The undercurrent of simmering violence and corruption which pervades Nick Carraway’s narration erupts in the death of Myrtle, Gatsby and Wilson.

The “valley of the ashes” epitomises and symbolises the “moral bankruptcy” of Fitzgerald’s world created in “The Great Gatsby”. Myrtle and Wilson live in this wasteland both physically and metaphorically. Physically the “valley of the ashes” is an area between New York and West Egg which is the “dumping ground” for the material excesses of this society. It is a society governed by the veneer of material success. Money, success and notoriety governs this world of “careless people …. who smash up things and creatures and then [retreat] back into their money or their vast carelessness”. A society where morality seems to be founded upon a “butterfly’s wing”. The result is the dust, the “foul dust” that collects in the “valley of the ashes” and the victims are people like Myrtle and Wilson.

Carraway’s narration is certainly poetic, Fitzgerald’s ability to capture that transient quality of the society which he portrays pervades the narrative. Characters with “restless eyes” and Daisy’s admiration of the “odour of the jonquils and the frothy odour of hawthorn and plum blossoms” echo of Fitzgerald’s observant descriptions of Gatsby’s parties where people come and go “like moths”. It is romantic and attractive and Carraway’s perverted narration keeps the romantic allusion alive. It is the allusion that the American society is full of hope, life, it is vibrant and fun. However, in reality the dust heaps of the valley of the ashes is a result of this insistent need to be better. It is a perverted narrative just as the advertisement of T.J.Eckleburg reflects a distorted vision. People can’t see properly, they need glasses. But the shabby, decaying billboard belies another significance. The decay of the owner’s dream for material success and the decline into “eternal blindness” that has resulted.

While Carraway continually searches for his reader’s approval eg. We never really like him. His criticism of Tom’s actions and his inability to “forgive him” smacks of moral high ground. And yet he has watched the action, he organised the meeting between Daisy and Gatsby and so when he admits to “provincial squeamishness” this is just another pointer to his at best inability to clearly see the actions of others, or he is lying.

Carraway never really accuses Gatsby as he accuses Tom. Tom is often violent, “hulking” or portrayed as a bully, he holds his hands out as he walks “as if to fight off interference”. In contrast, Gatsby wears “pink” suits and uses the constant rather appealing address of “old sport”. And yet underneath it all Gatsby is as morally corrupt as Tom and Daisy. He is a bootlegger, with clear “connexions” with the underground, knowing shady characters like “Wolfsheim. Rumours at one of his spectacular parties that he once “killed a man”, and he unwittingly reveals to Nick that he made his money in “three years”. His latter claim that he made his money in “the oil business” revisits Fitzgerald’s criticism of modern American society. A world driven more and more by oil: oil is the representation of everything corrupt and material that leads to such a fragmented and “careless” society.

It is this society that ironically society that Gatsby wants to be so much a part of. A society that values the culture and history of Europe. Tom and Daisy spent their honeymoon in the South of France, Gatsby at been to “Oggsford” and had decorated his house in the style of “Restoration Salons’ and “Merton College” library. And yet it is a distorted reproduction of this society. The tradition and culture of Europe is grounded. And this American society is constantly shifting. Nick has moved East to take advantage of the bond market. Tom and Daisy move on “and let other people
clean up the mess they had made”, Jordan Baker has moved on, T.J. Eckleburg’s advertisement is no longer relevant, he has moved on. For Carraway it seems that somehow Gatsby stands above this “moral bankruptcy”. He is duped by Gatsby’s “extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness”. And yet Gatsby is no better than the other characters. He builds the veneer of tradition and culture: his library is full of books that have not been read. He fills his house at weekends with vibrant people and for Carraway represents everything for which he has an “unaffected scorn”. But Carraway is able to overcome this. He can’t “forgive” Tom but can forgive Gatsby. He values Gatsby’s belief in the “green light”, his ability to follow a dream. Gatsby, who along with people like Tom and Daisy, is responsible for the “bleak dust”. Tom tells Nick that “he threw dust into your eyes”, and yet Nick still holds him in some sort of romantic moment. Perhaps that is what redeems him more than Tom. His “gift for hope”. In the end his is as much a victim of his dream and he takes with him Myrtle and Wilson. It is this ambiguity of Gatsby that simmers beneