true firmness of moral judgment” (243-44).

Critique also seems to inform the topical allusiveness that textures *Gatsby*: allusions to immigration-policy controversies; to popular songs, movies, and familiar advertisements (Berman, *Modern* 19-20, 24-28, 46-48, 128). Recurring snippets from the 1920s hit song “Ain't We Got Fun,” the looming image of an optician’s billboard, Myrtle Wilson's utopian shopping fantasies, and Daisy Buchanan's vision of Gatsby as “you know the advertisement of the man” (125) all illustrate the extent to which consumption and mass entertainment contest Fitzgerald's narrator's opening demand for unstinting “moral attention” (6). Topicality (in the form of Bette Davis, Hitchcock's *Psycho*, James Meredith, Medgar Evers, Emmett Till, boxers Davey Moore and Hurricane Carter, hit man Joey Gallo, No-Doz caffeine pills, and pillbox hats) functions similarly throughout Dylan's songs. Often this topicality belongs to an American exceptionalist utopianism and the claims to virtue it sanctions, as in Dylan's “Gates of Eden,” “The Hour that the Ship Comes In,” and Dylan's answer to the labor anthem, “I Dreamed I Saw Joe Hill Last Night,” “I Dreamed I Saw Augustine.” In contrast to these compositions' meditative and elegiac politics, Dylan protest songs, such as “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carol” (Edmundson 52-3) and “Masters of War,” call to mind Nick Carraway's unsettling turn from “reserving all judgments” (5), the balancing of contraries and ironies and ambiguities that Fitzgerald judged the crux of genius in *The Jazz Age*, to the expressly moralizing sentence Fitzgerald has Carraway pronounce against the Buchanans at the end of *Gatsby*. Carraway states, “They were careless people, Tom and Daisy—they smashed things and creatures around them and then retreated back into their money or their vast
carelessness or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made” (187-88). Morally charged commentary in both artists' writings seems at once to prompt and to deny hopes of social betterment.

CONCLUSION: SHARING AN IMPASSE

Both Fitzgerald's and Dylan's ambivalent stress on worldly, even topical, engagement demands a commensurate verbal style. In his reassessment of *Gatsby*, George Garret calls it a “wildly experimental novel” with a “composite style whose chief demonstrable point appears to be the inadequacy of any style (or any single means of perception or single point of view) by which to do justice to the story” (114). Dylan articulates just such an artistic credo in his early song, “Restless Farewell,” which begins complaining that “the silent night is shattered by the sounds inside my mind,” prompting the singer to turn back to consider “the signs,” just as Carraway ponders signs in the form of a Long Island Railroad timetable and an optician's billboard. After an interruptive, contemplation-provoking harmonica break, Dylan concludes:

I got the restless hungry feeling
That don't mean no one no good.

He then softens this confession of malevolence with a Whitmanesque gesture, a profession of egalitarian inclusiveness:

... everything I've been saying, friend,
You could say it just as good.
You're right from your side and I'm right from mine.
We're both just one too many mornings and a thousand miles behind.

Dylan's rhyming here of “good” with itself hammers home the inadequacy, the inevitability of stylistic impasse, the recognition of which Garret imputes to Fitzgerald. This recognition echoes in Carraway's resignation at his failure to communicate with Tom Buchanan at the close of *Gatsby*: “I felt suddenly as though I were talking to a child” (188).

The management of such difficulty in *Gatsby* and Dylan's songs is remarkably similar. It consists of rehearsing the inadequacies Garret cites in order to overcome them, embracing stock vocabularies and tropes as a means of purging their staleness. Christopher Ricks (who treats Dylan as a legitimate heir to Fitzgerald's precursor, Keats) praised Dylan as Shakespeare's equal, citing Dylan's “intuition as to how a cliché may incite reflection, and not preclude” it (“Clichés” 61; *Keats* 98). Such an intuition surfaces in Fitzgerald's play on almost all of Tom Buchanan's global pronouncements—on the Nordic race (17), on “self-control” and in coining the cliché “Mr. Nobody From Nowhere” (137).

Fitzgerald's rendering of Wolfsheim's mawkish redundant reminiscence about the “old Metropole” rests on sustained elaboration of this intuition (74-75). While lunching with Carraway and Gatsby, Wolfsheim “brooded gloomily” under “Presbyterian nymphs”—a brutal counterpoint to the virile, Jewish, unabashedly corrupt Wolfsheim presiding over a space “filled with faces dead and gone. Filled with friends now gone forever.” The redundant phrase “dead and gone” and the presiding nymphs evoke a “sentimental atmosphere”—a decidedly clichéd ambience, which Fitzgerald empties of reassuring familiarity by having Wolfsheim turn from the cliché to a cheerful account of his friend Rosy Rosenthal's gangland-style execution at the Metropole, a turn the narrator stretches with the observation that “a succulent hash” prompted Wolfsheim to forget the “sentimental atmosphere” he had established. Fitzgerald completes this scene's alienation effect with an oxymoronic modifier, which at once stresses the inadequacy of language to depict Wolfsheim and the narrator's pleasure in trying: “he began to eat with a ferocious delicacy.”
Fitzgerald also purges “sentimental atmosphere” from matters even more susceptible to sentimentalizing, from “love” itself. As Leslie Fiedler observed, “For Fitzgerald, ‘love’ was essentially frustration and yearning” (316). Fiedler went on to ascribe Fitzgerald's antipathy to conventional, sentimental renderings of love to the way in which Fitzgerald “identified himself with that sexual revolution which the ‘20's thought of as their special subject.” As the voice of a successor “sexual revolution,” Dylan further unpacks the sentimental discourse of romance by disclosing its unspoken sexual underside, which the phrase “four-letter-word” usually fits, most forthrightly in the refrain and title phrase of “Love is Just A Four Letter Word.”

This impetus and talent for unpacking bromides and platitudes also shapes many of Dylan's rhyme-and-image sequences. The 1965 “Tombstone Blues,” for example, takes “Gypsy Davey” from an old English folk ballad and has him arrive with a “blowtorch” and an assistant from the Cisco Kid TV westerns, “his faithful slave Pedro.” Pedro provides a stamp collection and, with it the holiest modern American cliché of all, a phrase right out of Dale Carnegie's best-seller—“a fantastic collection of stamps to win friends and influence, …” In the 1965 recording, Dylan's voice pauses at “influence,” thus calling into question its grammatical status: Is “influence” here Dale Carnegie's verb, minus its predicate, or a sentence-ending noun? After this pause, Dylan swerves away from Dale Carnegie's stock phrase and substitutes the expected predicate “people” with the phrase “his uncle.” This substitution reinforces the cliché-defeating switch by breaking the rhyme-pattern in the verse (camps / tramps / stamps—uncles) as Dylan does throughout “Tombstone Blues.”

The force of these lines also lies in their image juxtapositions, a characteristic of Dylan's style that peaked in the late sixties on the album Blonde on Blonde and in such narratives on the John Wesley Harding album as “The Ballad of Frankie Lee and Judas Priest.” In the Wolfsheim passage above, Fitzgerald presents Carraway as a student of “startling juxtapositions,” the most memorable of which may be the juxtaposition of Gatsby's soft, rich billowy shirts and Daisy's stormy crying (97-98). This stress on juxtaposition in Gatsby anticipates Fitzgerald's famous pronouncement in The Crack Up that “the test of a first-rate intelligence” is “the ability to hold to opposed ideas in the mind at the same time” (69). Just as Fitzgerald's Gatsby style results from the way his “sentences achieve an unhappy marriage” (Godden 80), Dylan's style in his most memorable songs rests on “awkward marriages” between melody and lyric, image and syntax (Thomson). The result in both writers' work is, in Philip Weinstein's assessment of Fitzgerald, art that “mocks both closure and exposure” (143) and writing, in Frank Kermode's verdict on Dylan, that’s “tough on allegorists” (188).

Throughout American literary history such resistance to allegory and antipathy to closure has marked the aspiration and the differentia of distinctly American writing, as hallmarks of the poet Emerson famously summoned in 1844 the artist who provokes “the imagination … to flow and not to freeze,” the antithesis of the mystic who “nails a symbol to one sense, which was true for a moment but soon becomes old and false” (322). Leading up to Emerson's account of language as “vehicular and transitive,” this devaluation of belief in favor of irresolution echoes in the “transitory moment” at the center of the narrator's closing meditation in Gatsby, a meditation that follows from Nick's inconclusive departure from the East and from the romance he sought there.

The “un-American” “mysticism” that Emerson disparages also figures as Fitzgerald's antagonist in his rigorously ambivalent limning of Catholic priestcraft throughout his fiction. The most notable instances include Father Schwartz, whom Fitzgerald's sympathetically severe narrator leaves “muttering inarticulate and heart-broken words in ‘Absolution,’” which Matthew Bruccoli cites as Gatsby's precursor (Babylon 150; Gatsby vii-ix), and the defeated “papal cross” with which Dick Diver “blessed the [Riviera] beach” he created and from which his own corrosive charm and corrupting knowledge has banished him (Tender 5-6, 314). Similarly acknowledging the aesthetic appeal and the cognitive dubiousness of priestcraft, Dylan's 1967 anti-allegory, “The Ballad of Frankie Lee and Judas Priest,” features an unnamed pallbearer reminding listeners that “nothing is revealed” before announcing “the moral of this story, the moral of this song.” This “moral” boils down to an admonition: “Don't go mistaking paradise for that home across the road”—or, as
Gatsby instructs, that home across the bay.

These two passages chasten utopianism while warning against the sort of “revelation” sanctioned by the apocalyptic and utopian ideologies to which Gatsby's eponymous hero and his Veblenian antagonist, Tom Buchanan, both subscribe. This convergence illustrates the role that Fitzgerald and Dylan share, as anti-prophets who made myths of their selves while in their art they undermined the very ground on which such myths rest.

Works Cited


**Criticism: Robert Seguin (essay date winter 2000)**

In the following essay, Seguin uses the theme of “ressentiment” (loosely, the envy of the lower toward the upper classes) to explore Fitzgerald's social sensibilities in Gatsby, also noting similarities between Fitzgerald's novel and Willa Cather's A Lost Lady.

Following his bout of emotional exhaustion in the mid-1930s, F. Scott Fitzgerald came to describe what he called his “crack-up” in more than strictly personal terms. In his meditation on his depression, the crack-up expands outward in waves from Fitzgerald as individual, encompassing disparate social and cultural materials and achieving a certain allegorical intensity. At one point, the shape of Fitzgerald's psyche becomes expressive of the very curve of national history, from the bull-market twenties to the depressed thirties:

My own happiness in the past often approached such an ecstasy that I could not share it even with the person dearest to me but I had to walk it away in quiet streets and lanes with only fragments of it to distil into little lines in books—and I think that my happiness, or talent for self-delusion or what you will, was an exception. It was not the natural thing but the unnatural—unnatural as the Boom; and my recent experience parallels the wave of despair that swept the nation when the Boom was over.

(Crack-Up 84)

There is an extravagance to this declaration, an extravagance I want to take seriously. I will thus assume as my working hypothesis that Fitzgerald is entirely correct in this bit of analytical retrospection, and that the discontinuous sine waves of emotions and history can, in some exceptional cases, become temporarily synchronized. Indeed, the nexus mediating between the individual subject and the social ground in this passage seems principally an affective one, and in general Fitzgerald's writerly metabolism, its shape and trajectory through time, appears tied with unusual intimacy to a consistent and highly wrought emotional set. This affective matrix, as the above quote from The Crack-Up illustrates, is often self-consciously foregrounded as a kind of interpretive apparatus in its own right. What I wish to pursue in these pages, then, is the manner in which a particular affect can attain a deeper historical resonance, how it might furnish a singular set of conduits or relays between the facts of an individual life, a determinate set of aesthetic practices, and the specific rhythms of a given historical moment.

The social and political sources and functions of the emotions in general remain poorly understood, screened off in part by a tendency to grasp their material complexity as a matter of the individual subject as such, of one's own idiosyncratic makeup. The case of Fitzgerald prompts us, however, to explore a little further, to imagine the affective realm as one of concrete social expression, complete with precise temporal dynamics and figural embodiments which variously mediate social content and lived experience. The specific affect that I focus on here is, not happiness, but rather ressentiment, “resentment” in English. I retain the French to remind the reader of its Nietzschean usage, wherein it already begins to assume the form of a social-structural passion, as Nietzsche (in a politically conservative manner) positions ressentiment as the principal class affect—the “smouldering hatred of a peasant,” as Fitzgerald would describe his own attitude toward the upper classes (Crack-Up 77)—directed at the putatively superior aristocracy and related titled or monied groups. While it remains an ideological maneuver to interpret progressive and egalitarian political movements in terms of envy and hatred—a move that marks ressentiment's discursive translation into what Fredric Jameson has termed an ideologeme, one of the minimal units of antagonistic class discourse—nonetheless ressentiment is real, a corrosive emotion that extends across the breadth of the class structure, the very tone of both its grim dramas of rising and falling and its petty quotidian power games alike. Such a choice of affect, one that already displays vivid social content, perhaps makes our overall task here somewhat easier, and allows us to specify at the outset that class dynamics—one of Fitzgerald's abiding interests—will be a central preoccupation in what follows.
But things become complicated at once, as I suggest that what we discover in Fitzgerald is not so much *ressentiment* in its naked aspect but rather a kind of sublimated and softened form of it, its deeper energies still active but its surface manifestations, its characteristic linguistic expressions, having undergone a decided shift. Certainly the requisite familial context was in place for the early nurturing of social slights and resentments: Fitzgerald expressed lifelong shame over his déclassé upbringing and was haunted by his father's career failures, and as a child frequently prayed “that they might not have to go to the poorhouse” (Mizener 38). Though never actually in poverty, the experience of growing up on the frayed edges of more well-to-do neighborhoods marked him deeply, resulting in a lifelong sense of social unease and inculcating a kind of compensatory snobbishness. The full metamorphosis of such attitudes into an aesthetic practice occurs only with *The Great Gatsby*, and only after, I would argue, the intercession of another literary practice, that of Willa Cather's in *A Lost Lady*. It is only after Cather's literary mediation that Fitzgerald finds himself able to rewrite a certain personal history in consonance with economic and social developments, suffused with the characteristic notes of loss, of regret, of diminution—the lyrical echoes of feeling oneself to have been burned by History. Hence this essay will in a small way be a study of that rather old fashioned thing, literary influence, but in a new key, the emphasis upon affect and historical rhythm designed to aid in my larger purpose: a clearer understanding of the ultimate social grounds of the literary achievement that is Fitzgerald's in *The Great Gatsby*. I will begin by looking at the inter-textual currents flowing between the two writers before turning in the second part of the essay to a closer examination of *The Great Gatsby* itself.

In *The Crack-Up*, Fitzgerald invokes the voice of an unnamed woman who urges him not to think small but instead embrace his breakdown in world-historical fashion: “By God, if I ever cracked, I'd try to make the world crack with me. Listen! The world only exists through your apprehension of it, and so it's much better to say that it's not you that's cracked—it's the Grand Canyon” (74). By the end of his account, as we saw above, Fitzgerald seemed willing to entertain such an approach. In 1936, the same year that *The Crack-Up* was written, Willa Cather, in a famous remark in the headnote to *Not Under Forty*, echoed something of Fitzgerald's interlocutor: “The world broke in two in 1922 or thereabouts” (v). Here Cather grandly names a crack in the world, and while there is no clear evidence that she suffered the sort of psychic ordeal that Fitzgerald experienced, still the year 1922 was an exceptionally difficult one for her: having undergone several operations related to gastrointestinal troubles, she was in poor health for much of the year; her great love Nellie McClung moved permanently to Europe; and her novel *One of Ours* was published that fall to harsh reviews that pierced her usual stoicism and wounded her sharply. As if seeking a kind of solace or retreat, she joined the ceremonial and tradition-oriented Episcopal church that December, signaling a renewed interest in religion and the beginnings of a slow movement into the past that would increasingly mark her fiction.

The novel that Cather published after this “year of the break” was *A Lost Lady*. In it, the prairie town of Sweet Water has decidedly seen better days. The town’s leading citizens, the Forresters, are facing decline: Daniel Forrester, the incorruptible railroad magnate known mainly as the Captain, has suffered business failures and a stroke, while his beautiful wife Marian begins spending too much time with dubious locals like the unpleasant Ivy Peters, a crude and ambitious young man whose principal desire is to ascend the town’s social ladder and displace the Forresters. Their troubles provoke a wave of hitherto suppressed and unsuspected bouts of spite and resentment from those who no longer regard the Forresters as models of civility and citizenship, or who no longer see in them the fulfillment of their own most powerful desires. In short, the veil of social decorum in Sweet Water is tearing apart, revealing a parched and bitter social and affective landscape.

As is well known, Fitzgerald read *A Lost Lady* in 1924, while he was working on the first draft of *The Great Gatsby*. He subsequently sent a copy of *Gatsby* to Cather with a letter acknowledging a writerly debt to her and even asking her leave for his close modeling of some passages in *The Great Gatsby* on *A Lost Lady*. Critical work on the precise nature of this debt has tended to follow Fitzgerald's lead and concentrate on the question of a certain transference of style. Others have pointed specifically to Fitzgerald's rendering of the
first-person narrator in *The Great Gatsby*: the Nick Carraway we know today only fully emerges after Fitzgerald reads *A Lost Lady*, where there is, if not a first-person narrator, at least a limited third-person narrator who closely follows the perspective of Niel Herbert and his ambivalent fascination with the charming Marian Forrester (a relationship echoed in *The Great Gatsby*). While these stylistic and technical aspects are important, I prefer to grasp the matter of influence more in terms of an awakening or sharpening of an aesthetic or theoretical problem field. From this perspective, what comes into focus is the question of social representation, of how to narrate social and historical content, a primary concern as both Cather and Fitzgerald are equally concerned with questions of class and social structure. In particular, it is Cather's use of affect as a means of charting social space and cultural change that Fitzgerald learned from but also altered for his own purposes: what is an aesthetic pedagogy is also, and at a certain level indistinguishably, an emotional pedagogy.

For it is indeed *ressentiment*, a searing, class-driven force, that grips Sweet Water. In addition to the hate-driven Ivy Peters, the townspeople in general are portrayed as sheer vermin whose sole purpose is to invade and bring down the Forresters' once elegant hilltop home. Even some of the wives of those "handworkers and homesteaders" who have settled the area, women who elsewhere in the Cather imaginary might merit considerable sympathy, fall prey to this bitter passion. When Marian Forrester falls ill, they have their opportunity: into the house they trounce, rooting through the closets and cellar and discovering, to their satisfaction, that in its diminished state there is really "nothing remarkable about the place at all!" (138).

Meanwhile, Niel Herbert, the young man who at first idealizes Marian only to become disillusioned with her once the household begins to decline, is himself marked as déclassé, a state that at length occasions his own bout of *ressentiment*. Niel's father has lost his property, and "there was an air of failure and defeat about his family" (30). Niel's status clearly informs his basic perspective: he can libidinally invest in the Forresters as representatives of a realm of wealth and beauty once available to him, but turns on Marian when the same fate befalls her after the death of her husband. Hence, the narrator's striking statement that "what Niel most held against Mrs. Forrester [was] that she was not willing to immolate herself, like the widow of all these great men [that is, the bourgeois pioneers], and die with the pioneer period to which she belonged" (169), can be understood as less an exaggerated expression of pain at the passing of obsolete ideals than an externalization and transference of Niel's own self-hatred, the self-hatred of the déclassé whose imaginary escape from failure has been definitively blocked.

The resemblances to *The Great Gatsby* are evident. Nick Carraway shares with Niel an ambivalent attraction to those of higher social status as well as an air of failure (Nick does not finally make it in the East and returns to the Midwest, to the bosom of his family and the hardware business). The texts also share a concern with the real or imaginary fluidity of class positions—the apparent increase in the permeability of the upper social strata. What seems absent from the parched and intolerable social world of Sweet Water is any imaginative space of escape, or at least this space is present only minimally in the figure of the Blum boys, sons of German immigrants who are clearly marked as peasants (that is, Old World types who know nothing of American democratic ways). There exists between them and Marian a natural bond of sympathy, a note of interclass harmony at odds with the rest of the novel and very different from that "smouldering anger" of which Fitzgerald spoke.

If we imagine the vocation of narrative to be the working through of the various representational possibilities inherent in a given social content, the narrative task remaining after the aesthetic and ideological work of *A Lost Lady* is a more complete envisioning of some alternative or negation of Sweet Water's social bitterness. This task was taken up not only in *The Great Gatsby* but also by Cather herself in her next novel, *The Professor's House*, published in 1925, the same year as *The Great Gatsby*. In *The Professor's House*, this effort emerges first in a more fully elaborated version of the relationship between Marian and the Blum boys. Here there is a naturally harmonious relation between the Professor, a slightly aloof man of dark Spanish aspect who is figured as an aristocrat, and his peasant opposite, the earthy German seamstress Augusta. More
crucial, though, is the figure of Tom Outland, described as an orphaned “tramp boy” who roams the Southwest as a cowboy until he eventually falls in with some Jesuits who clean him up and teach him some Latin. This rudimentary education soon launches him toward a metamorphosis into a scientific genius: chemist, physicist, and a mean amateur archaeologist to boot. Still, he retains a roughhewn and naive charm that wins over any social situation, and almost everyone in the novel is or was in love with him. In short, he's a wholly implausible fantasy figure, a utopian fusion of High and Low in all the cultural and social senses of those terms, a kind of “classless” narrative register. At some level Cather's novel recognizes this very implausibility, for Tom is already dead when the narrative opens. The only extended exposure to him that we receive is in the form of an interpolated first-person account of one of his Southwest adventures.

Is not Jay Gatsby a similar wish-fulfillment figure, intensely if variously invested in by those around him? His obsessive history with Daisy begins, of course, when he steps across the threshold of her house in Louisville, traces of his impoverished class background wiped clean by the “invisible cloak” of his military uniform. Bootlegger, Oxford man, distinguished veteran, rumored murderer: the sense of implausibility drapes him like a cheap suit. Rather than registering that implausibility indirectly, at the edges of the narrative as Cather does with Outland, Fitzgerald pulls that very uncertainty wholly within the perspective of Nick Carraway, creating a figure who alternately doubts and endorses Gatsby, or who sometimes seems to do both at the same time. Perhaps more importantly, the Nick/Gatsby dyad affords Fitzgerald the opportunity of critically restaging the thematics of resentment found in A Lost Lady. In Cather's novel, they had been used to chart in a lucid fashion the shifting social dynamics of Sweet Water; right alongside them, however, was a persistent register of idealized romanticism, waxing nostalgic about the faded ideals of the original Western pioneers. Cather puts some efforts into keeping these domains separate, marking the romantic imaginings as belonging to the past and the various resentments as part of the contemporary moment, but at certain points, particularly in the figure of Niel Herbert, the two strains are sufficiently conjoined, suggesting a rather more interdependent and symbiotic relationship.

In The Great Gatsby, Fitzgerald seizes upon this more conflicted and ambivalent possibility, interweaving romanticism and resentment more intensely and in the process transforming both. Again, this is chiefly in the consciousness of Nick, where a related kind of splitting occurs. Characteristic of someone suffering from resentments of his own, Nick attributes resentment to all those around Gatsby, those who emblematize the “foul dust” that envelops and destroys him. Nick reserves for himself and Gatsby the more lyrical and romantic registers. It is the textual productivity of this conjoined affect machine that I wish to draw attention to here, one which seeks in its own fashion the eradication of the present. Fitzgerald’s aesthetic practice creates a sensitive apparatus for the detection of new socio-historical content, one which has presented something of a conundrum to later critics in regards to its possible political and ideological valences. The novel has famously been taken as both a clinical exposé and a ringing affirmation of the American dream, as radical and conservative all at once. I think here of Fitzgerald’s own characterization of himself in 1924 as “a pessimist, [and] a communist (with Nietzschean overtones)” (Brucelli and Jackson 270), certainly an interesting phrase from our present perspective, implying as it does a simultaneous fealty and animus toward social hierarchy.4 Something of this dynamic is present in Cather as well, where some hierarchical relations are destructive while others point toward an imagined self-transcendence (though her generally conservative ideological investments are more readily limned). This works itself out in intricate ways in Fitzgerald.

In his 1932 essay “My Lost City,” one of several pieces collected in The Crack-Up which center on loss and dissipation, Fitzgerald recalls a striking moment from sometime in 1920 when This Side of Paradise was out and selling well, and he was on top of the world: “And lastly from that period I remember riding in a taxi one afternoon between very tall buildings under a mauve and rosy sky; I began to bawl because I had everything I wanted and knew I would never be so happy again” (29). His crying is precipitated, not by happiness itself, but via a secondary and temporally removed operation, as if Fitzgerald was at that moment imaginatively placing himself ten or twenty years in the future, a future already assumed to be diminished in comparison to that present, looking back on the moment and thereby generating what appears to be an intense regret. This
recalls the stark process of inexorable declension announced at the opening of “The Crack-Up”: “Of course all life is a process of breaking down […]” (69). It is a process that follows various paths, with distinct temporalities: some psychic blows are registered quickly, while others are more stealthy and only come to consciousness long after the fact. The latter is the form taken by Fitzgerald's trauma, as he realizes that for two years he has been an empty shell, a man merely going through the motions of living. It is in either case a peremptory affair, seemingly less a matter of inexorable Spenglerian decline—a minor interest of Fitzgerald's, and another Nietzschean motif—than of a sudden rupture, or a series of staggered, unpredictable blows. In his writing from this period he broods on such rhythms, imagining, as above, similar occurrences much earlier in his life, in what amount to dress rehearsals for the definitive crack-up in the thirties. Recalling again in “Early Success” the time of his first rush of good fortune, he notes that “it is a short and precious time—for when the mist rises in a few weeks, or a few months, one finds that the very best is over” (Crack-Up 86). Or, after a distressing visit to Princeton during that same period: “But on that day in 1920 most of the joy went out of my success” (89). First months, then weeks, now days—what takes shape in the movement of these reminiscences is a kind of vanishing point of experience, a hole slowly opening up within the frame of a (now past) present such that immediacy is hollowed out and slips rapidly out of one's grasp. The duration of experience steadily shrinks until, as in the limousine, Fitzgerald is in a sense after or beyond the moment even as he lives it, caught in a complex movement of proleptic retroactivity and its attendant affective correlatives of loss and longing.

“But one was now a professional”: with this rather grim-faced assertion from “Early Success” Fitzgerald introduces what is in effect the counter-temporality to that more breach or rupture-oriented one just examined. The advent of this, too, occurs around 1920, when This Side of Paradise is due out: “While I waited for the novel to appear, the metamorphosis of amateur into professional began to take place—a sort of stitching together of your whole life into a pattern of work, so that the end of one job is automatically the beginning of another” (86). Here then is an unbroken continuum, a seamless expanse stretching to the ends of time, one whose inner logic maintains a peculiar symbiosis with the multiply-segmented breakdown line, at once a countervailing force and a kind of incitement. Fitzgerald never stopped lauding what he called the “old virtues” of work and courage, but he was also perpetually bitter over the extensive amount of inferior (he thought) writing he had to do, chiefly for popular magazines, in order to maintain his notoriously extravagant lifestyle—work which he felt kept him from his real vocation as novelist. A professional, then, is not quite an artist, or not only one; rather, a professional is someone for whom every moment is at least potentially one of work, a position familiar enough to intellectual and cultural laborers whose generally privileged and satisfying work is shadowed by this disconcerting temporal structure. This is overcoded in Fitzgerald's case by his early terror of the poorhouse, suggesting that he was being oddly evasive in his characterization of that peasantlike rage which supposedly marked his feeling toward the wealthy. Setting aside the anachronism, what emerges from the poorhouse in this society is not a peasant but a proletarian; the deeper fear of this potential destiny, like some alternate life line lodged inside his actual one, colored his class metabolism. It is thus striking that the chapter of Marx's Capital that he perhaps knew best was the central one on the working day (that “terrible chapter,” he called it [Crack-Up 290]). Here Marx precisely notes that, considered in the abstract, the very definition of the worker is that of a person whose every instant of lived time (minus the necessities of eating and sleeping) can be considered potential labor time. This is a “stitching together” into an infernal and inhuman continuity that resonates with Fitzgerald's own conception of his craft, constituting something like the “inner ressentiment” of the writing profession as such.

Signs of these competing temporalities are present throughout The Great Gatsby. Some of Daisy's remarks, remarkable for their simultaneous evocation of a breathless excitement and a peculiar sadness, elicit this competition: “‘In two weeks it'll be the longest day of the year.’ She looked at us all radiantly. ‘Do you always watch for the longest day of the year and then miss it? I always watch for the longest day in the year and then miss it’” (12). This is Fitzgerald again in the taxi, in some ways a textbook lesson about the absence of presence: you move toward a future moment, one which in this case promises some particular enchantment, then suddenly you are on the far side of it, “it” having never really taken place—or perhaps it took place
without you, which might well be Nick's great fear—leaving you with only a vague regret. Or a slightly different version: "‘What'll we do with ourselves this afternoon?' cried Daisy, ‘and the day after that, and the next thirty years?’" (118). Here, rather than the vanishing nodal point of the longest day, we have the setting up of a sharp anticipation, then, leaping across a suddenly empty-feeling thirty years, a desolate stretch perhaps more akin to the world of the “professional.” Jordan Baker catches the flavor of this: “Don't be morbid” she says at once to Daisy, at which point Daisy herself is on the verge of tears (118).

These examples rhetorically concretize and enact in miniature much of the prevailing mood of the novel as a whole, dramatizing the absent or hollow center which animates it—the invented life, the glamorous ephemera, the death in which it culminates. In them the present wavers just a little, not unlike those gaps or seams Nick perceives in Gatsby's self-presentation. These seams afford a glimpse of the dull machinery behind what Nick describes as the gorgeous “unbroken series of successful gestures” (2) that constitute Gatsby's personality.

“My incredulity was submerged in fascination now,” Nick says when Gatsby informs him of war decorations received from the Montenegrin government. “It was like skimming hastily through a dozen magazines” (67). This makes of Gatsby a virtual parable of the modernist crisis of Schein or aesthetic appearance, as a host of processes during this period—from painterly abstraction, to Dadaist interventions, to the increasing autonomy of narrative episodes and even of the sentence itself—threatened the aesthetic object with a collapse back into its initial raw materials: smudges of paint on canvas, black marks on a page, or (in Tolstoy's famous example of the theater) people milling about and occasionally talking on a raised platform. Indeed, Mitchell Breitwieser posits Gatsby as a kind of modernist impresario, a Long Island Le Corbusier whose enormous parties strive toward the totality itself, liquor-fueled villes radieuses which stand as prolegomena “to the construction of a society utterly responsive to unification by a single design” (32). But the trick can fall flat, the plan can be seen through, and those who have invested considerable time and effort participating in a particular elaboration of Schein can turn away in bewilderment and hostility (a hostility Nick will be quick to attribute to those around him and Gatsby). Gatsby as Gesamtkunstwerk thus falls short of realization and is shunned and disowned, a certain failure of aesthetic possibility being at one and the same time the allegory of the failure of a dual social and national possibility itself conceived largely in aesthetic terms. This is a persistent theme in American letters, from Hawthorne through Williams and West and beyond, and I will return below to its further implications.

There is a particular sort of excess figured in moments like Daisy's outbursts or in others like Gatsby's straightfaced offering of an anecdote of his life while seemingly doubled-up with laughter at the same time. They have in them something overwrought or histrionic, a straining to express more than is possible (“I'm p-paralyzed with happiness” [9]), or a rapid inflation and sudden deflation, like a balloon quickly filling then bursting. This excess, and there are perhaps different forms of it, is the most characteristic motif or pattern in the novel. This excess is produced when the generalized ressentiment of Cather and the social portrait she fashions is drawn within one centering consciousness or point of view, where it meshes with a certain expressive tonality and becomes a kind of aesthetic resource in its own right. Ressentiment in A Lost Lady already had a formal complexity to it, at once temporal and emotional: a rage directed at the present and the force of its circumstances and exigencies in the name of an imaginary past of idealized values that is at the same time the place of an original (and unrecognized) wound or insult—an intricate play of destruction and preservation. The animating irony, or even aporia, at work here is that the afflicted white bourgeois or petit bourgeois Americans of the story are precisely, as instigators of a pattern of historical modernization, the source of the wound in question. The temporality of the crack-up is, as Deleuze argues (though I think he too quickly assimilates the matter to alcoholism as such), strikingly similar, though it is wound-up more tightly and concentrated within the movement of a singularity: it is a kind of permanent past perfect (passé composé), a constant “I have been” in which a momentary hardness or intensity of the present (“I have …) invariably fades or takes flight into phantasmatic pasts (… been”). “It is,” Deleuze says, “at once love and the loss of love, money and the loss of money, the native land and its loss” (The Logic of Sense 160). He calls this the depressive aspect of Fitzgerald's condition, though Breitwieser, in examining the affective texture of The Great Gatsby, employs what strikes me as the more productive term, melancholia. He nicely characterizes this
as an “anorexic” strategy designed to keep at bay the everyday viscousness of the Real and create a space for lyrical flights, “a chamber in which the dream can echo because the chamber is otherwise silent” (31). Here then is one register of the rather more sweetened form of ressentiment articulated by Fitzgerald seeking expression in those lyrical registers he learned so well from Keats (a lower-middle-class fellow with some fervid resentments of his own).

Melancholic, indeed, though this term risks remaining tied too closely to Fitzgerald's psychology and to a lyric embodiment. Hence it is together with those moments of “excess” that the full scope of the pattern detailed by Deleuze is played out. A certain level of excess in the novel is obvious enough: the lavishness of the parties, the Rolls Royces, the servants—the familiar trappings of Veblenesque leisure-class conspicuousness. But it extends down into individual narrative and linguistic moments in an instructive fashion. “He found her excitingly desirable,” (148) says Nick of Gatsby's initial reaction to Daisy. Not just exciting, or just desirable, but both, a little adjectival whirligig that spins and chases its own tail; this marks the origin of Gatsby's dream, which might well be recast as his obsession, a form of excess in itself. Think, too, of the wonderful, Homeric list of partygoers at Gatsby's that gathers a kind of deadpan comic momentum, or the old man selling dogs “who bore an absurd resemblance to John D. Rockefeller” (27), or (the already excessively Jewish) Meyer Wolfsheim's cufflinks made of human teeth that suddenly lend him the dark aura of some cannibal chieftain. There are as well those sheep rounding the Manhattan street corner, and Myrtle Wilson's pent-up, volcanic energy. All of these examples are moments or figures that momentarily exceed what they actually are, hijacking the world of present appearances and creating a parallel track of fantasy which flees into some alternative, but indefinite, realm. So, too, with the witness to Myrtle's death, the “pale well-dressed negro,” (140) whose appearance, as Breitwieser argues, exceeds narratological requirements: Why light skinned? Why well dressed? Is he too an aspirant, an outsider wanting in, not unlike Gatsby himself? We cannot know, as this figure vanishes at once, but the suggestion has been lodged. What to make, as well, of that odd and slightly notorious scene at the end of chapter 2 when Nick ends up beside Mr. McKee's bed, where the half-naked McKee shows Nick his book of photographs? An extravagant innuendo, at the very least (“keep your hands off the lever!” [38]), exceeding anything we might reasonably ascertain.

Finally, recall Gatsby's remarkable response to Nick's question about where he's from: the middle west, it turns out. What part of the middle west, asks Nick? “San Francisco” (65). Does Gatsby really think that San Francisco is in the Midwest? But this is a pointless inquiry. The sheer absurdity of the response, aside from giving it the aforementioned aspect of deadpan comedy, makes it another figure of excess, something that does not quite fit the container in which it is placed, threatening to burst things asunder. This already incredible answer of Gatsby's is in the midst of a longer and even less credible account offered of his Oxford education and his cavorting with European princes. Just as Nick seems about ready to call his bluff, Gatsby produces a photograph showing him with some other young men, holding cricket bats, with spires in the background. “Then it was all true,” says Nick, “I saw the skins of tigers flaming in his palace on the Grand Canal; I saw him opening a chest of rubies to ease, with their crimson-lighted depths, the gnawings of his broken heart” (67). For the reader, however (less given to romantic leaps), the photograph does not exactly dispel all doubts: given the evident fabrications of Gatsby's tale, in what sense could it be simply “true”? What indeed is it really depicting? That is, rather than standing as some mundane arbiter of the facts of the matter, a simple registration of empirical realities, the photo instead becomes an exceedingly strange artifact, an excessive and even surrealistic object glowing with mysterious energies.

Such “excess” suggests the narrative and even rhetorical refiguration of the encounter between Fitzgerald's and Cather's particular instantiations of ressentiment. This stems at least in part from the very nature of ressentiment, which might itself be grasped as a form of excess, as it is an insistent, corrosive, and often malignant intensification of a certain class awareness, wherein what might have remained a discrete piece of social knowledge becomes an overriding passion or drive. Within the field of Fitzgerald's narrative and ideological practice, a form of splitting or fragmentation occurs, and different expressive forms of ressentiment crystallize. These range from Nick's snobbish asides, melancholic intimations of longing, and
Nick's romanticism tends to carry the more palpable affective charge and does the work of deflecting felt slights and cruel deprivations into a compensatory structure of fantasy which softens the rage into something more bittersweet. The figuration of excess is generally more affectively neutral, but all of this, I think—much like Daisy's utterances—involves a temporal component that seeks the sudden inflation and distortion of the present moment, a brief placement of the present *sous rature* or under erasure, as an early Derridean protocol had it, both absent and present, an incursion of the supramundane that renders the present temptingly fungible. Together these registers work to produce the simultaneous intensification and flight of the present: moments never quite realized, events that never quite took place, desires that were never quite fulfilled—or, as Deleuze more sharply puts it, they all were and were not in the one selfsame movement. “I was within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life” (36), Nick muses in a formulation that nicely approaches what we are describing here.

The tension thus created stands as the very material index of the intricate and ambivalent positioning of the novel with respect to both its social ground and its exemplary place in the arc of Fitzgerald's career. Indeed, I like to imagine, in an Adornian fashion, a kind of utter subordination of the writer to his or her project, as a certain social and historical content, seeking, in the dynamism of its becoming, adequate aesthetic expression, seizes upon the accidental features of an individual life and psychology and draws them wholly within the process of its artistic self-elaboration. The artist in effect becomes a now fascinated and helpless appendage to this process—not passive, exactly, but one whose intentions and emotions themselves become transformed into so much literary raw material (what Goethe once spoke of in terms of “possession” by an aesthetic demon). It is to this social content that we can at last turn, by way of recalling that problematic of social representation that *A Lost Lady* embodied for Fitzgerald. For *A Lost Lady* is in some sense a narrative of social crisis, of rapid and debilitating social change that had implications for Cather's own aesthetic practice: in the twenties, after the world has “broken in two,” she can no longer write the same sorts of novels she once did. For Fitzgerald, however, this combined social and writerly crisis takes a rather different form.

Indeed, are the 1920s not themselves conventionally imagined as a period of excess, “roaring” from one over-the-top display to the next, with Fitzgerald himself as their duly-anointed chronicler? There are important truths in these popular images, though I think that sociologically speaking things were rather more complicated and ambivalent than this. While what I referred to above as a Veblenesque social structure was still much in evidence with its ostentatiously visible ruling elites, another material force to be reckoned with was on the scene, implying a rather different logic of social and ideological relations. I refer of course to the first full implantation of a mass consumer society in America: the assembly line, the five dollar day, the invention and aggressive extension of consumer credit, and the quantum leap forward in mass communication and advertising. This is much more than certain upper- or middle-class sectors buying commodities; this is the purchase of ever more and ever cheaper industrially produced goods by ever greater numbers of the whole population (including the working classes, numerically the greatest segment). This links for the first time what might be called the formalism of the profit motive—the restless, purely formal necessity for more pluses than minuses at the bottom of the accounting ledger—with consumption itself, now a formalized “more more more” en route to becoming a generalized social value for the first time (rather than a local “ethos” of this or that regional bourgeois fraction). Such a movement involves more than a simple ideology, but is a genuine material force, instantiated in practices, institutions, and social apparatuses, as well as ideologies, an excess which represents a problem for the kinds of leisure class representations of class content we normally associate with *The Great Gatsby*. This new sort of excess is of course nominally “democratic.” Unlike the Veblenesque scenario, which vividly dramatized class hierarchies and exclusions, the dynamic of consumption—partly ideologically but also partly for real, existing regardless of whatever patterns of status differentiation it becomes enmeshed with—this dynamic presented itself as at least tendentially available to all. This play of distinction versus leveling is interestingly complicated in the text by the figure of Gatsby, who is a transitional figure in that he himself uses conspicuous consumption to challenge and open up a still older form of distinction as represented by East Egg. Even this putative antiquity is deceptive, though, since
the Buchanans—Midwestern interlopers themselves—happily take their place in it, testament to the difficulties involved in trying to preserve intact boundaries of wealth, exclusivity, and “breeding” that have essentially been generated out of thin air.

More crucially still, industrial production and its attendant dynamic of mass consumption encode within their historical deployment and elaboration the ultimate suppression or shearing away of older style class content, such that we end up, as in the contemporary period, with no functional or socially resonant representations of the ruling class (pop-cultural detritus like TV’s *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous* in no way fulfilling this role). Fitzgerald’s contemporaries, such as Leon Samson, an unorthodox socialist and analyst of American exceptionalism whose work deserves wider recognition, were beginning to notice this trend. “The more complete and complicated the American system becomes,” Samson wrote, “the more independent it gets to be of its owners and heirs […] American capital has succeeded in scaling such titanic heights that it has proletarianized even the capitalists themselves” (281-82). Samson here employs what was for him a characteristic mode of ironic overstatement, but the trend he calls attention to was genuine enough. The individualizing and leveling effects of mass consumption work over time to suppress the meaningful visibility of ruling groups, a visibility necessary for the cultural and discursive maintenance and presentation of the class character of society. I presume, of course, that ruling groups still rule; the problem, however, is with their representability, with the fashioning of a culturally credible image of this power, something beautifully allegorized in the novel in the contrast between the initial view of Tom and Daisy and our later glimpses of them. The opening is sweeping and cinematic:

The lawn started at the beach and ran toward the front door for a quarter of a mile, jumping over sun-dials and brick walks and burning gardens—finally when it reached the house drifting up the side in bright vines as though from the momentum of its run. The front was broken by a line of French windows, glowing now with reflected gold and wide open to the warm windy evening, and Tom Buchanan in riding clothes was standing with his legs apart on the front porch.

Later, however, after the accident that kills Myrtle, Nick does a little reconnaissance for Gatsby, in search of Tom and Daisy, who are now secreted away:

I walked back along the border of the lawn, traversed the gravel softly, and tiptoed up the veranda steps. The drawing-room curtains were open, and I saw that the room was empty. Crossing the porch where we had dined that June night three months before, I came to a small rectangle of light which I guessed was the pantry window. The blind was drawn, but I found a rift at the sill.

Tom and Daisy were sitting opposite each other at the kitchen table […].

A dramatic decrease, then, in the Buchanans’ visibility, an allegorical sequestering from public view whose now small-scale intimacy is itself tellingly described by Nick, who notes that “anybody would have said that they were conspiring together” (146). This is a remarkable premonition of what happens when the functionality of social groups is suppressed, a condition precisely identified by Jameson as the tendency “to dissociate the acknowledgment of the individual existence of a group from any attribution of a project that becomes registered not as a group but as a conspiracy” (*Postmodernism* 349). The cultural existence or presence of the economic and political agency of social classes is thus a signal casualty of our era and a development with serious social and political consequences. In the Marxian optic, of course, the very
possibility of “real” politics—those that can significantly alter and improve the material well being and daily lifeworld of the broad masses of the population, indeed permitting them to undertake such a profound renovation for themselves—depends in large measure on at least some sort of tendentially dichotomizing dynamic (whose initial contours need not express themselves in strict class terms). In other words, the potential for working-class consciousness is itself dependent in part upon the perceptible reality of ruling groups.

So the excess of mass consumption is in tension with the excess of Veblen’s conspicuous consumption. The latter is on the surface in The Great Gatsby, but I think it is the former which is at work in those more local, figurally striking moments. Such a reading is further suggested by the chief desire projected by Nick throughout the course of the story, a desire for security. This might be seen, for example, in his reluctance to involve himself in the uncertain play of human affairs (his “anorexic” tendency), the counterpoint to which are the moments when an unwanted public attention is turned upon him: “[Myrtle] pointed suddenly at me, and every one looked at me accusingly. I tried to show by my expression that I had played no part in her past” (35). Here the force of the Look pulls him out of his more comfortable spectatorial role; recall as well the suspicious glances of the women on the train as Nick bends to retrieve a dropped pocketbook. More crucial is the gravitational pull of that “warm center of the world” (3) represented by the Midwest of his childhood, to which his thoughts so often turn and to whose comforting embrace he has returned to write the narrative we now read. Indeed, he is now virtually as “safe and proud above the hot struggles of the poor” (150) as Daisy herself. There is perhaps an infantile and Oedipal aspect to this, but before leaving it at that Freudian level it must be noted that security is also a value projected by mass consumption. Whereas the leisure class seeks to affirm itself via the direct or indirect class humiliation of everyone else, and thus promote a certain level of social insecurity, mass consumption promises something else. If, as Jameson notes, “we all do want to ‘master’ history in whatever ways turn out to be possible” (Postmodernism 342), and hence seek out a certain insulation from blind historical forces, then piles of more or less available commodities offer themselves up to recently proletarianized populations as another warm center of the world, something which again is more than mere ideological trickery but is bound up with materially dense forces of attraction and appeals to deep Utopian impulses.

And so, finally, Gatsby’s shirts: another very famous scene, usually taken as emblematic of the commodity-drunk twenties and the mediation of Gatsby and Daisy’s relationship by these commodities. Let me instead suggest a somewhat different reading, inspired in part by Richard Godden’s observation that Daisy’s precise action—“she bent her head into the shirts and began to cry stormily” (93)—to the extent that she does not simply collapse with abandon into them, implies more consideration than is normally supposed, a kind of distance or gap between herself and the shirts (Fictions 86). Rather than try, as Godden does, to ascertain what is really going through Daisy’s mind here,¹⁰ I would simply observe a certain tension or agon between these two images, the leisureclass woman on the one hand, and on the other the pile of commodities whose very logic threatens to erase her social visibility. Allegorical tears, then, from a character whose “disappearance” will be as marked as (if, as so often with this class, rather less violent than) that of her working-class double, Myrtle Wilson.

Hence, in the end, the profound ambivalence and unique achievement of this novel, as the narrative tracks the emergence of new social content whose laws of operation will suppress the very social meaning of those images and representations from which Fitzgerald’s aesthetic practice drew its initial and enduring inspiration. As in some devil’s pact—though in this particular pact the two moments of charmed existence and terrible payment are coterminous—Fitzgerald’s aesthetic impulses seize upon (or are exploited by) an historical dynamic that both sustains and destroys, and which portends the ultimate extinction of his writerly vocation and being. And, at some obscure level, this is at once known and fearfully cherished: getting burned by History as a kind of ecstatic self-realization. This dynamic issues in the complex movement of splitting and sublimation of ressentiment that we have discussed here, with its simultaneous intensification and undermining of present reality, its vivid excess and sharp longing, its romantic nostalgia and quiet bitterness.

239
(at once love and the loss of love, money and the loss of money). These all remarkably dovetail and spiral around one another in an effort to vehiculate a dense and tense knot of social, and essentially class, relations, themselves in complicated transition. This effort to capture and portray what is in the end an historical conundrum is one that perhaps can only end in exhaustion, and indeed, from this point onward Fitzgerald's career will never be quite the same. Writing will never again come so easily to him, and will at times, as during the writing of Tender is the Night, become a veritable torment.

Thus it is appropriate that the novel ends (as we, and so many other commentaries on the text, also end) with Nick sprawled on Gatsby's beach, his thoughts returning to the dawn of the New World. Here we are at that moment of the break with the old world, that moment of breathless Utopian possibility when the project of “America” rises in the imagination as an essentially aesthetic project, something it has largely remained ever since. But with remarkable echoes of Adorno's interpretation of Odysseus's encounter with the Sirens, Fitzgerald offers a rhetorically complex version of a dialectic of myth and enlightenment. In Adorno, the aesthetic (the Sirens' song, heard only by the bound master Odysseus) and exploited labor (the oarsmen, deaf with plugged ears to the fatal temptation) split off from one another at the very outset of “western” culture.11 Fitzgerald's Dutch sailors are themselves afforded a moment's aesthetic contemplation before the frenzied plunge into the continent which will inaugurate that very historical dynamic destined to vitiate the aesthetic dream, namely the stupendous eruption of human labor aimed at extracting as much wealth as possible: that is to say, class dynamics as such, the very ones so consistently disavowed in the dream of America and now materially masked by the advent of mass consumption. What results is a kind of spatio-temporal loop or prison, a seemingly forward movement that leads only backward: “His dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was already behind him […]. And so we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past” (182). Like Fitzgerald in the taxi, or Daisy awaiting the summer solstice, what is evoked here is a vanishing point in time that amounts finally to a foreclosure on the future, a condemnation to empty longing and repetition without issue. This includes both Fitzgerald's future, left now with only the insidious and changeless grind of sheer professionalism and its particular ressentiment (an omen of the crack-up to come), as well as our collective future as such. Here is the kernel of materialist insight that emerges from the political unconscious of this text and its serendipitous interaction with the details of Fitzgerald's writerly metabolism: no ultimate political or social future is possible without that class dynamic which The Great Gatsby at once dramatizes and effaces. Until such a development, a spectral “America” remains suspended in mythic brooding over the trauma of its always-failed attempts to realize itself.

Notes

1. For this discussion, see Jameson, The Political Unconscious 201-205.
2. Here and throughout I intend the term “class” not only in its more mainstream sense of income stratification but also and more crucially in the Marxian sense of a hierarchical organization of the labor process which affords the imposition of surplus labor and the extraction of surplus value via the production of commodities.
3. On this, see Quirk. I have written in more detail on A Lost Lady and The Professor's House in my forthcoming book, Around Quitting Time: Work and Middle-Class Fantasy in American Fiction (Duke UP).
4. Compare as well the following, taken from a letter Fitzgerald wrote to Max Perkins (March 5, 1922): “I'm still a socialist but sometimes I dread that things will grow worse and worse the more people nominally rule. The strong are too strong for us and the weak too weak” (Kuehl and Bryer 57).
5. For this terminology of break and segmentation, see the brief discussion of “The Crack-Up” in Deleuze and Guattari 198-200.
6. The term Schein comes from German idealist aesthetics, where it designates the aesthetic effect achieved by the application of some process of construction upon a given set of raw materials. Its English equivalents (aesthetic appearance or illusion, fiction) tend to suggest some truth or reality
existing behind the mere appearance, an implication not present in the German original. For a useful discussion of these issues, one which also broaches the problem of modernism, see Jameson, Late Marxism 165-176.

7. I think that this passé composé can shift into a futur antérieur (“I will have been”) from time to time, though Deleuze, with characteristic schematic rigor, attributes this latter tense exclusively to another literary alcoholic, Malcolm Lowry.

8. Though there has been much debate over his ethico-political status as narrator, I take Nick's snobbishness as a given. Not only is it announced on the first page—“as my father snobbishly suggested, and I snobbishly repeat”—it is effectively performed. His father's advice, after all, concerned the need to be mindful of the disparate “advantages” available to people; it counseled, in a liberal and democratic spirit, a certain forbearance in the face of material inequality. Nick translates this into the unequal distribution of “a sense of the fundamental decencies,” an altogether more vaporous and idealistic matter far more open to corruption by class attitudes. This of course leads into Nick's oft-noted belief that he “reserves judgment,” when he is in fact busy judging left and right.

9. For a persuasive periodization of the full creation of consumer society, one nicely grounded in the details of economic history, see Livingston.

10. Godden suggests that Daisy momentarily recalls here the “original,” uniformed and classless Gatsby she knew from Louisville; the awful distance between that earlier, innocent figure and the improbable parvenu before her sparks her tears.

11. See Horkheimer and Adorno, 33-4. I follow the widely shared feeling (by no means provable) that this astonishing rewrite of the myth, given its sheer dialectical brilliance and concentration, must be Adorno's doing, rather than that of the more prosaic Horkheimer.

Works Cited


Criticism: Mitchell Breitwieser (essay date fall 2000)


[In the following essay, Breitwieser explores ways in which Fitzgerald used the phrases “the Jazz Age” and “The Last Tycoon” to define epochs in American literary history, prefiguring the discipline which would become American studies.]

An earlier version of this essay was presented at “History in the Making: The Future of American Literary Studies,” a conference held at the University of Wisconsin at Madison in late March 1999. At the beginning of my talk, I remarked that I had grown up in Monona, a small town about five miles from the campus, and that I earned my BA from UW-Madison in 1975. Preparing for the talk, I confessed, had stirred up memories, among them my first reading of The Great Gatsby (1925), which powerfully evoked what F. Scott Fitzgerald called the promise of life. My students, I noted, hearing again that elusive tune I had heard 25 years before, tend to dislike, affably, my middle-aged reading, for instance my claims concerning Nick Carraway's bad faith or my preference for the centrifugal disturbances of Tender is the Night (1933). In the difference between my reading and theirs I see that, though Fitzgerald still interests me deeply, he has changed, or rather, the center of his gravity has for me moved not only to the discoveries of his later fiction but also to certain facets I had not noticed in The Great Gatsby, where he begins to think critically about history, about race, class, region, nationality, and about how the intersections of such powers provoke, shape, and frustrate desire. Fitzgerald's writing seems to me now less an expression and celebration of pure longing than an archaeology of American desire—not the unbroken lineage from Dutch explorers to Jazz Age dreamer that Fitzgerald posited at the end of his most famous work, but a sedimentation of desires, like the layers of Troy or the layers of meanings Freud peeled away in the analysis of the symptom—“America” as a condensation, aggregate, or depository of subject-residues, rather than a mystical being. This, I would say, is where Fitzgerald parts company from Thomas Wolfe and Ernest Hemingway and keeps company with William Faulkner and Zora Neale Hurston, his historical sense laying the foundation for what would be called American studies and prefiguring some of the disciplinary transformations within literary study that were the topic of “History in the Making.” To sketch out something of that prefiguration, I reflected on two terms, “the Jazz Age” and “The Last Tycoon.” Since the term “Jazz Age” appears in the 1931 essay “Echoes of the Jazz Age,” a postmortem of the 1920s, we have in both phrases an announcement that an American epoch has ended, an implied analysis of the subjective forms that the epoch produced, and speculations concerning the forces that brought about the end. I differentiated the two terms by contrasting the melancholia that typifies endings in The Great Gatsby and the
1931 essay with some new ways of thinking about social and personal coherence that Fitzgerald was exploring at the time of his death in 1940.

First, then, the “Jazz Age.” For Fitzgerald the term may have resonated humorously with Stone Age, Bronze Age, and Iron Age—periodizations of archaic humanity that came into use among archaeologists during the second half of the nineteenth century. If so, the irony is two-sided: first, whereas an “age” used to span centuries, the velocity of change is now such that we run through an age in 10 years or so, as long as it takes a culture-defining group of young people to follow the arc of its third decade; and second, whereas the universal plastic material that defines us used to be substance—stone, bronze, iron—it is now an intense, ungraspable cultural energy, jazz, “an arrangement of notes that will never be played again,” as Nick Carraway says of Daisy Buchanan’s voice (11).

As fundamental material, jazz saturates the culture of its epoch, supplying people, events, and artifacts with the character by which they are most succinctly grasped. The term “Jazz Age” therefore imputes to 1920s jazz what Louis Althusser and Etienne Balibar call “expressive causality” (310), which “describe[s] the effect of the whole on the parts, but only by making the latter an ‘expression’ of the former, a phenomenon of its essence” (316). Althusser and Balibar’s “but only” indicate their conviction that “expression” is a restrictive way to understand a society, that there are more complex and satisfying ways to think about parts and wholes, an idea, I will eventually argue, that Fitzgerald was approaching as he wrote *The Last Tycoon* (1941). But for now, let’s stay with the idea of expressive causality, with, in Fitzgerald’s case, a temporary national whole of which the parts are expressions, which is what makes an epoch—when the parts break away from their expressivity, become dark and single, then begin to recohere around a new core, the epoch gives way to its successor. Fitzgerald’s commitment to expressive structure is especially evident in his post-Emersonian linkage between charisma and history, his belief, first, that in their alertness to the spirit of the epoch, remarkable individuals such as Jay Gatsby, Dick Diver, and Monroe Stahr are like “those intricate machines that register earthquakes ten thousand miles away” (6), and second, the belief that such harbingers will catalyze a similar spirit among those who enter the remarkable man’s zone of self-display. Expressing the whole, the members of a transcendent avant-garde lead lesser persons to discover their latent character as symbols of the nation. Like his social vision, Fitzgerald’s symbolist aesthetic is undergirded by his passionate theoretical commitment to the transcendent whole, his spiritual and libidinal nationalism appropriating the emotional and theoretical energies of his Roman Catholic upbringing—the essence of the nation bestows the kiss of worth on objects that then partake of its splendor by expressing it symbolically. America is where the Eucharist couples with the commodity fetish, a fervent articulation of American exceptionalism that influenced such literary works as *On the Road* (1957) and *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), and that anticipated in fiction the line of scholars from Henry Nash Smith and Charles Feidelson through Richard Slotkin to Sacvan Bercovitch. Perhaps even more than Nathaniel Hawthorne, Fitzgerald is the prose poet of what Lauren Berlant calls the “National Symbolic”—“the order of discursive practices whose reign within a national space produces, and also refers to, the ‘law’ in which the accident of birth within a geographic/political boundary transforms individuals into subjects of a collectively-held history. Its traditional icons, its metaphors, its heroes, its rituals, and its narratives provide an alphabet for a collective consciousness or national subjectivity; through the National Symbolic the historical nation aspires to achieve the inevitability of the status of natural law, a birthright” (20).

The symbolicity of the symbol—its character as vessel containing abstract reality or as portal opening onto wonder—supplies the symbolic thing with its vitality. Failing that access, the thing is a mere thing, a dispirited outcome that in *The Great Gatsby* is figured as “foul dust” or ashes—devitalized remainder (6). These symbols of nonsymbolicity are extremely interesting to me, because they are the valleys where Fitzgerald, or his narrator at least, confines social life that fails to express the ideal (revulsion marking that place where insight will later appear). Insofar as a person is a living seismograph of the ideal, a pure register of abstract national content, he is truly vital, alive, luminous; insofar as he is particular—a person with projects, worries, tics, pleasures, and sorrows, all of them inflected by ethnicity, region, religion, class,
gender, parental neurochemistry, and so on—he is a failure, merely particular, an outpost in which the rhythms of the capital have long since been forgotten. Determination by real circumstance and the complexity that this yields are markers of inadequacy. This is why Gatsby is great: he is always and only desirer-of-Daisy, and not desiring her as a particular woman, but desiring her for the abstract stuff that she is “full of” (94).

To exemplify the spirit of the nation is therefore to be a knight of desire, like Søren Kierkegaard's knight of virtue, for whom purity of heart is to will one thing. But what if the one thing that the symbol incarnates—the essence that makes the epoch an epoch—is not itself at one with itself, but rather fractured, internally complex? As my title suggests, this brings us back to jazz, the primal X of the decade. Jazz is mentioned most often in Chapter 3 of The Great Gatsby, Nick's excited account of the first party he attended across the lawn at Gatsby's: “By midnight the hilarity had increased. A celebrated tenor had sung in Italian and a notorious contralto had sung in jazz and between the numbers people were doing ‘stunts’ all over the garden while happy vacuous bursts of laughter rose toward the summer sky” (51). A little later,

There was the boom of a bass drum, and the voice of the orchestra leader rang out suddenly above the echolalia of the garden.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he cried. “At the request of Mr. Gatsby we are going to play for you Mr. Vladimir Tostoff's latest work which attracted so much attention at Carnegie Hall last May. If you read the papers you know there was a big sensation.” He smiled with jovial condescension and added “Some sensation!” whereupon everyone laughed.

“The piece is known,” he concluded lustily, “as Vladimir Tostoff's Jazz History of the World.”

However: “The nature of Mr. Tostoff's composition eluded me, because just as it began my eyes fell on Gatsby, standing alone on the marble steps and looking from one group to another with approving eyes” (54). This is a briefly puzzling moment—if Nick is simply distracted by Gatsby's appearance, why doesn't he say, “but I didn't hear the piece because” rather than “the nature of the piece eluded me because”? Several years ago I found the answer to this question in Fitzgerald's manuscript, which includes a long description of the “Jazz History” that was cut from the final version:

“The piece is known,” he concluded lustily, “as Les Epstien's Jazz History of the World.”

When he sat down all the members of the orchestra looked at one another and smiled as tho this was after all a little below them after all. Then the conductor raised his wand—and they all launched into one of the most surprising pieces of music I've ever heard in my life. It fascinated me. perhaps it was the champagne I've never heard it since and perhaps it was the champagne but for about fifteen minutes I don't think anyone stirred in their chairs—except to laugh now and then in a curious puzzled way when they came to the end of a movement.

It started out with a weird, spinning sound that seemed to come mostly from the cornets, very regular and measured and inevitable with a bell now and then that seemed to ring somewhere a good distance away. A rhythm became distinguishable after a while in the spinning, a sort of dull beat but as soon as you'd almost made it out it disappeared—until finally something happened, something tremendous, you knew that, and the spinning was all awry and one of the distant bells had come alive, it had a meaning and a personality somehow of its own.

That was the first movement and we all laughed and looked at each other rather nervously as the second movement began. [new paragraph mark] The second movement was concerned with the bell only it wasn't the bell anymore but two instrum wi a muted violin cello and two
instruments I had never seen before. At first there was a sort of monotony about it—a little disappointing at first as if it were just a repetition of the spinning sound but pretty soon you were aware that something was trying to establish itself, to get a foothold, something soft and persistent and profound and next you yourself were trying to help it, struggling, praying for it—until suddenly it was there, it was established rather scornfully without you and it stayed there seemed to lurk around as with a complete self-sufficiency as if it had been there all the time.

I was curiously moved and the third part of the thing was full of an even stronger emotion. I know so little about music that I can only make a story of it—which proves I've been told that it must have been pretty low brow stuff—but it wasn't really a story. He didn't have lovely music for the prehistoric ages with tiger-howls from the trap finishing up with a strain flat from Onward Christian Soldiers in the year two B. C. If wasn't like that at all. There would be a series of interruptive notes that seemed too fall together accidently and colored everything that came after them until before you knew it they became the theme and new discords were opposed to it outside. But what struck me particularly was that just as you'd get used to the new discord business there'd be one of the old themes rung in this time as a discord until you'd get a ghastly sense that it was all a cycle after all, purposeless and sardonic until you wanted to get up and walk out of the garden. It never stopped—after they had finished playing that movement it went on and on in everybody's head until the next one started. Whenever I think of that summer I can hear it yet.

The last was weak I thought though [ ] most of the people seemed to like it best of all. It had recognizable strains of famous jazz in it—Alexander's Ragtime Band and the Darktown Strutter's Ball and recurrent hint of The Beale Street Blues. It made me restless and looking casually around my eye was caught by the straight, graceful easy figure of well proportioned well-made figure of Gatsby who stood alone on the his steps looking from one group to another with a strange eagerness in his eyes. It was as though he felt the necessity of supplying, physically at least, a perfect measure of entertainment to his guests. He seemed absolutely alone—I never seen anyone who seemed so alone.

(The Great Gatsby: A Facsimile 54-56)

Startling, fascinating, ultimately dismaying, and even frightening in its manifest but inexplicable logic, the "Jazz History" seems not to express its audience, but rather to stand in sardonic or satiric relation to them, making them drop their hilarity and mutuality, and to look to one another for a reassurance that none can supply to the others. But the dismay and consequent revulsion Nick feels do not overwhelm an obvious interest: "I was curiously moved." The nature of the piece eludes him, he says, just when he seems to be about to have it in hand: it seems to have a core, but it veers off just when about to present itself. The performance does not venture into the unexpected in order to return to the domestic consolation of familiar motifs or melodies: even the return of familiar elements is uncanny and threatening, since those elements, when they recur, are embedded in a miasma that distorts them not beyond recognition, but in such a way that recognition and disorientation become the same thing. The music seems to amplify rather than to soothe the party's echoralia.

Such a contortion of the familiar world breaks out at several points in the novel, for instance in Nick's speculations concerning Gatsby's last moments: "[H]e must have felt that he had lost the old warm world, paid too high a price for living too long with a single dream. 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 …" (169). Material, without being real: only the ideal confers real
reality on material things, and lacking it they become nightmares. “[D]isruptions in the realm of the National Symbolic,” according to Berlant, “create a collective sensation of almost physical vulnerability: the subject without a nation experiences his/her own mortality and vulnerability because s/he has lost control over physical space as a part of his/her inheritance” (24).

Even when the East excited me most … it had always a quality of distortion. West Egg especially still figures in my more fantastic dreams. I see it as a night scene by El Greco: a hundred houses, at once conventional and grotesque, crouching under a sullen, overhanging sky and a lustreless moon. In the foreground four solemn men in dress suits are walking along the sidewalk with a stretcher on which lies a drunken woman in a white evening dress. Her hand, which dangles over the side, sparkles cold with jewels. Gravely the men turn in at a house—the wrong house. But no one knows the woman's name, and no one cares.

(185)

The wonder, interest, and horror of “The Jazz History of the World” is that its distortion of the world is a deliberate human production, rather than a symptom of postepochal decay: it is an artifact, not a ruin. Nick and Fitzgerald are baffled by and irresistibly interested in what seems to them to be the enormous perversity of the act of intentionally disconnecting things from their expressivity and turning them into stranded, carefully fashioned monstrosities—terminating expression, dissevering the conduit that makes things really real, assiduously producing a residue of unique creations that only a rather total failure of attention could assign to a category such as ashes or junk. Though the excised passage does not associate such intentional distortion with African-American cultural practice, a 1926 letter thanking Carl Van Vechten for a copy of his novel Nigger Heaven (1926) makes the connection clearly: “[Your novel] seems, outside of its quality as a work of art, to sum up subtly and inclusively, all the direction of the northern nigger, or, rather, the nigger in New York. Our civilization imposed on such virgin soil takes on a new and more vivid and more poignant horror as if it had been dug out of its context and set down against an accidental and unrelated background” (Fitzgerald, Letters 490).

Those readers who listen to jazz may have concluded that, despite the incomprehension and ethnocentric or racist revulsion, Fitzgerald realized what jazz is. Compare his account of “The Jazz History of the World,” for instance, with André Hodeir's analysis of Louis Armstrong's “Butter and Egg Man,” written in the 1950s about a recording from the time Fitzgerald was writing The Great Gatsby:

In this record, Armstrong manages to transfigure completely a theme whose vulgarity might well have overwhelmed him; and yet his chorus is only a paraphrase. The theme is not forgotten for a moment; it can always be found there, just as it was originally conceived by its little-known composer, Venable. Taking off melodically from the principal note of the first phrase, the soloist begins with a triple call that disguises, behind its apparent symmetry, subtle differences in rhythm and expressive intensity. This entry by itself is a masterpiece; it is impossible to imagine anything more sober and balanced. During the next eight bars, the paraphrase spreads out, becoming freer and livelier. Armstrong continues to cling to the essential notes of the theme, but he leaves more of its contour to the imagination. At times he gives it an inner animation by means of intelligent syncopated repetitions, as in the case of the first note of the bridge. From measures 20 to 30, the melody bends in a chromatic descent that converges toward the theme while at the same time giving a felicitous interpretation of the underlying harmonic progression. This brings us to the culminating point of the work. Striding over the traditional pause of measures 24-25, Armstrong connects the bridge to the final section by using a short, admirably inventive phrase. Its rhythmic construction of dotted eighths and sixteenths forms a contrast with the more static context in which it is placed, and in both conception and execution it is a miracle of swing. During this brief moment, Louis
seems to have foreseen what modern conceptions of rhythm would be like. In phrasing, accentuation, and the way the short note is increasingly curtailed until finally it is merely suggested (measure 25) how far removed all this is from New Orleans rhythm!

(qtd. in Hadlock 30)

Hodeir is free of the discomfort that suffuses the Fitzgerald passage, but the point is the same, which makes Fitzgerald's excised fragment—itself set adrift from the novelistic whole it would have quite significantly failed to express—one of the first perceptive reactions to jazz performance among white American writers. By contrast, Rudy Vallee's dismay seems much less alert: “Truly I have no conception of what 'jazz' is, but I believe the term should be applied … to the weird orchestral effects of various colored bands up in Harlem. … These bands have a style all their own, and at times it seems as though pandemonium had broken loose. Most of the time there is no distinguishable melody. … [I]t is absolutely impossible for even a musical ear to tell the name of the piece” (qtd. in Stearns 182). Though partaking of Vallee's perplexity, Fitzgerald anticipates Hodeir's understanding that jazz by design offers no reunion with the already known, but rather, by way of improvisation, disconnects the familiar from its familiarity, making it do startling things. To someone as intensely and deeply committed to a sacramental and holistic conception of art and society as Fitzgerald was at this time in his life, such created tension could only appear as a fracture, a break in the body of the work and in the body politic, an alienation shared even by so recent and influential a critic as Ted Gioia:

An aesthetics of jazz would almost be a type of non-aesthetics. Aesthetics, in principle if not in practice, focuses our attention on those attributes of a work of art which reveal the craftsmanship and careful planning of the artist. Thus the terminology of aesthetic philosophy—words such as form, symmetry, balance—emphasizes the methodical element in artistic creation. But the improver is anything but methodical; hence these terms have only the most tangential applicability to the area of jazz. The very nature of jazz demands spontaneity; were the jazz artist to approach his music in a methodical and calculated manner, he would cease to be an improver and become a composer. For this reason the virtues we search for in other art forms—premeditated design, balance between form and content, an overall symmetry—are largely absent in jazz. In his act of impulsive creation, the improvising musician must shape each phase separately while retaining only a vague notion of the overall pattern he is forging. Like the great chess players who, we are told, must be able to plan their attack some dozens of moves ahead, the jazz musician must constantly struggle with his opaque medium if he hopes to create a coherent musical statement. His is an art markedly unsuited for the patient and reflective.

(55)

Fitzgerald's perception of jazz performance in the excised passage might seem to be more astute than a remark in “Echoes of the Jazz Age”: “The word jazz in its progress toward respectability has meant first sex, then dancing, then music. It is associated with a state of nervous stimulation, not unlike that of big cities behind the lines of a war” (16). But notice that Fitzgerald does not say this is what jazz is, but rather this is what jazz has meant and what it has been associated with. He is not really departing from the insight of the excised passage, but rather changing the subject from jazz to the image of jazz in the middle-class white popular imagination. His feeling for the distinction accords with the subsequent judgment of cultural and social historians: thought of primarily in terms of its conspicuous and propulsive rhythm, jazz came to emblemize for white Americans both an erotic vitality nearly lost in an effete society (but still effective among African Americans) and the pace of postwar technological modernity. This is the image of jazz, jazz understood as energy and velocity, that is implied in the term “Jazz Age” and embodied in Gatsby, the restless, not-quite-really-white roughneck with the world's most extraordinary car. Leopold Stokowski succinctly articulated this understanding of jazz: “Jazz has come to stay because it is an expression of the times, of the breathless,
energetic, superactive times in which we are living, it is useless to fight against it. … America's contribution
to the music of the past will have the same revivifying effect as the injection of new, and in the larger sense,
vulgar blood into dying aristocracy. … The Negro musicians of America are playing a great part in this change” (qtd. in Ogren 7). 4 Jazz could signify both primitivity and hypermodernity because in both cases it is
thought of as raw energy preceding or outrunning form—a beat, rather than a conversation, a meditation, a
paraphrase, or a discovery. An alternative form so radically disparate from popular performative norms as to
be aesthetically unrecognizable to unexperienced listeners, jazz seems not to be form at all, only outburst.

When I talk about “real jazz” I mean to appeal only to a formal authenticity: we can, for example, say whether
a poem is or is not a sonnet without recourse to mystical essentialism. The distinction between real jazz and
the image of jazz became more tangled, however, when popularizers began to compose, perform, and record
music that reflected the popular image of jazz. As such simulation gathers steam, the distinction between, say,
the performances of the Fletcher Henderson Orchestra and what those performances are imagined to amount
to is succeeded by the distinction between the Fletcher Henderson Orchestra and, say, the Paul Whiteman
Orchestra, which was generally thought to be America's premiere ensemble. According to Burnett James,
“Paul Whiteman, though called the ‘King of Jazz,’ fronted an orchestra of semi-symphonic proportions. His
jazzmen had their way from time to time, but in essence only as a sideline” (15). Marshall Stearns expands
this point:

The number of prosperous dance bands at the popular level multiplied, while the jazz content
remained slight. At the same time, dancing the Charleston, the Black Bottom, and the Lindy
was highly popular and the bands tried to oblige by playing a little hot jazz. … None of these
large dance bands, however, could swing as a whole. The formula consisted of importing one
or two “hot” soloists, or “get-off” men, letting them take a chorus once in a while surrounded
by acres of uninspired fellow musicians. “Society band leaders like Meyer Davis and Joe
Moss always wanted to have at least one good jazzman in their bands,” says clarinetist Tony
Parenti. Bix Beiderbecke was doing this for Paul Whiteman in 1927. Beiderbecke was very
well paid and his colleagues all looked up to him—the “hot” soloists were always the
elite—but the frustration of being allowed to play so little, when he was hired because he
could play so much, led to all kinds of personal problems and, indirectly, to the after-hours
“jam session,” where a musician could play his heart out.

(180)

Kathy Ogren agrees with this assessment of the dance bands, especially Whiteman's:

Whiteman, who became the “King of Jazz,” saw his role as that of dignifying and
legitimating jazz. He … explained away certain characteristics and performance practices
original to the music. Whiteman warned musicians against using syncopation, which “gives a
sense to the ignorant of participation in the world's scientific knowledge.” But, Whiteman
continued, with a sense of relief, “Syncopation no longer rules American music … as we use
it in the United States [it] is an African inheritance … but to-day it is no longer a necessary
thing. It has been retained much as an ornament.” Whiteman's popular music became so
closely identified with jazz that many Americans had no knowledge of its Afro-American
origins. Whiteman himself, who disliked the association with jazz and dance music, titled his
Aeolian Hall concert an “Experiment in Modern Music.”

(159)

The Aeolian Hall concert is a key cultural locus for my argument: commencing with some horsing around on
“Livery Stable Blues” (1917) (introduced by Whiteman as “an example of the depraved past from which
modern jazz has risen” [Ogren 161]), the orchestra proceeded through Tin Pan Alley numbers such as “Yes We Have No Bananas” (1923), escalated to the debut of “Rhapsody in Blue” (1924), with George Gershwin on piano, and concluded with Edward Elgar's “Pomp and Circumstance” (1901-07). The sequence of the performance thus seems like a progression from energy to art, an effect that depends on agreeing with Whiteman's pronouncement that the structural core of jazz is an African ornament that can be sacrificed without significant loss in order to move to an aesthetic high ground. Where we might see a nonjazz orchestra equipped with a couple of jazz “stunts,” whinnying trumpets, and some boosted drumming, Whiteman claimed that his music was jazz emerged from its cocoon, its inner necessity fulfilled.

Thanks to extensive advance publicity, the Aeolian Hall concert was packed—invitations had been sent to Stokowski, Fritz Kreisler, Sergei Rachmaninoff, Van Vechten, and many other prominent white New Yorkers—and the response was tumultuous (Jablonski 66-67; Stearns 165-67). The concert was performed on 12 February 1924, a couple of months before the Fitzgeralds sailed for France; their celebrity at the time was such that they may have been included on the guest list, though I have been unable to discover whether they were invited or attended. In any case, the coverage in the New York papers after the concert was so extensive that Fitzgerald could not have failed at least to hear about the occasion. I am satisfied that the Aeolian Hall concert was the prototype for “The Jazz History of the World,” a lineage first suggested, as far as I can tell, by Darrell Mansell. If Fitzgerald is in fact alluding to Whiteman's hubristic and ethnically defamatory extravaganza, the allusion is rather biting: though the excised passage seems at points to describe “Rhapsody in Blue,” it nonetheless alludes to, stays close to, what jazz is at its core, to what Whiteman called unnecessary ornament, a trope not far from Fitzgerald's “foul dust.” The performance at Gatsby's party, therefore, were Fitzgerald to have left the excised fragment in, would have put on view a rather fabulous cultural reversal, jazz per se reviving or breaking out at the heart of an event staged to curtail jazz and to appropriate its aura, not only an overturning of Whiteman's pretension but also an exuberant betrayal of the aesthetic norms governing the book in which it would have been enclosed. Though it is as hard to say for sure what Fitzgerald listened to as it is to prove he was at the Aeolian Hall concert, I am quite sure he would have heard the real thing as well as the smooth simulacrum: it is hard to imagine him not joining in on Van Vechten's Harlem fieldtrips, and in France Fitzgerald's friend and fellow émigré Gerald Murphy made a point of having the latest jazz records on hand—his yacht, the Weatherbird, took its name from an Armstrong record that he had sealed in the yacht's keel, a recording made two years after “Butter and Egg Man” (Tomkins 32, 116-17).

But if Fitzgerald heard jazz per se, his narrator nevertheless responds with aversion to what Thelonious Monk would later call jazz's ugly beauty, and the excised passage shows no awareness of the African-American motivations for jazz performance. If the serial paraphrasing that Nick hears seems to him to be a prolonged deformity or brutalization, to the performer improvisation means a kind of circumstance-based freedom, taking an element from the dominant culture, twisting it, turning it around and inside-out, seeing if it will serve ends other than the usual and familiar ones. Like experiment in general, it seeks to discover avenues of possibility through the midst of inevitability, and to do so without special worry about the survival of coherence. It is useful to recall Ralph Ellison's praise of Armstrong in the preface to Invisible Man (1952):

Perhaps I like Louis Armstrong because he's made poetry out of being invisible. I think it must be because he's unaware that he is invisible. And my own grasp of invisibility aids me to understand his music. Once when I asked for a cigarette, some jokers gave me a reefer, which I lighted when I got home and sat listening to my phonograph. It was a strange evening. Invisibility, let me explain, gives one a slightly different sense of time, you're never quite on the beat. Sometimes you're ahead and sometimes behind. Instead of the swift and imperceptible flowing of time, you are aware of its nodes, those points where time stands still or from which it leaps ahead. And you slip into the breaks and look around. That's what you hear vaguely in Louis' music.
Willfully putting fidelity to the original aside, the performer liberates cultural matter, puts it into motion. Though this sort of individual departure from script seems to Nick to endanger the coherence and recognizability of the whole—to endanger the sort of expressive structure that Fitzgerald saw in his vision of American sacramentalism—in fact it adumbrates a radically different vision of cohesion, if not of wholeness in its ultimately metaphysical sense. Martin Williams explains this other vision well:

In all its styles, jazz involves some degree of collective ensemble improvisation, and in this it differs from Western music even at those times in its history when improvisation was required. The high degree of individuality, together with the mutual respect and co-operation required in a jazz ensemble carry with them philosophical implications that are so exciting and far-reaching that one almost hesitates to contemplate them. It is as if jazz were saying to us that not only is far greater individuality possible to man than he has so far allowed himself, but that such individuality, far from being a threat to a co-operative social structure, can actually enhance society.

My feeling that Fitzgerald came to a similar conclusion about jazz's motive brings me to The Last Tycoon, the novel on which he was working when he died of heart failure in 1940. Monroe Stahr, loosely based on Irving Thalberg, is Hollywood's most successful producer, dominating and organizing the ensemble of labor at his studio—drunken writers, extras, peevish celebrities, lighting men, etc.—with a firm, bluff, equable, brilliant, and self-assured demeanor that commands instant respect from all and yields successful collective enterprise. He thus recapitulates the social potency of Gatsby and Dick Diver from the preceding novels, but because he has found a young industry in a young place, his potency can exercise itself in legitimate business triumph rather than in crime, Riviera beach parties, or obsession with the daughters of old money. Because Hollywood is the last new industry and California is the geographical terminal beach for the series of longings that began with Dutch sailors staring at Long Island. Stahr is the last tycoon. He therefore culminates and closes an epoch somewhat longer than the Jazz Age, the century, more or less, from Andrew Jackson's election to the time of the novel. The commencement date is established early on in The Last Tycoon, when three characters enduring a long stopover during a transcontinental flight take an early-morning cab ride out to Jackson's mansion, The Hermitage. The first couple of times I read the novel this interlude seemed rather pointless, until it occurred to me that Fitzgerald meant us to see Jackson as the first tycoon—not a businessman, but a charismatic and unorthodox westerner who marshaled broad-spectrum appeal independently from established elites, creating in the process the economic domain in which the subsequent tycoons down to Stahr would flourish. From Jackson to Stahr, then, we have the Tycoon Age, with Stahr's life being the epoch's sunset, the moment when structure crumbles and the individuated pieces shed their expressivity, the luster they enjoyed while they stood firm in Stahr's light.

The novel is very unfinished. In what we do have, Fitzgerald launches the plot along two arcs, the thematic relations between which are not at first clear. First, Stahr is suffering the strain of overwork to the point of risking his life. Producing effective charisma is no longer an effortless or fulfilling enterprise, in part because Stahr's belief in the worth of his work, in the quality of his films, is diminished; and this subterranean slippage is aggravated by widening divisions in the studio, conspiratorial maneuverings by rivals whose crass profiteering is an index of their contempt for the moviegoing public, and advancing unionization among the laborer-writers. Such splitting and fraying suggests to Stahr that, despite his titanic labors, he only has a limited number of rabbits left in his hat.

In the second plot line, Stahr meets by chance a woman named Kathleen who closely resembles his dead wife Minna, an actress, and the resemblance stirs him from his apathy into a desperate and eerie erotic pursuit that
recalls Edgar Allan Poe’s “Ligeia” (1838) and anticipates Alfred Hitchcock's Vertigo (1958): “It was Minna's face—the skin with its peculiar radiance as if phosphorus had touched it, the mouth with its warm line that never counted costs—and over all the haunting jollity that had fascinated a generation” (64). As in those texts, the generative problem is the quandary of second love. If one is destined to love some one, then the act of doing so expresses his fundamental inner truth, his profoundest self, the continuity to which all changes can be subordinated. When love is seen this way, there can be no second love—either the first or the second must have only seemed to be love—because a second love would mean that the lover had a fluid or split core, and that change can therefore be radical. Recall Gatsby's incredulity when Daisy says she loved Tom too. The narrative of the second beloved who reincarnates or exactly resembles the first papers over this fracture in desire and in the desiring self by allowing the supposition that the second love is the first beloved redivivus. But in several quite stirring and uncomfortably beautiful encounters, Stahr seems to discover Kathleen's mystery, her difference from Minna, and this discovery only deepens the attraction, without provoking any severe crisis in self-image. Relinquishing the obsessive and coercive concern with near-exact repetition that predominates in Poe and Hitchcock, Fitzgerald quickly establishes Kathleen's not-Minnaness, with wisps of abiding uncanny reminder, as if, perhaps, second love improvises on the first, “to repeat yet not recapitulate the past” (89).

It should be clear what I consider to be the deep link between the two plot lines, the opening of divisions within what had seemed to be secure wholes—between Stahr and his profession, within his professional world, within his ambition and within his desire—splinterings that Fitzgerald emblematizes as the dispersal of light-sources: “Other lights shone in Hollywood since Minna's death: in the open markets lemons and grapefruits and green apples slanted a misty glare into the street. Ahead of him the stop-signal of a car winked violet and at another crossing he watched it wink again. Everywhere floodlights raked the sky. On an empty corner two mysterious men moved a gleaming drum in pointless arcs over the heavens” (62). This dispersed glow recurs later, on a Pacific beach near a half-completed house Stahr is having built. He takes Kathleen there one night for what turns out to be one of the most frank and moving sexual encounters to be found in Fitzgerald, who is usually prudish where the act is concerned. It is both funny and touching when their postcoital barefoot stroll along the ocean brings them into a field of squirming light, dozens of sparkling, spawning grunion, shiny, sexual, fecund, an extraordinary organic improvisation on what happened just moments before in Stahr's oceanside hermitage: “It was a fine blue night. The tide was at the turn and the little silver fish rocked off shore waiting for 10:16. A few seconds after the time they came swarming in with the tide and Stahr and Kathleen stepped over them barefoot as they flicked slip-slop in the sand. A Negro man came along the shore toward them collecting the grunion quickly like twigs into two pails. They came in twos and threes and platoons and companies, relentless and exalted and scornful around the great bare feet of the intruders, as they had come before Sir Francis Drake had nailed his plaque to the boulder on the shore” (92-93). In Fitzgerald's novels, African Americans commonly appear at the moment when the main characters' world is deeply disturbed, as if breaking-up is also breaking-open. Only in The Last Tycoon, though, is that disturbance refreshing and inexplicably inspiring—a sense of possibility perhaps enhanced by the echo between Drake's arrival in California and the transfixed gaze of the Dutch sailors at the end of The Great Gatsby. The man on the beach tells Stahr and Kathleen that he doesn't really come for the fish, but rather to read Emerson, a copy of which he is carrying in his shirt. His pensiveness is confirmed a moment later when, on hearing that Stahr makes movies, he remarks that he and his children don't go to the movies, “because there's no profit in it.” He continues down the beach, “unaware that he had rocked an industry” by shining this harsh light on Stahr's already-uneasy feeling of professional worth (93).

“Now they were different people as they started back” (94). The conversation with the man on the beach and the sexual interlude with Kathleen upset the elementary articles of Stahr's self-image, his commitment to his work, and his loyalty to his desire for his wife, but these inner fractures turn out not to be premonitions of subjective decay of the kind Fitzgerald described in “The Crack-Up” (1935) and depicted in Tender is the Night. Instead, they crack Stahr open, rather than up, investing him with an intuition of life below the monolithic, frozen unities of the tycoon and romantic love systems. This post-epochal intuition runs
underground while he drives Kathleen home, then surfaces. We should recognize the terms Fitzgerald uses to describe Stahr's anomalous epiphany:

Winding down the hill he listened inside himself as if something by an unknown composer, powerful and strange and strong, was about to be played for the first time. The theme would be stated presently but because the composer was always new, he would not recognize it as the theme right away. It would come in some such guise as the auto-horns from the Technicolor boulevards below or be barely audible, a tattoo on the muffled drum of the moon. He strained to hear it, knowing only that the music was beginning, new music that he liked and did not understand. It was hard to react to what one could entirely compass—this was new and confusing, nothing one could shut off in the middle and supply the rest from an old score.

(96-97)

Lest we be ignorant of the source of such music, Fitzgerald immediately adds: “Also, and persistently, and bound up with the other, there was the Negro on the sand” (96). Without the disgust—“he liked and did not understand”—Fitzgerald returns to the insight of the excised fragment, acknowledging jazz's cultural origins and motivations, its allegiance to a future contemplated as something more interesting than the return of fulfillment.

Fitzgerald's early death strikes all the more sharply, for me at least, when I think about this new way of thinking that he was laboring so hard to convey, the series of discoveries of the real that The Last Tycoon would have been about—desire that is not a suburb of commodity-fetishism, labor politics, uninhibited capitalism, the self and the nation as diverse and nonself-identical. He was on the verge of something, like Stahr's unbuilt house, permanently unbuilt.

How did he come to that continental extremity? Perhaps something of an answer lies in the difference between Emerson's “Representative Man,” who has something, some mystical X that he bestows, and Gatsby, who has only desire, that is, who lacks rather than has, bestowing only a sharply focused version of others' more diffuse lacking. Gatsby apprises one that he shares an absence at the core, a vacancy that precedes the fantasms that address themselves to that vacancy—mystic nationhood, voices full of money, and fresh green breasts. If Fitzgerald found himself in the predicament Nick surmises in Gatsby, “[paying] too high a price for living too long with a single dream” (169), then he may have turned to face the constitutive deficit that the pursuit of the dream had been designed to distract him from. If the common feature of the artifacts in the American archaeological dig is longing, then perhaps the common feature of American experience is not the nation but rather the absence of the nation, temporialized as not yet. This feeling of the absence of the nation is historically produced by the deep belief that there ought to be—and that there could be—a nation, that is, a political and spiritual object that compensates for the extreme losses that typify the experience of modernity. I derive this conception of the nation as imaginary compensation from Benedict Anderson:

The extraordinary survival over thousands of years of Buddhism, Christianity or Islam in dozens of different social formations attests to their imaginative response to the overwhelming burden of human suffering—disease, mutilation, grief, age and death. Why was I born blind? Why is my best friend paralyzed? Why is my daughter retarded? … At the same time, in different ways, religious thought also responds to obscure intimations of immortality, generally by transforming fatality into continuity (karma, original sin, etc.). In this way, it concerns itself with the links between the dead and the yet unborn, the mystery of re-generation. Who experiences their child's conception and birth without dimly apprehending a combined connectedness, fortuity and fatality, in a language of “continuity”? 

252
Shortly later, Anderson addresses the predicament of modernity:

[I]n Western Europe the eighteenth century marks not only the dawn of the age of nationalism but the dusk of religious modes of thought. The century of the Enlightenment, or rationalist secularism, brought with it its own modern darkness. With the ebbing of religious belief, the suffering which belief in part composed did not disappear. Disintegration of paradise: nothing makes fatality more arbitrary. Absurdity of salvation: nothing makes another style of continuity more necessary. What then was required was a secular transformation of fatality into continuity, contingency into meaning. As we shall see, few things were (are) better suited to this end than the idea of a nation. If nation-states are widely conceded to be “new” and “historical,” the nations to which they give political expression always loom out of an immemorial past, and, still more important, glide into a limitless future. It is the magic of nationalism to turn chance into destiny.

(18-19)

“The nation,” Homi Bhabha contends, “fills the void left in the uprooting of communities and kin, and turns that loss into the language of metaphor. Metaphor, as the etymology of the word suggests, transfers the meaning of home and belonging, across the ‘middle passage,’ or the central European steppes, across those distances, and cultural differences, that span the imagined community of the nation-people” (291). The US is of course one of the special cases, since its immemorial pasts are European and Native American: the past of the locale entails ethnic difference, whereas ethnic continuities are not local, that is, they connect to other nations. In large measure, Fitzgerald's reference to the Dutch sailors has seemed to many readers an attempt to say, we do have our own time immemorial now, finally, and thereby to transfigure or positivize the peculiarly originary place that lacking has occupied in the imagination of American national self-constitution. What I am proposing is that Fitzgerald may in his last years have begun to shift his focus from fantasmatic reimbursements—the green breast in all its avatars—to constitutive hunger or deficit, and to contemplate such deficit as an opportunity, rather than as an occasion for stoic resignation. If I am right, this development would echo with Claude Lefort's notion of democracy (rather than of nation):

Power was embodied in the prince, and it therefore gave society a body. And because of this, a latent but effective knowledge of what one meant to the other existed throughout the social. This model reveals the revolutionary and unprecedented feature of democracy. The locus of power becomes an empty place. There is no need to dwell on the details of the institutional apparatus. The important point is that this apparatus prevents governments from appropriating power for their own ends, from incorporating it into themselves. The exercise of power is subject to the procedures of periodical redistributions. It represents the outcome of a controlled contest with permanent rules. This phenomenon implies an institutionalization of conflict. The locus of power is an empty place, it cannot be occupied—it is such that no individual and no group can be consubstantial with it—and it cannot be represented.

(17)

Gazing from a Swiss mountain, Dick Diver observes a crucial vacuum that rivals, in its transfigured sorrow, Melville's Grand Armada, a play of figurality which is not restrained by a clear distinction between the thing and its shadow: “On the centre of the lake, cooled by the piercing current of the Rhone, lay the true centre of the Western World. Upon it floated swans like boats and boats like swans, both lost in the nothingness of the heartless beauty. It was a bright day, with sun glinting on the grass beach below and the white courts of the Kursal. The figures on the courts threw no shadows” (Fitzgerald, Tender 147-48). If the center is nothingness, then loneliness—the historical circumstance to which nationalism so ferociously and unsuccessfully responds—might come to seem mysteriously opportune, people and their things freed from the
burden of symbolizing, finding their way through an epoch's ruin: “They sat on high stools and had tomato broth and hot sandwiches. It was more intimate than anything they had done, and they both felt a dangerous sort of loneliness, and felt it in each other. They shared in varied scents of the drug-store, bitter and sweet and sour, and the mystery of the waitress, with only the outer part of her hair dyed and black beneath, and, when it was over, the still life of their empty plates—a silver of potato, a sliced pickle and an olive stone” (Fitzgerald, Love [The Love of the Last Tycoon] 85).

Notes

1. All future parenthetical references to the novel will refer to Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby: The Authorized Text (1991) unless noted otherwise.

2. My understanding of the connection between nationalism, symbolization, and the simplification of historical reality is heavily indebted to John F. Callahan, The Illusions of a Nation:

   What, in America, have been the relations between complex human personality, history, and those myths summoned to explain the facts of history? What in the national past tempts succeeding generations to evade their history and seek mythologies of fraudulent innocence/particularly misleading, when applied to history, is the mythic mode's assumption that ongoing experience endlessly repeats past patterns of action and policy. Nevertheless, history and myth raise the same question for America: how does history rationalized subvert personality? How have dominant myths swayed consciousness away from complexity and freedom? Why have fixity, stereotype and a one-dimensional, denotative perception won out over fluidity, archetype, and personality in the round?

   (3)

3. I apologize for entering the term “nigger” into print. Would that it died out from misuse. But Fitzgerald's comment concerning the “direction” of African-American culture in New York seems important to me.

4. This quotation originally appeared in Alain Locke's The New Negro (1925), but I found it in Ogren. Ogren's book has been extremely helpful. I am also indebted to Burton Paretti, The Creation of Jazz (1992); Martin Williams, The Jazz Tradition (1983); Samuel Charters and Leonard Kunstadt, Jazz: A History of the New York Scene (1962); Arnold Shaw, The Jazz Age: Popular Music in the 1920s (1987); Stearns; Gunther Schuller, Early Jazz: Its Roots and Musical Development (1968); and Gioia. I have been deeply affected by (and would like sometime to write an essay on) Sidney Bechet's autobiography, Treat it Gentle (1960). I am especially indebted to Richard Hadlock, both for his Jazz Masters of the Twenties, and for his weekly Sunday night radio show, “The Annals of Jazz,” from KCSM in San Mateo, CA, also at KCSM.org on the Web.

5. I am continually surprised that an extended comparison of the careers of Beiderbecke and Fitzgerald has not been attempted, perhaps because of their different performative media. The resonances are many: in addition to death from drinking, they share an upper midwestern origin, rapid and somewhat scandalous celebrity, the pressure of coming to terms with the constraints imposed by success, and a fine strain of alluring and disturbing melancholia.

6. For a discussion of the relation between jazz and symphonic performance during this period, see Bernard Gendron, “Jamming at Le Boeuf: Jazz and the Paris Avant-Garde” (1989-90).

7. My feeling that this is for Fitzgerald a breakthrough (rather than a breakdown) moment, and that he felt it to be so, is reinforced by the presence of an item from his personal erotic code, bare feet. In a ledger he composed to help him recall his early years, Fitzgerald recalled that in August 1901, he “went to Atlantic City—where some Freudian complex refused to let him display his feet, so he refused to swim, concealing the real reason” (Turnbull 9). For July 1903, he writes: “There was also a boy named Arnold who went barefooted in his yard and peeled plums. Scott's freudian shame about
his feet kept him from joining in” (Turnbull 11). In *This Side of Paradise* (1920), Amory Blaine is at one point the victim of a fantasmatic tormentor who leers at Blaine as if in full knowledge of Blaine's worst traits: “Then, suddenly, Amory perceived the feet, and with a rush of blood to the head he realized he was afraid. The feet were all wrong … with a sort of wrongness that he felt rather than knew. … It was like weakness in a good woman, or food on satin; one of those terrible incongruities that shake little things in the back of the brain. He wore no shoes, but, instead, a sort of half moccasin, pointed, though, like the shoes they wore in the fourteenth century, and with the little ends curling up. They were a darkish brown and his toes seemed to fill them to the end. … They were unutterably terrible … (113). The “terrible incongruity” anticipates the “Jazz History,” so it is not surprising that the issue of race would surface shortly after: “The elevator was close, and the colored boy was half asleep, paled to a livid bronze. … Axia's beseeching voice floated down the shaft. Those feet … those feet …” (114).

8. See Callahan 82 on this passage.

**Works Cited**


———. *Tender is the Night.* New York: Scribner's, 1962.


In the following essay, Monteiro discusses possible sources for the last passage in Gatsby, in which Nick muses on how Long Island might have looked to the early explorers.

In one of the most familiar passages in twentieth—century literature, Nick Carraway thinks back on the late Jay Gatsby, who had suffered so grievously from the hard malice of the Buchanans and their like in the inhospitable East. It begins as an elegy but turns into a lament for humankind's capacity for wonder and awe in the face of the hard truths of history. Disillusioned, sad, sentimental, this child of the Midwest looks out, through the mind's eye, across Long Island Sound and re-imagines the “old island” as it must have looked four centuries earlier to the Western sailors who were but the advance guard of the adventurers, immigrants, and settlers to come. Like the psalmist who sits by the rivers of Babylon, lamenting the lost Zion, he, too, weeps for what is past and will not return. It bears repeating.

Most of the big shore places were closed now and there were hardly any lights except the shadowy, moving glow of a ferryboat across the Sound. And as the moon rose higher the inessential houses began to melt away until gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes—a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby's house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder. … Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter—to-morrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther. … And one fine morning—
So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.\(^1\)

These final sentences of *The Great Gatsby* take on a strange and surprising significance when they are read against Fitzgerald's immediate sources for them in the literature about Columbus and the New World. Behind Nick's words and sentiments lies a vast body of Western literature on notions of a terrestrial paradise. Since Fitzgerald ties this “fresh, green breast of the new world” to a New York island that “flowered once,” as Carraway imagined, for “Dutch sailors' eyes,” it is possible to pin down his principal if not sole source for Nick's last rueful vision.

Washington Irving's *A History of New York, from the Beginning of the World to the End of the Dutch Dynasty*, first published in 1809 and attributed to the fictional *persona* of “Diedrich Knickerbocker,” is a problem for the genre purist. While the book often mocks history and historical writing, it otherwise suits perfectly Fitzgerald's fictional imagination. For among other matters, it demonstrates how one fabulating writer confronts the stuff of history, drawing on his considerable folkloristic ability to turn historic materials into the romanticized stuff of national legend and Western myth. Irving's history describes the first look which those “honest Dutch tars” had of the New World when their ships “entered that majestic bay which at this day expands its ample bosom before the city of New York, and which had never before been visited by any European.”

The island of Manna-hatta spread wide before them, like some sweet vision of fancy or some fair creation of industrious magic. Its hills of smiling green swelled gently one above another, crowned with lofty trees of luxuriant growth, some pointing their tapering foliage towards the clouds, which were gloriously transparent, and others loaded with a verdant burden of clambering vines, bowing their branches to the earth, that was covered with flowers.\(^2\)

Irving's description echoes earlier accounts of what the so-called “terrestrial paradise” might look like. In *Voyages and Discoveries of the Companions of Columbus* (1828), Irving places Columbus' considerations of this theme within a greater tradition of such speculation, beginning with the “Grand Oasis of Arabia,” where, he writes, “exhausted travellers, after traversing the parched and sultry desert, hailed this verdant spot with rapture; they refreshed themselves under its shady bowers, and beside its cooling streams, as the crew of a tempest tost vessel repose on the shores of some green island in the deep.”\(^3\) He also summarizes St. Basilius' discourse on “Paradise”:

There the earth is always green, the flowers are ever blooming, the waters limpid and delicate; not rushing in rude and turbid torrents, but welling up in crystal fountains and winding in peaceful and silver streams. There no harsh and boisterous winds are permitted to shake and disturb the air and ravage the beauty of the groves; there prevails no melancholy nor darksome weather, no drowning rain nor pelting hail, no forked lightning nor rending and resounding thunder; no wintry pinching cold nor withering and panting summer heat, nor any thing else that can give pain or sorrow or annoyance; but all is bland and gentle and serene; a perpetual youth and joy reigns throughout all nature and nothing decays and dies.\(^4\)

Later, in *A History of the Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus* (1828), Irving summarizes Columbus' own thinking about the shape of the earth and the nature of the vast new world before him. “Philosophers had described it [the earth] as spherical,” he wrote,

but they knew nothing of the part of the world which he had discovered. The ancient part, known to them, he had no doubt was spherical; but he now supposed that the real form of the earth was that of a pear, one part much more elevated than the rest, and tapering upwards toward the skies. This part he supposed to be in the interior of this newly found continent, and immediately under the equator. … He beheld a vast world, rising, as it were, into existence
before him; its nature and extent unknown and undefined, as yet a mere region for conjecture. Every day displayed some new feature of beauty and sublimity. Island after island, whose rocks he was told were veined with gold, whose groves teemed with spices, or whose shores abounded with pearls. Interminable ranges of coast; promontory beyond promontory, stretching as far as the eye could reach; luxuriant valleys, sweeping away into a vast interior, whose distant mountains, he was told, concealed still happier lands, and realms of still greater opulence. When he looked upon all this region of golden promise, it was with the glorious conviction, that his genius had, in a manner, called it into existence; he regarded it with the triumphant eye of a discoverer.5

Irving's major source for Columbus' speculations, theories, and convictions were Columbus' letters reporting on his four voyages to the New World. It was in his third-voyage letter that Columbus explained that the earth was in “the form of a pear … or like a round ball, upon one part of which is a prominence like a woman's nipple, this protrusion being the highest and nearest the sky, situated under the equinoctial line, and at the eastern extremity of this sea.”6 So important did he think his discovery to be that he repeated it in the same letter, in pretty much the same terms, only a few sentences further on. Therefore, when he reached the island of Trinidad, he was not surprised to find “the temperature exceedingly mild; the fields and the foliage likewise were remarkably fresh and green,” adding:

all this must proceed from the extreme blandness of the temperature, which arises, as I have said, from this country being the most elevated in the world, and the nearest to the sky. On these grounds, therefore, I affirm, that the globe is not spherical, but that there is the difference in its form which I have described; the which is to be found in this hemisphere, at the point where the Indies meet the ocean, the extremity of the hemisphere being below the equinoctial line. And a great confirmation of this is, that when our Lord made the sun, the first light appeared in the first point of the east, where the most elevated point of the globe is. …7

That Fitzgerald was acquainted with Columbus' letters may be confirmed further by his account of hardships suffered on his fourth voyage. As echoed later in Fitzgerald, he writes of “currents [that] were still contrary,” “currents still oppos[ing]” the progress of ships “in the worst possible condition” but “always beating against contrary winds.”8

If the finale of The Great Gatsby owes a good deal to Washington Irving, it is curious to note that Fitzgerald's novel might have had its own small share in a later historian's rendering of Columbus' Spanish in his letter on the third voyage. Samuel Eliot Morison, finding the existing translations of Columbus' letters into English to be unsatisfactory, informs readers of his Admiral of the Ocean Sea: A Life of Christopher Columbus (1942) that he has made his own translations of the original Spanish. Morison renders “de la forma de una pera … ó como quien tiene una pelota muy redonda, ye en un lugar della fuese como una teta de muger alli puesta”9 as “the earth was not round after all, but ‘in the shape of a pear,’ or, like a round ball ‘on one part of which is placed something like a woman's breast.’”10 “This breast,” continues Morison, “reached nearer Heaven than the rest of the world, and on the nipple the Terrestrial Paradise was located.”11 Interestingly, the English scholar Stephen Reckert, who quotes Morison's explanation for Columbus' miscalculations, also provides his own translation of the passage from Columbus' third voyage letter, which reads in part: “I began to think this about the world: I find it is not round …, but the shape of a quite round pear, and in one place like a woman's breast …, and this nipple part is the highest and nearest to Heaven. …”12

Foreshadowing Fitzgerald's Nick Carraway, Columbus sets down his impressions on first looking at what would come to be called the New World:
All these islands are very beautiful, and distinguished by a diversity of scenery; they are filled with a great variety of trees of immense height, and which I believe to retain their foliage in all seasons; for when I saw them they were as verdant and luxuriant as they usually are in Spain in the month of May,—some of them were blossoming, some bearing fruit, and all flourishing in the greatest perfection, according to their respective stages of growth, and the nature and quality of each. … The nightingale and various birds were singing in countless numbers. …

For the dreamer, as Dick Diver learns in Tender Is the Night, the nightingale of the imagination knows no spatial limitations. It has no natural habitat. But it does for Nick Carraway, of course, whose plaintive anthem evokes Columbus' vision as it is replayed for Dutch sailors, first in Irving, then in Fitzgerald. Gatsby embodies a twentieth-century version of their dream—it was William Butler Yeats's notion, it will be recalled, that man embodies truth but cannot know it—but he cannot get past the green light at the end of Daisy's dock, which has signaled from the start the absolute barrier to the realization of his dream of Daisy and the recoverable past.

Of course what is problematic about Gatsby's dream is that it not only has roots in the past but that it is intended to remake the past. In short, it is temporally disoriented, for the dreams of Columbus and the others, including the Dutch sailors, are keyed to the possibilities of the future. Henry David Thoreau quotes Humboldt's words on Columbus as he first faces the New World:

> The grateful coolness of the evening air, the ethereal purity of the starry firmament, the balmy fragrance of flowers, wafted to him by the land breeze, all led him to suppose (as we are told by Herrera, in the Decades) that he was approaching the garden of Eden, the sacred abode of our first parents. The Orinoco seemed to him one of the four rivers which, according to the venerable tradition of the ancient world, flowed from Paradise, to water and divide the surface of the earth, newly adorned with plants.

Thoreau reveals his own wonderment, as he looks out over the beach at Cape Cod, that “men do not sail the sea with more expectation. Nothing remarkable was ever accomplished in a prosaic mood. The heroes and discoverers have found true more than was previously believed, only when they were expecting and dreaming of something more than their contemporaries dreamed of, or even themselves discovered,” he continues, “that is, when they were in a frame of mind fitted to behold the truth.” Thus, even the quixotic “expeditions for the discovery of El Dorado, and of the Fountain of Youth, led to real, if not compensatory discoveries.” Such quests differ from Jay Gatsby's, though, for there can be nothing compensatory when, as in his case, the risk is absolute.

Washington Irving's History of the Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus also anticipates Carraway's simile connecting the egg to Columbus in the first chapter of The Great Gatsby:

> Next to the countenance shown him by the king and queen, may be mentioned that of Pedro Gonzalez de Mendoza, the grand cardinal of Spain, and first subject of the realm; a man whose elevated character for piety, learning, and high prince-like qualities, gave signal value to his favours. He invited Columbus to a banquet, where he assigned him the most honourable place at table, and had him served with the ceremonials which in those punctilious times were observed towards sovereigns. At this repast is said to have occurred the well known anecdote of the egg. A shallow courtier present, impatient of the honours paid to Columbus, and meanly jealous of him as a foreigner, abruptly asked him whether he thought that, in case he had not discovered the Indias, there were not other men in Spain, who would have been capable of the enterprize? To this Columbus made no immediate reply, but, taking an egg, invited the company to make it stand upon one end. Every one attempted it, but in vain;
whereupon he struck it upon the table so as to break the end, and left it standing on the broken part; illustrating in this simple manner, that when he had once shown the way to the new world, nothing was easier than to follow it.\textsuperscript{17}

Irving then adds a footnote: “This anecdote rests on the authority of the Italian historian Benzoni. … It has been condemned as trivial, but the simplicity of the reproof constitutes its severity, and was characteristic of the practical sagacity of Columbus. The universal popularity of the anecdote is a proof of its merit.”\textsuperscript{18}

Interestingly enough, Mary Shelley borrowed the anecdote of Columbus and the egg from the 1828 edition of Irving’s \textit{Columbus}. In her 1831 preface to \textit{Frankenstein}, she writes:

Invention, it must be humbly admitted, does not consist in creating out of void, but out of chaos; the materials must, in the first place, be afforded: it can give form to dark, shapeless substances, but cannot bring into being the substance itself. In all matters of discovery and invention, even of those that appertain to the imagination, we are continually reminded of the story of Columbus and his egg. Invention consists in the capacity of seizing on the capabilities of a subject, and in the power of moulding and fashioning ideas suggested to it.\textsuperscript{19}

This is not a bad explanation for what encourages Jay Gatsby to think that he can re-fashion the factual past, bringing it into line with his clear dreams and hazy ideals, much like the Dutch sailors with all time and place seemingly opening out before them. So too, Jay Gatsby, that young student of “needed inventions,” succeeds in becoming both his own Dr. Frankenstein and his own creation. He is, after all, to Nick’s amazement, his own best invention: the product of his Platonic conception of himself. Like Mary Shelley’s monster, he is not accepted by the villagers, from whose ranks will come his murderer.

Behind Fitzgerald's story of New York and the East, however, lies still another major source, this time not for the anecdote about Columbus' triumph over his carping critics, but for the fable of failure that is the story of the two Eggs, West and East. Into the mix out of which emerged \textit{The Great Gatsby} had gone Sherwood Anderson's “The Triumph of the Egg.” Published in \textit{The Dial} in March 1920 and collected in 1921 in a volume bearing the same title as the story, Anderson's story, from one point of view at least, offers a major criticism of that version of the American Dream promising success to those who work honestly, hard, and long, especially to those independent souls who strike out on their own into the adventurous but dangerous realm of small business.

Like \textit{The Great Gatsby}, “The Egg” (its final title) is a first-person retrospective narrative. A son recalls his boyhood, his mother and father, his father's attempts to succeed. He meditates on the dark metaphysics of raising chickens and the darksome effects on a child of living among the daily dying of chicks and chickens. Not so mysterious diseases decimate the population, and the stupid chicken has a predilection, like a character in \textit{Gatsby}, for running out into the road and being struck dead by passing vehicles. The chicken farm fails (compare the Uncle Sol of E. E. Cummings' poem “Nobody Loses All the Time,” who, after committing suicide, finally starts a successful business, a “worm farm”), and the father starts a restaurant. But chickens and eggs are in his blood. He has a collection of monster chicks, with two heads, multiple legs, and the like, preserved in jars, and he has learned to perform tricks with eggs. Anxious to satisfy his ambition for himself and his family (when single he had his own horse), his desperation takes a singularly American turn toward Barnumism. He will attract customers to his restaurant by exhibiting his chicken wonders and doing magic tricks that he will not hesitate to explain to his customers. The showing of his exhibits is doomed from the start. It would take a rare bird, indeed, to order a fried egg sandwich or a Western omelet as a bizarrie of chicken freaks before him suspended in preservative alcohol stare out at him.

The father on this day, to amuse and bemuse his only customer, moves anxiously and excitedly to his magic tricks. He promises to do the real trick that Columbus said he would do but did not.
“Well,” he began hesitatingly, “well, you have heard of Christopher Columbus, eh?” He seemed to be angry. “That Christopher Columbus was a cheat,” he declared emphatically. “He talked of making an egg stand on its end. He talked, he did, and then he went and broke the end of the egg.” My father seemed to his visitor to be beside himself at the duplicity of Christopher Columbus. He muttered and swore. He declared it was wrong to teach children that Christopher Columbus was a great man when, after all, he cheated at the critical moment. He had declared he would make an egg stand on end and then when his bluff had been called he had done a trick.20

The father proceeds to his trick. He will make the egg stand alone by rolling the egg between the palms of his hands, claiming that he was coaxing the electricity from the human body into the egg. When he does bring off the trick, however, his customer is not looking, and by the time the latter looks back, the egg has fallen over.

It does not seem to be far-fetched to think here of Gatsby's grand entertainments designed to attract Daisy, weekend parties that have no other meaning for Gatsby beyond that one purpose. Of course, they too fail ultimately. Nick Carraway early on foreshadows the notion of the Columbian sham that so angers the father in Anderson's story “The Egg” when he describes West Egg and East Egg, “a pair of enormous eggs, identical in contour and separated only by a courtesy bay, jut out into the most domesticated body of salt water in the Western hemisphere, the great wet barnyard of Long Island Sound. They are not perfect ovals,” he continues, “—like the egg in the Columbus story, they are both crushed flat at the contact end.” With Columbus on his mind, it is no wonder that Nick describes himself as “a guide, a pathfinder, an original settler.”21 For all of his Barnum-like tricks and Columbus-like antics, Gatsby will fall before the “hard malice” of others. Fitzgerald was, of course, not rewriting Anderson's story. But it might have been one of its starting points, not the least of which was the ironic, elegiac, rueful tone of its retrospective narration.22

Nick is carried away with his narration, his mythologizing, his defense of Gatsby the criminal with an impossibly sentimental ideal that fails to recognize both the incarnation in Daisy of the grail which he is in the quest of and the realities of the human condition, among the contingencies of which is inevitable mutability and the passage of time. The battle of East Egg and West Egg is over, and there is no winner.

The Columbus and egg story surfaces also in the William Faulkner story “The Bear.” “Cass” McCaslin Edmonds presents his cousin Isaac McCaslin with a global overview of an exhausted Old World just before the New World is discovered. For a “thousand years … men fought over the fragments of that collapse until at last even the fragments were exhausted and men snarled over the gnawed bones of the old world's worthless evening until an accidental egg discovered to them a new hemisphere.”23 That new hemisphere provided him with opportunity, but at a cost, as Faulkner reported to the Delta Council, a Mississippi group honoring him in 1952:

By remaining in the old world, we could have been not only secure, but even free of the need to be responsible. Instead, we chose the freedom, the liberty, the independence and the inalienable right to responsibility; almost without charts, in frail wooden ships with nothing but sails and our desire and will to be free to move them, we crossed an ocean which did not even match the charts we did have; we conquered a wilderness in order to establish a place, not to be secure in because we did not want that, we had just repudiated that, just crossed three thousand miles of dark and unknown sea to get away from that; but a place to be free in, to be independent in, to be responsible in.24

Yet, as “The Bear” indicates, this continent was already owned by men “while He—this Arbiter, this Architect, this Umpire—condoned—or did He? looked down and saw—or did He? Or at least did nothing: saw, and could not, or did not see; saw, and would not, or perhaps He would not see—perseverent, impotent, or blind: which?”25 Faulkner's indifferent or uncaring deity is an avatar of Fitzgerald's Dr. T. J. Eckleberg, whose
vacant eyes overlook the valley of ashes on the way to Mana-hatta. So Faulkner joins the story of Columbus' egg with arguably Fitzgerald's most famous Modernist image, dropping the entire matter, in all its aspects, into heady ruminations about history and divinity in Yoknapatawpha.

Just as his use of the Columbus anecdote emerges in Faulkner's great hunting story, so Fitzgerald's sorrowful look into the past for the green light and the paradisal hopes the Dutch sailors saw in the promised land of New York shores has lived on, one imagines, in the breasts of many, each manifestation taking its own form and seeking out its own expression. One of the more striking versions of Nick Carraway's vision is wonderfully emblematic—the words of a professor of literature later turned university president and, still later, baseball commissioner:

[Baseball] is designed to break your heart. The game begins in the spring, when everything else begins again, and it blossoms in the summer, filling the afternoons and evenings, and then as soon as the chill rains come, it stops and leaves you to face the fall alone. … It breaks my heart because it was meant to, because it was meant to foster in me again the illusion that there was something abiding, some pattern and some impulse that could come together to make a reality that would resist the corrosion; and because, after it had fostered again that most hungered-for illusion, the game was meant to stop, and betray precisely what it promised. Of course, there are those who learn after the first few times. They grow out of sports. And there are others who were born with the wisdom to know that nothing lasts. These are the truly tough among us, the ones who can live without illusion, or without even the hope of illusion. I am not that grown-up or up-to-date. I am a simpler creature, tied to more primitive patterns and cycles. I need to think something lasts forever, and it might as well be that state of being that is a game; it might as well be that, in a green field, in the sun.26

In this piece, published in the Yale Alumni Magazine in 1977 when he was president of the university, Bart Giamatti gives a new emphasis and a re-focused meaning to Gatsby's dreaming, and he does so in a voice that sounds a bit like Nick Carraway's. It was not inappropriate that the young Angelo Bartlett Giamatti, the author of a doctoral dissertation later published as The Earthly Paradise and the Renaissance Epic, had served an apprenticeship at Princeton, teaching Dante, Petrarch, and Spenser, before journeying home to New Haven. “Columbus thought he had found the blessed land across the wide waters,” Giamatti had written in the Earthly Paradise, “and he was certainly not the last man to search.”27

In notes toward his last novel, now known as The Love of the Last Tycoon: A Western (note, a “Western”), Fitzgerald has his female narrator, a young woman named Cecilia, tell of her first sight of sheep in the flesh:

I thought of the first sheep I ever remember seeing—hundreds of them, and how our car drove suddenly into them on the back lot of the old Laemmle studio. They were unhappy about being in pictures but the men in the car with us kept saying:

“Swell?”

“Is that what you wanted, Dick?”

“Isn't that swell?” And the man named Dick kept standing up in the car as if he were Cortez or Balboa, looking over that grey fleecy undulation. If I ever knew what picture they were in I have long forgotten.28

It is the narrator who refers to “Balboa or Cortez” as the one who first looks out over the Pacific Ocean. One of them is commonly accepted as the first European to do so. The narrator confesses to confusing the two Spaniards. Her confusion recalls John Keats, of course, whose poem mistakenly credits this primary

26
experience to Cortez. The confusion in *The Love of the Last Tycoon* is not, of course, Fitzgerald's. That he introduces it into his fiction, however, suggests that he found the confusion meaningful or at least suggestive of meaning.

There are, for example, the parallels between the Spaniards (represented by Balboa and Cortez) and the Dutch sailors who first saw in wonderment the greenness of Mana-hatta. It is the wonder that each experiences at new discovery which each feels brings them together. Just as the whole of the Pacific Ocean lies before the Spanish Europeans, the whole of the North American continent lies before the Dutch Europeans. Just as Keats can imagine how Balboa (or Cortez) felt, along with his men, so too can Nick Carraway imagine how the Dutch sailors felt. But what is more important is the parallel between Keats and Carraway. Each has had to resort to a simile to define his amazement. Keats's “discovery” of Chapman's translation of Homer is like Carraway's discovery of Gatsby and his intransigent dream. Only the discovery of a new planet or the sight of a new ocean can reveal the depth and magnitude of discovering Chapman's Homer. Only the one-time awe of the Dutch sailors can reveal the depth and magnitude of Gatsby's American dream. So Carraway has to reach for a new loop in the coda to his narrative to put that narrative in its proper historical-mythic perspective.

Interestingly, the effect that Fitzgerald achieves is, in a funny way, something like that of the Dutch girl pictured on the cleanser container. Fitzgerald as author stands to Carraway as Carraway as author stands to Gatsby, while Gatsby stands to the East Egg world as, in history, the first Dutch sailors stand to the green islands before them. Keats saw in Balboa silence and in his men “wild surmise.” History has told us what such “wild surmise” led to with the brutal violence and bloody conquests of Cortez. Yet the Gatsbys stay the course. They will not learn the lessons of history. If they are doomed to repeat the mistakes, they will keep the dreams (though they be violent and destructive) both alive and verdant. They shall persist if not prevail, like the boats beating against the current, doomed to fail at the last.

Of course, in Keats's time, Europe's “discovery” of the Western hemisphere was not much deplored, nor was Britain's still-expanding empire much questioned except by her rivals in empire building. For Fitzgerald, however, who would soon discover Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West*, the discoverer's egg turned out to be the great humpty-dumpty. It could never be put back together again any more than Gatsby could fix the past or Sherwood Anderson could abandon the hopeful mystery he cast over his “almost beautiful,” single-truth grotesques.29

Notes
6. I quote from *Christopher Columbus: Four Voyages to the New World, Letters and Selected Documents*, ed., and trans. R. H. Major, intro. John E. Fagg (Citadel, 1992), p. 130. This is a bilingual edition of *Select Letters of Christopher Columbus, with Other Original Documents, Relating to his Four Voyages to the New World* (Hakluyt Society, 1847).


14. In the same year that saw the publication of *The Great Gatsby*, William Carlos Williams rendered Columbus’ vision: “[W]e saw the trees very green, and much water and fruits of divers kinds. … Bright green trees, the whole land so green that it is a pleasure to look on it. Gardens of the most beautiful trees I ever saw. … I walked among the trees which was the most beautiful thing which I had ever seen” (*In the American Grain*, intro. Horace Gregory [New Directions, n.d.], pp. 25-26).


22. Until Anderson's “collapse” with the publication of *Dark Laughter* Fitzgerald's attitude toward his work had always been laudatory. In 1923, he had reviewed the novel *Many Marriages* favorably, and even as late as 1925 he still considered Anderson, as he wrote to Maxwell Perkins, “one of the very best and finest writers in the English language today” (*The Letters of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, ed. Andrew Turnbull [Scribners, 1963], p. 187). By 1927, however, he had changed his mind. It was Hemingway who, since “Anderson's collapse,” was “the best we have, I think,” as he informed Mencken (*Correspondence of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, ed. Matthew J. Bruccoli and Margaret M. Duggan [Random House, 1980], p. 210).


**Criticism: Brian Sutton (essay date fall 2000)**


*In the following essay, Sutton examines the significance of a recurring image of the framing of Tom and Daisy in a frame of artificial light in Gatsby.*
In F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Gatsby goes to spectacular lengths to try to achieve what Nick Carraway calls “his incorruptible dream” (155): to recapture the past by regaining Daisy Buchanan's love and getting her to tell her husband, Tom, that she never loved him (111). For much of the novel, Gatsby seems likely to succeed, not only because his efforts are so extraordinary, but because Daisy’s marriage seems so miserable and corrupt that she must surely be looking for the chance to escape. But Daisy herself proves to be corrupt and thus perfectly suited for marriage with Tom, with whom she shares membership in an exclusive society from which Gatsby is barred. Whenever Fitzgerald emphasizes the resilience of Tom and Daisy's corrupt marriage, he relies on a recurring image: He portrays Tom and Daisy together, side by side, framed by a square or rectangle of artificial light.¹

The image first occurs late in the opening chapter. Although at this point Fitzgerald hasn't yet established the possibility that Daisy might leave Tom for Gatsby, he has clearly shown how miserable Daisy seems within her marriage. When the narrator, Nick Carraway, attends a small dinner party at Tom and Daisy's mansion, Daisy publicly blames Tom for a bruise on her knuckle, suggesting physical violence (12). She calls him “a brute” and “hulking,” repeating the latter word immediately after he “crossly” says he doesn't like it (12). She belittles his ideas, twice winking at Nick during Tom's comments about a book he claims to have read (13-14). Then she abruptly leaves the dinner table to retrieve Tom after he has left to answer a telephone call, evidently from his lover, Myrtle Wilson (14-16), and when Daisy is alone with Nick, she complains bitterly about her marriage and her life (17-18).

Yet the instant she finishes her complaint, Nick “felt the basic insincerity of what she had said,” and a moment later she looks at Nick “with an absolute smirk on her lovely face, as if she had asserted her membership in a rather distinguished secret society to which she and Tom belonged” (18). Therefore almost from the beginning of the novel, Fitzgerald hints that despite or perhaps because of the corruption in the marriage, Daisy is content to be married to Tom. And when Nick leaves for the night, Fitzgerald uses the square of artificial light to frame an image emphasizing Tom and Daisy's basic compatibility with one another. At their front door, they “stood side by side in a cheerful frame of light” (20). Tom and Daisy speak like a happy couple, agreeing with one another and referring to themselves as a unit:

“We heard you were engaged to a girl out West.”

“That's right,” corroborated Tom kindly. “We heard you were engaged.”

(20)

By the time we encounter the second instance of the frame of light, near the end of chapter 6, Gatsby has become Daisy's lover. Once again the image occurs at the conclusion of a party, this time one of the larger, wilder parties that Gatsby throws. Again events of the evening underscore problems in the marriage, problems that by now suggest that Daisy may indeed leave Tom and end up with Gatsby. She spends a considerable portion of the evening dancing with and talking alone to Gatsby, whereas Tom spends much of the evening pursuing a woman he has met (106-07). Besides being irritated with each other's flirtatious behavior, Daisy and Tom are both disdainful of the other's potential lover: Daisy describes the woman Tom pursues as “common but pretty” and sarcastically offers him a pencil to write down the woman's address (107). Tom describes the party as a “menagerie” and says of Gatsby, “A lot of these newly rich people are just big bootleggers, you know” (109). But this snobbishness, although expressed through bickering, ultimately unites Daisy and Tom within the “distinguished secret society” Gatsby cannot penetrate. Although Daisy defends Gatsby when Tom mocks his party, she too is “offended” and “appalled” by the party's garish, drunken-Broadway atmosphere and joins her husband in a mutual distaste for Gatsby's world. At the end of the evening, standing side by side framed in “ten square feet of light” emanating from Gatsby's front door, Tom and Daisy leave together, and Gatsby admits to Nick, “She didn't like it. […] I feel far away from her” (110-11).
When at the end of chapter 7 the frame of light appears for the third and final time, it is at the close of a day in which Gatsby has forced the love triangle to its inevitable crisis. Once again he at first seems likely to succeed: Daisy's facial expression and tone of voice have made Tom sense that she loves Gatsby (119), and Daisy calls Tom "revolting" after he obliquely acknowledges having had a succession of adulterous affairs (132). But when Gatsby takes the ultimate step of asking Daisy to tell Tom that she has never loved him, her immediate reaction makes clear that "she had never, all along, intended doing anything at all" (133) about leaving Tom. When Tom brings up the shady means by which Gatsby has made his fortune, Gatsby's chances of winning Daisy are dead, not because Daisy now finds Gatsby immoral, but because Gatsby is now firmly established as a mere social-climbing bootlegger, in contrast to Tom and Daisy who were born into wealth. When Tom learns of Gatsby's relationship with Daisy, his initial reaction is indignation that "Mr. Nobody from Nowhere" could threaten his marriage (130). And in the end, Daisy thinks much the same way Tom does, rendering Gatsby's dreams hopeless.

Although this encounter is disastrous for Gatsby, worse is to follow. Driving back to Long Island in Gatsby's car, Daisy accidentally runs over and kills Myrtle Wilson. With violence hanging in the air, Gatsby is reduced to hiding in the bushes near Tom and Daisy's house, hoping to protect Daisy in the event that, as he says to Nick, her husband "tries to bother her about that unpleasantness this afternoon" and "tries any brutality" (145). Although his concern for Daisy's safety is undoubtedly genuine, Gatsby may also hope for an outburst from Tom, because Gatsby's only remaining chance to win Daisy would be if Tom were to drive her away through violence.

But when Nick goes up to the house to "see if there's any sign of commotion" (145), he comes to "a small rectangle of light" at a window and finds Tom and Daisy framed within that light, sitting together, his hand covering hers, and Daisy nodding in agreement as he speaks (146). Once again, the artificial light frames a scene portraying Tom and Daisy as well matched, united in mutual corruption. Nick observes, "There was an unmistakable air of natural intimacy about the picture, and anybody would have said they were conspiring together" (146).

Judging from later events, perhaps Tom and Daisy were "conspiring together." Daisy evidently allows Tom to believe that Gatsby was driving when Myrtle Wilson was killed. And when Tom encounters Myrtle's husband, who is armed and deluded with grief into thinking that whoever ran over Myrtle had been her lover and had killed her deliberately, Tom directs him to Gatsby's house. Myrtle's husband then murders Gatsby and commits suicide. Thus, whereas Tom and Daisy and their marriage survive, Gatsby is killed for running over Myrtle—something Daisy did—and for being Myrtle's lover—something Tom was. It is ironic that despite the repeated imagery of Tom and Daisy together in a frame of light, in the end it is Gatsby who is framed by Tom and Daisy.

Note

1. For a contrasting analysis of this image pattern, one correlating the pattern with the novel's themes related to the American Dream and the first European explorers' encounter with the American wilderness, see Lawry.

Works Cited


Criticism: Chikako D. Kumamoto (essay date fall 2001)


[In the following essay, Kumamoto explores Fitzgerald's use of the “egg and chicken” metaphors as part of Gatsby's structure.]

FITZGERALD'S THE GREAT GATSBY

Having moved to the suburbs of New York City, Nick Carraway makes the now-famous comparison between his neighborhood and its adjacent community: “Twenty miles from the city a pair of enormous eggs, identical in contour and separated only by a courtesy of bay, jut out into the most domesticated body of salt water in the Western Hemisphere, the great barnyard of Long Island Sound” (Fitzgerald 9).

One may inquire, however, whether Nick means the egg metaphor simply as a felicitous coincidence or as a surreptitious carrier of his narrative thesis. Among theme-clarifying studies of Fitzgerald's major images in the novel—studies by Lehan, Geismer, Johnson, Laying, Miller, and Sutton, for instance—only Kermit Moyer comments specifically on the egg-shaped setting as Fitzgerald's structural design shoring up the parallel between the novel's narrative circularity and the circular geography (45). In my essay I examine this and also investigate how Nick's seldom-critiqued “a pair of enormous eggs,” as well as other heretofore unnoticed egg-inspired images in the narrative, acts as his submerged thematic signals.

Plausible meanings of egg references can be traced to two sources, the first of which is Fitzgerald's known attraction to “The Feast of Trimalchio” in Petronius's The Satyricon. Fitzgerald scholars document the frequent correspondence between Fitzgerald and Maxwell Perkins chronicling Fitzgerald's obsession with using Trimalchio as part of the final title, as in Trimalchio or Trimalchio in West Egg, before he settled down to The Great Gatsby. The recent Cambridge University Press publication of Trimalchio: An Early Version of The Great Gatsby also makes us privy to the history of the Trimalchio text that would eventually become The Great Gatsby (West xiii-xix). As Gatsby's literary antecedent, Trimalchio appears to have provided Fitzgerald with a keen awareness of the elevating effect of classical inscriptions on the Gatsby character. As Brian Way speculates, Fitzgerald must have learned from Petronius something of “the dramatic organization of such scenes [Gatsby's parties]—about the mounting rhythms that run through huge entertainment” (105-06). I argue, then, that this Trimalchio link can further intimate Fitzgerald's possible secondary awareness of the satiric suggestiveness of images of eggs and fowls underscoring Gatsby's “vast, vulgar, and meretricious” dream shared by the social-climbing Trimalchio (104).

It is in this respect that Gatsby's parties revisit Trimalchio's, where Roman celebrities and adventurers are courted with rare dishes of peahen's eggs, oriole, and other fowls:

We, meanwhile, were still occupied with the hors d'oeuvres when a tray was carried in and set down before us. On it lay a basket, and in it a hen, carved from wood, with wings outspread as though sitting on her eggs. Then two slaves came forward and, to a loud flourish from the orchestra, began rummaging in the straw and pulling out peahen's eggs which they divided among the guests. Trimalchio gave the whole performance his closest attention. “Friends,” he said, “I ordered peahen eggs to be set under that hen, but I'm half afraid they may have hatched already. Still, let's see if we can suck them.” We were handed spoons [...] and cracked open the eggs. [...] I heard one of the guests, obviously a veteran of these dinners, say, “I wonder what little surprise we've got in here.” So I cracked the shell with my hand and found inside a fine fat oriole, nicely seasoned with pepper.
Roman feasts like Trimalchio's were a popular social institution where the host enhanced personal status by expending great care and effort on the visual sumptuousness of the food (Donahue; D'Arms 308-20). Moreover, hen's eggs were a highly prized item in the Roman diet, and fabulous public feasts were judged incomplete without various dishes of eggs, chicken, ducks, and other fowls (Smith 551-55; Macrobius). In the notes to his translation of *The Satyricon*, William Arrowsmith explains that during the Republic peahen eggs were considered a fabulous delicacy and that an oriole (or fig eater) is a brilliantly colored bird whose habit of stuffing itself on ripe figs endeared it to Roman epicures (Petronius 192). In Petronius's Menippean pen, the egg and fowl dishes coalesce into a satiric iconography of Trimalchio's pretensions to social status and his attempts to belong to Roman patrician society. From such egg and fowl lore of antiquity, one can infer Fitzgerald's intertextual ambition to heighten the irreconcilable social gap between West Egg, with a chauffeur clad “in a uniform of robin's egg blue,” and East Egg, “with a single green light” (26, 45). Like Trimalchio's, Gatsby's parties attract guests with illegal liquors, rare foods, popular entertainment, and upstart celebrities, in spite of “Tom and Daisy's aversion to them” (West xviii).²

Fitzgerald expands the Petronian association in chapter 7, in which Gatsby desperately clings to his dream of having what he believes to be the status of the American patrician. Fitzgerald first pays homage to his classical indebtedness by writing that “his career as Trimalchio was over” when Gatsby stops his Saturday night parties (119). He then adds a satiric bite to the egg and fowl allusions with the aid of the idiomatic meanings of “chicken” when he describes Nick's glimpse of Tom and Daisy “sitting opposite each other at the kitchen table with a plate of cold fried chicken between them and two bottles of ale […] conspiring together” (152-53). By this point in the narrative, Nick has learned from Gatsby that it was Daisy who was driving the car that killed Myrtle Wilson. Lexical sources from as early as 1400 and 1630 use “chicken” to mean people who are cowardly and have lost their nerve at crucial moments, in phrases like “cherles chekyn” and “Not finding the Defendants to be Chikins, to be afraid of every cloud or kite” (Barnhart 120; Rogers 56). Another connotation of “chicken” for Fitzgerald's contemporaries was general prosperity for the masses, as in “a chicken in every pot, a car in every garage,” the slogan of the Republican Party in the 1928 presidential campaign (Hurwitz 107). What better symbol of the death of normal human conscience, courage, and empathy at the heart of the narrative action than the picture of cold chicken appropriated to Tom and Daisy, paired with Nick's tiptoeing away, which renders all those colloquial meanings of chicken ironically apt? On one hand, the term “chicken” points to Daisy's panicky self-absorption in the face of her punishable crime. Most damningly, Tom's lawless, face-saving exercising of social privilege (his callous unconcern with his mistress's death) colludes with Daisy's ready renunciation of her talismanic power that has so attracted Gatsby (“Once in a while she looked up at him [Tom] and nodded in agreement”). Thus the chicken trope unmasks the cowardly Tom and Daisy's “conspiring together” to re-establish the unbreakable, unholy alliance of marriage, cash, and status—a fundamental cause of Gatsby's tragedy.

More than a show of witty conceit, “a pair of enormous eggs” and fowls are visual analogs for Fitzgerald's ironic gaze, obliquely trained on the bitter abilities of inherited rank and the magic of money to subvert genuine human connectives like love.

**Notes**

1. The following sources document Fitzgerald's title-naming history: West xi; Bryer and Kuehl; Turnbull 478; Bruccoli and Duggan 153.
2. James L. W. West III, the editor of the recent Cambridge edition of *Trimalchio*, notes that one of the differences between the early version and the final *The Great Gatsby* is the reader's increased awareness of “Gatsby's courting of celebrities—and Tom and Daisy's aversion to them” (xviii).

**Works Cited**


The Great Gatsby, F. Scott Fitzgerald: Further Reading

CRITICISM


Draws on theories of Mikhail Bakhtin to explain the juxtaposition of past and present in Gatsby.


Argues that Gatsby is not a portrayal of an idealized yet corrupted American dream, but rather a false dream corrupted by a culture of commodity.


Attempts to define the “greatness” of The Great Gatsby in terms of its evocation of the power of a dream.

Additional coverage of Fitzgerald's life and career is contained in the following sources published by the Thomson Gale: American Writers; American Writers: The Classics, Vol. 2; American Writers Retrospective Supplement, Vol. 1; Authors and Artists for Young Adults, Vol. 24; Authors in the News, Vol. 1; Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: Biography & Resources, Vol. 1; Concise Dictionary of American Literary Biography, 1917-1929; Contemporary Authors, Vols. 123, 110; Dictionary of Literary Biography, Vols. 4, 9, 86, 219, 273; Dictionary of Literary Biography Documentary Series, Vols. 1, 15, 16; Dictionary of Literary Biography Yearbook, 1981, 1996; DISCovering Authors; DISCovering Authors: British Edition; DISCovering Authors: Canadian Edition; DISCovering Authors Modules: Most-studied Authors and Novelists; DISCovering Authors 3.0; Encyclopedia of World Literature in the 20th Century, Ed. 3; Exploring Novels; Exploring Short Stories; Literature and Its Times, Vol. 3; Literature Resource Center; Major 20th-Century Writers, Eds. 1, 2; Novels for Students, Vols. 2, 19; Reference Guide to American Literature, Ed. 4; Reference Guide to Short Fiction, Ed. 2; Short Stories for Students, Vols. 4, 15; Short Story Criticism, Vols. 6, 31; Twayne's United States Authors; Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism, Vols. 1, 6, 14, 28, 55; and World Literature Criticism.

Teaching Guide: Introduction

So you're going to teach F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby. Whether it’s your first or hundredth time, this classic text has been a mainstay of English classrooms for generations. While teaching The Great Gatsby has its challenges—an unreliable narrator, class and racial biases—exploring this text with your class will be rewarding for you and your students. Fitzgerald creates a richly atmospheric Jazz Age setting as the context for examining issues of American identity and values that continue to be relevant today.

Facts at a Glance

- Publication Date: 1925
- Recommended Grade Level: 10th and up
Texts That Go Well With *The Great Gatsby*

*The Waste Land* by T. S. Eliot. *The Waste Land*, published three years before *The Great Gatsby*, was much admired by Fitzgerald. The imagery used to describe *The Great Gatsby*’s valley of ashes resembles the descriptions of landscapes found in Eliot’s groundbreaking modernist poem, and the two works both touch on themes of alienation and materialism. Unraveling the complexities of *The Waste Land* is a challenge, but advanced students are likely to recognize parallels. Reading the two together can make *The Great Gatsby*’s darker undercurrents more feel more prominent and more profound.

Cartoons from *The New Yorker*. The iconic magazine first appeared in 1925, and many of its early cartoons lampooned the same cultural phenomena that Fitzgerald portrays in *The Great Gatsby*. When Daisy bemoans to Nick in chapter 1 “Sophisticated—God, I’m sophisticated!” she sounds like she could be quoting a *New Yorker* cartoon caption. Like Daisy and Nick, the *New Yorker*’s target readership considered itself worldly and self-aware. See if students think that characterization still rings true now, almost a century later.

The most easily accessible source, the book *The Complete Cartoons of the New Yorker*, is (despite its name) an edited collection that leaves out some cartoons now considered to be in poor taste. Subscribers to *The New Yorker* can look through all of the early issues in the comprehensive online archive.

“The Weary Blues” by Langston Hughes. Concurrent with the Jazz Age was the literary and intellectual flowering of the Harlem Renaissance, which had Hughes as one of its most acclaimed poets. “The Weary Blues” portrays a side of New York City life that feels a world away from *The Great Gatsby*. See if students can identify any points of connection between the poem and the novel.

“A Certain Lady” by Dorothy Parker. This short poem by one of the most prominent literary figures of the 1920s could be titled “A Flapper’s Lament.” It reads like an expression of the discontent smoldering inside Daisy.

*The Catcher in the Rye* by J. D. Salinger. Nick Carraway casts a jaundiced eye on the bustling, superficial world of post-World War I New York. A quarter century later, Holden Caulfield shares some of the same cynicism as he surveys in the city in the years following World War II. The narrators of these two high school syllabus staples speak with distinctly different voices—and Nick claims “I am one of the few honest people that I have ever known” while Holden brags that “I’m the most terrific liar you ever saw in your life”—but beneath the surface they have traits in common.

**Teaching Guide: Key Plot Points**

Overview: The novel unfolds during the summer of 1922, in New York and outside the city amid the mansions on Long Island’s north shore. The narrator, Nick Carraway, is a Midwesterner from a prosperous
family. After graduating from Yale and fighting in World War I, he decides to move to New York and try his hand in the bond business. He rents a modest bungalow on Long Island, located next door to an opulent estate owned by Jay Gatsby. Across the bay from Gatsby’s home is the mansion of Nick’s second cousin, Daisy Buchanan, and her husband, Tom, who comes from an “enormously wealthy” Chicago family and was a college acquaintance of Nick’s.

Over the course of the summer, Nick learns that Gatsby had met and fallen in love with Daisy five years earlier in Louisville, her hometown, where he was stationed for military training. He left to fight in World War I, and by the time he returned, Daisy had married Tom. Through mysterious means, Gatsby has amassed a fortune and moved into a house that looks across the water to Daisy’s. He is convinced that she loves only him, and the crux of the novel’s plot is his attempt to win her back.

**Daisy learns that Gatsby is living nearby on Long Island (chapter 1, East Egg):** In the novel’s opening scene, Nick goes to the Buchanan’s for dinner. It’s clear that all is not well between Daisy and Tom. They spar verbally, and when Tom leaves the table to take a phone call, Jordan Baker, a female friend of Daisy’s, explains to Nick that it’s Tom’s “woman in New York” who is calling.

Earlier, Jordan has mentioned that she knows Nick’s neighbor, Gatsby. Daisy is startled—“Gatsby? What Gatsby?” she says—but the conversation is cut short when they’re called in to dinner. Daisy doesn’t bring him up again, but in retrospect it’s clear that the revelation of his presence is the crucial event of the evening.

**Nick meets Myrtle; Tom breaks Myrtle’s nose (chapter 2, upper Manhattan):** On a Sunday afternoon, Tom introduces Nick to his mistress, Myrtle Wilson, the wife of an auto garage owner. Tom takes them to an apartment in upper Manhattan that he keeps for their trysts. Myrtle’s sister and the downstairs neighbors arrive to make a small but riotous party. Nick says, “I have been drunk twice in my life, and the second time was that afternoon.”

The hours pass in a haze, with Myrtle at one point telling Nick the story of how she and Tom first met on the train in from Long Island. After they disembarked, with barely a word exchanged, he had forcefully lead her into a taxi with him. “I told him I’d have to call a policeman,” she says, “but he knew I lied.” Later, Myrtle chides Tom about Daisy, and Tom responds by striking her, breaking her nose. The chapter is at its core a demonstration of Tom’s character, showing his arrogance, his entitlement, and his brutality.

**Nick attends one of Gatsby’s parties and meets Gatsby for the first time; Jordan has a long conversation with Gatsby in private (chapter 3, Gatsby’s mansion):** On most weekends Gatsby hosts a lavish party, with a full orchestra, an extravagant buffet, free-flowing liquor, and scores of guests. Many attendees have never met Gatsby, and his mysterious identity leads to wild speculation, including theories that he was a German spy during the war and that he has killed a man.

Nick attends one such party, where he meets up with Jordan. At one point he strikes up a conversation with a stranger, who turns out to be Gatsby. Nick describes at length Gatsby’s smile—“one of those rare smiles with a quality of eternal reassurance.” Gatsby is extremely, almost excessively, attentive to his guests’ desires, but he’s also aloof, soberly observing the revels without joining in himself. Late in the evening, a butler summons Jordan to speak with Gatsby in private. When she leaves him after an hour’s conversation, she tells Nick, “I’ve just heard the most amazing thing,” but she has sworn not to divulge what she’s been told.

**Nick and Gatsby have lunch with Meyer Wolfsheim; Jordan tells Nick about Gatsby and Daisy’s courtship (chapter 4, midtown Manhattan):** One late July morning, Gatsby shows up at Nick’s bungalow and drives him into the city. Along the way, Gatsby tells Nick about his past, providing fanciful, vague stories of inherited wealth, big-game hunting, jewel collecting, study at Oxford, and wartime heroics. Nick finds the stories preposterous, but then he questions his own skepticism when Gatsby provides a medal for bravery
from the war and a photo of him at Oxford to support his claims.

Gatsby is preparing Nick for a request that Jordan is going to make of him later that day on Gatsby’s behalf. Before then, though, Nick has lunch with Gatsby, who introduces him to Meyer Wolfsheim, a Jewish gambler. Though it isn’t stated explicitly, there are indications that Gatsby has business dealings with Wolfsheim, thus giving the first hint of the true source of Gatsby’s wealth.

Later that afternoon, Jordan tells Nick that Gatsby and Daisy had fallen in love when he had been stationed at a military base near Louisville, Daisy’s hometown, before the war. He has purchased a mansion across the bay from Daisy and throws his lavish parties for the sole purpose of impressing her. (This is the “most amazing thing” that Gatsby told Jordan in their private conversation.) Gatsby’s request is that Nick invite Daisy to Nick’s home for tea. Unbeknownst to her, Gatsby will join them.

**Gatsby and Daisy reunite (chapter 5, Nick’s bungalow and Gatsby’s mansion):** As planned, Daisy comes to Nick’s and is reunited with Gatsby. At first the two former lovers are awkward and embarrassed. Nick leaves them alone for an hour, and when he returns, they’ve been transformed. Gatsby “literally glowed” with well-being; Daisy’s cheeks are stained with tears, and as she discusses the weather, her voice “told only of her unexpected joy.”

Gatsby takes them on a tour of his house, and Daisy is suitably impressed by its opulence. In his bedroom, Gatsby starts flinging his extensive, elaborate collection of shirts onto a table. Daisy buries her face in them and begins to cry, saying, “It makes me sad because I’ve never seen such … such beautiful shirts before.” Eventually Nick parts company with them. As he’s preparing to leave, he notices that a look of doubt has returned to Gatsby’s face and speculates that the reunion, however happy, hasn’t equaled the image of Daisy that Gatsby has built up in his mind. Then she whispers something in his ear, and the doubt seems to vanish.

**Nick reveals details from Gatsby’s past; Daisy and Tom attend a Gatsby party (chapter 6, Gatsby’s mansion):** Nick digresses from his narrative to provide some details about Gatsby’s past. (Nick explains that Gatsby “told me all this much later,” but this section of the novel has the tone of an omniscient narrator.)

Gatsby’s given name is James Gatz. He was born in North Dakota, the son of itinerant farm workers. As a teenager he was filled with grand ambitions; “he invented just the sort of Jay Gatsby that a seventeen-year-old boy would be likely to invent, and to this concept he was faithful to the end.” His dreams started to come to fruition when he met and became the protégé of Dan Cody, a millionaire who had made his fortune mining copper in Montana. Gatsby spent five years with Cody on his yacht, sailing around the world three times, until Cody abruptly died. Gatsby was given $25,000 in Cody’s will, but his widow managed to block the inheritance. Although Gatsby ended up getting no money out of the relationship, his time with Cody helped shape his character. “He was left with his singularly appropriate education; the vague contour of Jay Gatsby had filled out to the substantiality of a man.” That’s where Nick ends Gatsby’s history, revealing clues to his character but not explaining how he has become so rich.

Back in the novel’s present-day, Daisy and Tom attend to one of Gatsby’s parties. Gatsby proudly points out the celebrities who are in attendance, but Tom is haughty and rude, and Daisy, in her more demure way, is equally unimpressed. They both show disdain for the nouveau riche of West Egg, the area of Long Island where Gatsby lives. After they leave, Gatsby is despondent, insisting to Nick, “She didn’t have a good time.” Still, he clings to his hope that Daisy will tell Tom she never loved him, and that she and Gatsby will then take up their relationship where it left off five years earlier. Nick counsels not to expect too much from Daisy and tells Gatsby, “You can’t repeat the past,” to which he responds, “Why of course you can!”
Daisy, Gatsby, and Tom have a confrontation in the Plaza Hotel; Myrtle is struck and killed by Gatsby’s car (chapter 7, East Egg, Manhattan, Queens): After Daisy’s unsatisfactory experience, Gatsby stops throwing parties and fires his servants, replacing them with some less polished associates of Wolfsheim. Gatsby, Jordan, and Nick are invited to Tom and Daisy’s for lunch, where Nick suspects Daisy and Gatsby plan to confront Tom and orchestrate a break in the Buchanans’ marriage.

The day of the lunch is blazing hot, and there’s tension in the air. As Tom takes a call in another room, Daisy kisses Gatsby on the lips and tells him she loves him, as Nick and Jordan look on.

After lunch, they decide to go into New York, where they take a suite at the Plaza Hotel, with the idea that they will drink mint juleps as an antidote to the heat. Gatsby confronts Tom, saying Daisy has never loved him and pressuring Daisy to tell him so. She does, reluctantly, but at Tom’s prodding she admits that she did in fact at one point love him too—that she loved both of them. Tom then explains that he knows Gatsby is involved in criminal business dealings with Meyer Wolfsheim. It becomes evident that Daisy has lost her nerve and that she is not going to leave Tom.

They drive back to Long Island, Nick and Jordan with Tom, Daisy with Gatsby. Gatsby’s car hits and kills Myrtle Wilson, who has run into the road outside Wilson’s garage. They don’t stop. (Gatsby later tells Nick that it was Daisy driving the car.) Tom, who is a few minutes behind them, pulls over to see about the commotion and finds Myrtle laid out dead, surrounded by police and witnesses, while her husband, George Wilson, howls with grief in his office.

Wilson kills Gatsby (chapter 8, Gatsby’s mansion): Nick visits Gatsby early in the morning and advises him to leave town for a while, but Gatsby wants to stay so that Daisy knows where to find him. He still hopes she will leave Tom for him. At this point Gatsby tells Nick the information about Dan Cody that has been recounted in chapter 6. He also describes his courtship of Daisy—how he became enthralled with her, in no small part because he sensed for the first time that a desirable young woman of wealth and privilege was attainable for him.

Gatsby and Nick have breakfast, and then Nick goes to the city to work. His parting words to Gatsby are, “They’re a rotten crowd. You’re worth the whole damn bunch put together.”

George Wilson has spent the night thinking about what happened to Myrtle. He says he knows how to find out who owns the car that killed her, and that he considers the owner her murderer. In the morning he walks to Long Island. Presumably, though it’s not said explicitly, he speaks to Tom and finds out that the car belongs to Gatsby. Wilson goes to Gatsby’s estate, shoots Gatsby to death in the swimming pool, and then kills himself. Nick goes to the house later that afternoon and, along with some of the servants, discovers the bodies.

Gatsby’s death draws the attention of journalists and the police, but no one except for Nick shows a personal interest. He calls Daisy, but learns that she and Tom have left town, giving no indication of where they’ve gone or when they plan to return.

Gatsby is buried; Nick moves back west (Long Island and New York, chapter 9): Three days after Gatsby’s death his father arrives, having read about the murder in the Chicago newspapers. He’s a doddering old man, saddened by his son’s death but proud of his accomplishments and awed by his splendid home. He, Nick, a few servants, and one eccentric guest from Gatsby’s parties are the only attendees at the rain-soaked burial.

In the fall, feeling jaded by his experiences, Nick decides the return to the Midwest. Before he leaves, he runs into Tom walking along Fifth Avenue. Nick confronts him about his role in Gatsby’s death. Tom admits that he told Wilson that the car that hit Myrtle belonged to Gatsby, but he also indicates through his comments that
he isn’t aware Daisy was the driver. He thinks Gatsby “ran over Myrtle the way you’d run over a dog.” Nick renders a final judgment: “They were careless people, Tom and Daisy—they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they made.”

Teaching Guide: History of the Text

Publication History and Initial Reception: At the time of The Great Gatsby’s publication in 1925, F. Scott Fitzgerald was a rising literary star. Like Nick Carraway, Gatsby’s narrator, Fitzgerald came from Midwestern roots and had attended an Ivy League college. After leaving Princeton without a degree and barely missing action in World War I (he was completing training when the war ended), he launched his writing career by selling several short stories to literary magazines. He followed in 1920 with his first novel, This Side of Paradise, which was a surprise bestseller. A second novel published in 1922, The Beautiful and the Damned, also sold well, and he was earning top dollar for the stories he regularly contributed to prominent magazines. Not yet thirty years old, Fitzgerald was famous, well compensated, and—like the characters in The Great Gatsby—leading an extravagant social life in New York.

Fitzgerald wrote to his editor that he aimed to make Gatsby “a consciously artistic achievement.” Ultimately the book would more than fulfill his ambitions, becoming one of the most read and revered works in the American literary canon, but at the time of its publication, it was a disappointment, garnering mainly positive reviews but not selling as well as his first two novels.

Gatsby would mark the beginning of a downturn in Fitzgerald’s career. He would continue his substantial output of short stories and essays published in leading magazines, but he wouldn’t complete another novel until 1934’s Tender Is the Night, which drew modest sales and mixed reviews. His personal life was marked by alcoholism, tuberculosis, mounting debts, and a troubled marriage. In the late 1930s he tried to shore up his finances by moving to Hollywood to write movie scripts. It was there that, in December of 1940, he died of a heart attack at the age of 44.

Posthumous Rise in Status: Several factors contributed to the rise in The Great Gatsby’s status in the years following Fitzgerald’s death. Though it hadn’t sold as well as his earlier novels, it was recognized in some obituaries as his greatest achievement, and it had prominent champions in the literary world, including poet T. S. Eliot, critic Lionel Trilling, and editor Malcolm Cowley. Most significant in this group was Edmund Wilson, a classmate of Fitzgerald’s at Princeton, who edited the unfinished manuscript of Fitzgerald’s final novel, The Last Tycoon. It was published in 1941 in a joint edition with a reprint of Gatsby, thus boosting Gatsby’s readership.

- The renewed interest led to it being chosen in 1942 as a book to be given to American soldiers fighting in World War II. Over 150,000 copies were distributed—six times the number that had sold in Fitzgerald’s lifetime. From that point forward, it was firmly established as part of the American literary canon. With 25 million copies in print, it’s the best-selling book ever produced by the venerable publishing house Charles Scribner’s Sons.

The Roaring ‘20s: The Great Gatsby is filled with cultural allusions linked to the period in which it was written and set—the Roaring ‘20s, a point in American history that’s both colorful and consequential. The following cultural phenomena of the time are central to the story, but were so familiar to Fitzgerald’s original readers that he needed only to make passing allusions to them:

- Prohibition: The Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution, prohibiting manufacture and sale of alcohol, passed in 1920, marking the beginning of the Prohibition Era. Although the word
“prohibition” doesn’t appear in *The Great Gatsby*, it’s key to the story’s plot. In a few years, Gatsby has gone from penniless to rich as a result of bootlegging—the black-market sale of alcohol, which became a thriving business for organized crime in the ‘20s. Without Prohibition, the Gatsby of the novel couldn’t have existed. Also, every character in the novel who drinks is a complicit scofflaw. In the confrontational scene at the Plaza Hotel, Tom condemns Gatsby for being a bootlegger while holding a bottle of whiskey in his hand, a symbol of his hypocrisy.

**Women’s rights:** The Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution, giving women the right to vote, was also passed in 1920. It’s worthwhile to remind students that Daisy, Jordan, and Myrtle lived in a world where such a fundamental right was a novelty for women.

The ‘20s was also the era of “flappers,” a term used to describe a generation of women who were breaking taboos against wearing revealing clothing (dresses cut above the knee were considered risqué), drinking and smoking in public, and expressing sexuality. One of the triggers of the movement had been World War I; as men were sent off to battle, back home women took on roles in the labor force that had been traditionally male. After experiencing some of men’s economic liberties and responsibilities, women were staking claim to greater social freedoms as well. Fitzgerald’s work was famous for portraying flappers; one of his early story collections is titled *Flappers and Philosophers*. Daisy and Jordan both fit the type, but Gatsby’s most detailed portrayal of flapper culture is found in the party scenes, where women are repeatedly shown being free-spirited, boisterous, and drunk—behaviors that wouldn’t have been tolerated a decade earlier.

**Jazz:** The Roaring ‘20s was also known as the Jazz Age, a term that Fitzgerald is said to have coined. Jazz at the time, with its energy and experimentation, was both popular and subversive, much like rock and roll would be in the period following World War II. Also like rock, much of the popular jazz in the ‘20s was performed by white musicians appropriating a black musical idiom. The jazz mentioned in the novel—performed at Gatsby’s parties and later wafting up from a wedding reception at the Plaza—is presumably played by white musicians, but its roots in black culture are likely to be one of the prompts for the racist paranoia expressed by Tom several times in the novel.

**Automobiles:** Cars play an important part in the resolution of *Gatsby*, and they’re used as symbols of affluence throughout the story. It can be enlightening for students to learn how the status of cars and driving in 1922, when the novel is set, differs from the current day. In the early ‘20s there were approximately 10 million registered automobiles in the U.S., compared to about 260 million today. There were no traffic signals. (The first was put into use in 1923.) Driver’s licenses weren’t required, and driver education was informal—car salesmen would give instruction to new owners, and most drivers were taught by family and friends. Daisy’s fateful time behind the wheel is an indication of growing freedom for women in the ‘20s. The fact that her driving turns out to be fatal could be interpreted as a sign that Fitzgerald felt some ambivalence about women’s empowerment.

**Teaching Guide: Teaching Approaches**

**Gatsby and the American Dream:** Jay Gatsby is often identified as an embodiment of the American dream, with connotations both good and bad. As a young man he started with nothing and, through determination and ambition, achieved great wealth. The narrator, Nick Carraway, admires Gatsby but also recognizes the superficiality of his dreams, saying that he was in “the service of a vast, vulgar and meretricious beauty,” and that he had devoted his life to fulfilling an ideal he had conjured up as a naive seventeen-year-old boy. Gatsby’s goal, at least in broad terms, is to achieve the life of wealth and privilege that Tom and Daisy were born into. His method for getting there doesn’t seem to concern him. He never shows any compunction about being involved in organized crime—and Nick doesn’t judge him negatively because of it.

**For discussion:** What is the American dream? In what ways does Gatsby fulfill it, and in what ways doesn’t he?
• For discussion: How does Daisy factor into Gatsby’s ambitions? Is his love for her an obstacle to achieving the American dream, or would winning her hand be the dream’s ultimate fulfillment?
• For discussion: Does The Great Gatsby portray the American dream more as reality or illusion? Is the novel ultimately a criticism or an endorsement of the dream?

Portrayal of the Roaring ‘20s and the Jazz Age: One of the things that makes The Great Gatsby engaging is the nuanced way in which it captures a fascinating moment in American history. Ideally, you can time the reading of the novel to coincide with your students’ study of the 1920s in history class. Regardless of whether that’s feasible, it’s worthwhile to devote time to the major social issues of the day, some of which are addressed in the history section of this guide. Strategies you can use include showing documentary videos about the era (such as segments from the Ken Burns series on Prohibition), and having students work in small groups to research and present information to the class about topics such as the Volstead Act, women’s suffrage, flappers, and the concept of the “the Jazz Age.”

• For discussion: Based on the evidence in the novel, which segments of society appear to have felt the most impact from the changes of the Roaring ‘20s? Are the changes more for the good or the bad?
• For discussion: How does the book’s portrayal of the era compare with what students have learned about it from historical accounts?
• For discussion: What similarities, if any, are there between the Roaring ‘20s and the present day?

Daisy Buchanan, Victim and Villain: The plot of The Great Gatsby revolves around the character of Daisy. All of Gatsby’s actions are ultimately motivated by his love for her; her decision to stay with Tom is the novel’s crucial turning point; and when she accidentally kills Myrtle, and thus precipitates the deaths of Gatsby and George Wilson, she becomes the story’s villain. She’s also The Great Gatsby’s most complex and enigmatic character, by turns wise and naive, abused and abusive, loving and heartless. Students are likely to feel some sympathy for her plight. She’s objectified by Tom and Gatsby, and by Nick as well, all of whom are enthralled by the sound of her voice without having much regard for what she’s actually saying. In the end, it’s her silence that turns her character sinister. Gatsby dies while awaiting a call from her that never comes, and as she disappears following Gatsby’s death, Nick condemns her “vast carelessness,” a phrase that takes on the weight of a moral censure.

• For discussion: In the scene at the Plaza Hotel where Daisy is forced to choose between Gatsby and Tom, why does she decide to stay with Tom? Given the circumstances, was it the right choice for her?
• For discussion: By having Daisy hit and kill Myrtle and not admit to it, Fitzgerald chooses to portray her in a harshly negative light. What might have been his motivation for doing this? Is fleeing a hit-and-run consistent with the behavior she has displayed up to that point in the story?

The Role of Nick Carraway: As The Great Gatsby’s narrator, Nick is the filter through which readers see the events of the novel. He’s mainly a passive observer, but he isn’t reluctant to interpret and render judgment on what’s happening. While he can be clever and insightful, under scrutiny some of his opinions aren’t entirely compelling—which makes him a good vehicle for introducing students to the concept of an unreliable narrator. Have them read Nick’s storytelling with a skeptical eye, and ask if they can come up with alternative interpretations for the events he describes.

• For discussion: Early in the novel, Nick calls himself “one of the few honest people I have ever known.” Yet when he breaks up with Jordan at the end, she laments that she has misjudged him, saying, “I thought you were rather an honest, straightforward person.” Why does she question his honesty? Are there parts of Nick’s narrative that might be less than honest?
• For discussion: In their last moments together, Nick tells Gatsby, “They’re a rotten crowd. You’re worth the whole damn bunch of them put together.” Is his high regard for Gatsby justified? Is there anything about Nick’s own background that would predispose him to admire Gatsby and to be
Teaching Approaches: Tricky Issues to Address

The Story Contains Elements of Anti-Semitism, Racism, and Class Bias. There are moments in *The Great Gatsby* of unmistakable prejudice. Students will almost certainly detect anti-Semitism in the caricatured portrayal of Meyer Wolfshiem, the Jewish gangster who is Gatsby’s mentor in the world of organized crime. They also may be taken aback by a moment when Nick refers two black men in a passing car as “bucks” and says, “I laughed aloud as the yolks of their eyeballs rolled toward us in haughty rivalry.” His descriptions of white working-class characters can be similarly caricatured and unsympathetic. When Myrtle Wilson is killed, Nick is less disturbed by her death than he is worried about its ramifications for Gatsby and Daisy.

**What to do:** The biases expressed in the story come through the filter of Nick, the narrator. He possesses many of the prejudices typical of someone of his station in life at this time in American history. In comparison to the blatant prejudice of characters such as Tom Buchanan, Nick’s are relatively mild. Have students explore the effect of this filtering. What does Nick pay attention to? Pass judgment upon? What does Nick ignore? What might be his reasons for this?

**What to do:** Ask students to explore the biases of the characters by examining what they know of them. What views do the novel’s characters seem to hold? Where do those views come from? Is there any evidence that they will (or should) alter or expand their views? Have students consider the impact the characters’ prejudices have on the novel. To what extent does it matter that many of the wealthy white characters, such as Tom and the attendees at Gatsby’s parties, also come across as caricatures?

**Nick’s Narration Is Sometimes Haughty and Difficult to Comprehend.** Nick is prone to drawing poetic, philosophical conclusions from the novel’s events. Some of his pronouncements are likely to perplex students (and teachers as well). In the opening pages, for instance, he says about Gatsby, “If personality is an unbroken series of successful gestures, then there was something gorgeous about him, some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life, as if he were related to one of those intricate machines that register earthquakes ten thousand miles away.” It’s possible to identify the general intent behind this sentence—that Gatsby was uncommonly aware of life’s possibilities—but as a conditional “if-then” statement, it doesn’t really hold together. Throughout the book, Nick makes similar statements, sometimes grandly citing classical philosophers to bolster his arguments.

**What to do:** The storyline of *The Great Gatsby* is fairly simple. Nick’s commentaries are like touches of elaborate decoration. As much as anything, they’re there to create a mood, and they can be effective in that respect even when they don’t stand up to logical scrutiny. If students struggle with them, emphasize that the story can be understood without having to unravel Nick’s pronouncements. At the same time, it’s worthwhile to solicit interpretations from multiple students, and then see if they can come to a consensus.

Teaching Approaches: Alternative Approaches

While the main ideas and discussion questions above are typically the focal points of units involving *The Great Gatsby*, the following suggestions represent alternative approaches that may enrich your students’ experience and understanding of the novel.

**Focus on the novel’s narrative structure:** Much of the dramatic impact of *The Great Gatsby* depends on the ways in which Fitzgerald chooses to conceal and reveal information. Have students examine Fitzgerald’s strategies for constructing his plot and characters. Why does he choose chapter 6 as the point to tell the story of Gatsby’s past? Why does he give such a fractured view of Gatsby and
Daisy’s courtship, having Jordan describe it in limited detail in chapter 4, and then Gatsby elaborate on it in chapter 8, while never giving Daisy’s perspective? What other plot and character details are strategically withheld from readers?

• **Focus on looking for other “American dreams” in The Great Gatsby**: Jay Gatsby is commonly thought to epitomize the American dream. Do other characters have “American dreams” as well? Can the concept be applied to Daisy, or Wolfsheim, or Myrtle—or is it limited by gender and ethnicity? What about the other men in the novel? Do Tom and Nick and George Wilson have American dreams? If so, how do they differ from Gatsby’s?

• **Focus on the use of symbolism**: Fitzgerald employs several prominent, memorable symbols in *Gatsby*, including the green light at the end of the Buchanans’ dock, the valley of ashes, and the eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg. What is the significance of these symbols? Beyond these conspicuous examples, are there other elements in the novel that take on symbolic meaning? More broadly, why do authors employ symbolism in works of literature?

**Short-Answer Quizzes: Chapter 1 Questions and Answers**

**Study Questions**
1. Who is the narrator of the story?

2. What is the significance of the white space between paragraphs 4 and 5?

3. From what part of the country does Nick originally come?

4. Why has Nick moved to New York?

5. How does Nick come to live next door to Jay Gatsby?

6. Where had Nick known Tom Buchanan before?

7. What is Jordan Baker’s relationship to Daisy Buchanan?

8. What does Nick learn from Jordan when Tom is called to the phone?

9. What is the “secret society”?

10. What does Nick see Gatsby doing at the end of the chapter?

**Answers**
1. Nick Carraway tells the story as he learns it from various sources.

2. The white space indicates where the flashback to Nick’s experience in New York begins.

3. The Midwest is the home of Nick and his ancestors, a part of the country in touch with the soil and wholesome American values.

4. After the war, he is looking for a better job than the Midwest provides.

5. He rents a bungalow with a friend who subsequently transfers to Washington, leaving Nick without a roommate.
6. They had been in school together at Yale.

7. The two had been friends in Louisville, Kentucky. Daisy is two years older than Jordan.

8. Tom has “a woman” in New York. Jordan enjoys eavesdropping.

9. The “secret society” consists of distinguished people who, seemingly, are above the law; their social standing is power.

10. Gatsby is stretching out his arms toward a green light at the end of a dock across the water in a worshipful stance.

**Short-Answer Quizzes: Chapter 2 Questions and Answers**

**Study Questions**

1. What is the Valley of Ashes literally?

2. Who or what is Dr. T. J. Eckleburg?

3. What is George Wilson’s occupation?

4. What items does Myrtle purchase in the city?

5. What is significant about Myrtle’s questioning whether the dog is a boy or girl?

6. Who is Catherine?

7. What effect does the change of dress have on Myrtle?

8. How does Myrtle talk about the help at the hotel?

9. What rumor has Catherine heard about Gatsby?

10. How does Catherine explain to Nick the affair of Myrtle and Tom?

**Answers**

1. It is an area, something like an isthmus, joining West Egg and East Egg. It parallels a railroad track.

2. The picture of Dr. Eckleburg, an oculist in a bygone age, appears on a billboard in the Valley of Ashes.

3. Wilson pumps gas and repairs cars.

4. She purchases *Town Tattle* magazine, cold cream, perfume, and a puppy. She has another list to buy the next day: “a massage and a wave, and a collar for the dog, and one of those cute little ash-trays where you touch a spring, and a wreath with a black silk bow for mother’s grave that’ll last all summer.”

5. She cannot acknowledge the sex of the dog—it is too delicate an issue—but she herself is involved in an illicit sexual relationship.
6. Catherine is Myrtle’s sister procured as a companion for Nick. She may be a prostitute since she “lived with a girl friend at a hotel.”

7. She is transformed as vitality changes to “impressive hauteur.”

8. She refers to them as an inferior order; she has changed roles as she has changed clothes.

9. He is a nephew or cousin of Kaiser Wilhelm’s.

10. According to Catherine, Daisy is Catholic and refuses to give Tom a divorce.

**Short-Answer Quizzes: Chapter 3 Questions and Answers**

**Study Questions**
1. What kinds of cars does Gatsby use to transport guests?

2. How do the guests behave?

3. What does Nick wear to the party?

4. How does Gatsby interact with the guests?

5. What observation does Owl Eyes make about Gatsby’s library?

6. What is Nick’s first opinion of Gatsby?

7. What happens at the end of the party as the guests are leaving?

8. What does Gatsby’s formal gesture of waving farewell remind us of?

9. What story does Nick recall about Jordan, and what is the catalyst for his remembering?

10. How does Nick provide a contrast, a foil character, to Jordan?

**Answers**
1. His station wagon and a Rolls-Royce provide transportation for the guests.

2. The guests display the rules of behavior associated with amusement parks.

3. He dresses up in his white flannels.

4. He does not participate.

5. The library contains real books though the pages have yet to be cut. Here, and in references to Tom’s “reading,” the emphasis seems to be on pseudo-intellectualism.

6. He is impressed with his smile and his genuine interest.

7. A wheel comes off a drunken guest’s car, and the occupants end up in a ditch.
8. Earlier he extended his arm over the bay toward the green light.

9. She “had moved her ball from a bad lie in the semi-final round” of a golf tournament. Nick remembers this scandal as he and Jordan are “on a house-party together up in Warwick,” and she leaves a borrowed car out in the rain with the top down, and then lied about it.

10. Jordan is “incurably dishonest”; Nick is exceedingly honest.

**Short-Answer Quizzes: Chapter 4 Questions and Answers**

**Study Questions**

1. What is the date at this point in the novel?

2. Whom does Nick encounter at Gatsby’s party?

3. What is the suggestion about Henry L. Palmetto’s death?

4. In the description of Gatsby’s car, what is the significance of its being bright with nickel and swollen in its monstrous length with all kinds of boxes?

5. What phrase does Gatsby repeatedly use to address Nick and others?

6. In what country did Gatsby receive a medal “For Valour Extraordinary”?

7. Who fixed the World Series in 1919, according to Gatsby?

8. Why is Daisy’s reputation so pristine?

9. For how long has Gatsby been pursuing Daisy?

10. What phrase keeps coming back to Nick?

**Answers**

1. It is now July 5 1922 and shortly thereafter.

2. Somewhat surprisingly, he runs into Jordan Baker.

3. It was a suicide prompted by some dark dealing or situation.

4. It is like a god’s chariot.

5. He often calls others “Old Sport,” a phrase he perhaps picked up while studying briefly at Oxford.

6. In tiny Montenegro he was recognized for valor.

7. According to Gatsby, the Series was fixed by one man—Wolfsheim, a fictional character based on a real person.

8. Daisy does not drink.
9. Gatsby has been reading papers, keeping clippings, looking tirelessly for Daisy for five years.

10. Nick remembers the saying, “There are only the pursued, the pursuing, the busy, and the tired.”

**Short-Answer Quizzes: Chapter 5 Questions and Answers**

**Study Questions**

1. Why does Nick say Gatsby’s house looks like the World’s Fair?
2. How does Gatsby’s gardener help prepare for Daisy’s visit?
3. How does Gatsby dress for the rendezvous with Daisy?
4. Who is the Finn referred to in chapter 5?
5. How long has it been since Daisy and Gatsby had seen each other?
6. What does Gatsby’s maid do when leaning out a central bay window?
7. In what way are the various rooms in Gatsby’s mansion described in historical terms?
8. Who was Gatsby’s first benefactor?
9. What part does nature play in the rendezvous?
10. Who provides the musical background for the love scene?

**Answers**

1. It is so lit up late at night.
2. He cuts Nick’s grass as well as Gatsby’s.
3. He wears a white flannel suit, silver shirt, and gold-colored tie, accouterments fit for a god.
4. She is Nick’s domestic help.
5. Gatsby has counted every minute for these five years they have been apart.
6. She spits, an incongruous action in such a setting.
7. The description includes Marie Antoinette music-rooms and Restoration salons, a sort of continental decor.
8. Dan Cody, who had made money from silver and gold fields, took him aboard his yacht.
9. It rains.
10. When Daisy and Gatsby are reunited, Klipspringer plays the piano.
Short-Answer Quizzes: Chapter 6 Questions and Answers

Study Questions
1. In what state did Gatsby grow up?

2. What was his real name?

3. What was Dan Cody’s background?

4. Who was Ella Kaye?

5. How much was to have been Gatsby’s inheritance from Cody?

6. Why did he not receive it?

7. What is the significance of the threesome not waiting for Gatsby?

8. Why was Daisy appalled at Gatsby’s party?

9. How did Tom charge Gatsby with making his money?

10. In what season of the year had Gatsby met and kissed Daisy?

Answers
1. Gatsby was reared in North Dakota.

2. He was named James or Jimmy Gatz.

3. Apparently, he had made a fortune in metals from Nevada silver fields and gold in the Yukon.

4. Ella Kaye was Cody’s mistress.

5. He was to receive $25,000.

6. Ella Kaye found a legal strategy to cut him out and inherit Cody’s millions herself.

7. He does not understand that their invitation is superficial; in fact, he is being insulted without being aware of it.

8. The sophistication and restraint of the “secret society are missing.” The vitality and simplicity of Gatsby’s guests are virtually palpable, and Daisy is unappreciative.

9. Tom denounces Gatsby as a bootlegger.

10. He had known her in Louisville in the autumn of the year.

Short-Answer Quizzes: Chapter 7 Questions and Answers

Study Questions
1. Why does Gatsby let all his domestic help go?
2. Whom does he use instead?

3. Why do the characters decide to go to New York?

4. What does Pammy wear when she comes into the room?

5. What does Gatsby say about Daisy’s voice?

6. What does Tom drive to New York?

7. Who rides with Gatsby?

8. What comment does Tom make about drug stores?

9. Of what does Tom accuse Gatsby?

10. How old is Nick at the party?

**Answers**

1. He dismisses them to accommodate meetings with Daisy and her wish for privacy.

2. He uses connections of Wolfsheim’s, people who owed him favors.

3. They want to escape the heat and boredom.

4. Like her mother, she wears white.

5. Her voice is “full of money.”

6. He drives Gatsby’s yellow car.

7. Only Daisy rides with Gatsby.

8. You can buy gasoline or most anything else at such stores—even liquor, he implies.

9. He accuses him of bootlegging, gambling, swindling, and even something bigger and more damaging than these.

10. Nick turns 30 years old on this day.

**Short-Answer Quizzes: Chapter 8 Questions and Answers**

**Study Questions**

1. How late does Gatsby stand outside Daisy’s house, waiting to see if she needed him?

2. Why is Gatsby’s house unkempt?

3. Why does Nick advise Gatsby to go away a while?

4. Where had Gatsby met Daisy, according to the story he tells Nick?
5. What might Fitzgerald mean in describing Daisy’s porch as “bright with the bought luxury of starshine”?

6. Why didn’t Gatsby return to Daisy immediately after the war?

7. When Gatsby returned to Louisville, where was Daisy?

8. Why is the chauffeur about to drain the pool?

9. Why does Gatsby ask him to wait?

10. After learning who owns the yellow death car, what does Wilson do?

**Answers**

1. He waits until 4:00 a.m.

2. He has released all of his servants.

3. Nick is confident the car will be traced to Gatsby, putting Gatsby’s life in jeopardy.

4. He met her while he was at Camp Taylor from which he and other officers went to visit Daisy.

5. The brightness in her description results from somebody’s materialism.

6. He was sent to study at Oxford.

7. She was on her wedding trip with Tom.

8. With autumn approaching, leaves will fall and clog up the pipes.

9. He plans to take his first swim of the season in it.

10. Wilson kills Gatsby and then turns the gun on himself.

**Short-Answer Quizzes: Chapter 9 Questions and Answers**

**Study Questions**

1. How is Gatsby’s death explained by the press in local newspapers?

2. How does Catherine respond to questions about her sister?

3. How does Wolfsheim’s letter attempt to explain his not attending the funeral?

4. Who is Henry C. Gatz?

5. Why does Klipspringer call?

6. When Nick locates Wolfsheim’s office and demands to see him, what is ironic about the situation?

7. How does Wolfsheim remember Gatsby?
8. Why did Gatsby continue to wear Army uniforms?

9. What could Nick mean when he concludes, “This has been a story of the West, after all—”? 

10. What is the meaning of the last paragraph, the metaphor, of the book?

**Answers**

1. Wilson is a “madman,” reduced to a “man deranged by grief.”

2. She declares she has never known Gatsby, that she was “completely happy with her husband,” and that she has never been involved in any kind of mischief.

3. He is tied up in important business and cannot “get mixed up in this thing now.”

4. He is Gatsby’s father from Minnesota.

5. He calls about some shoes he left at Gatsby’s, not out of concern.

6. Wolfsheim is sinister and apparently ruthless, but he is whistling “The Rosary.”

7. He was a major, just coming out of the army, covered with medals.

8. He was so poor he could not afford regular clothes.

9. It is the story of the Western continent as well as the Midwest contrasted with the East.

10. We persist in our drive forward, but, like boats moving against the current, we are always borne back into the past. As the National Archives has it, “The past is prologue to the future.”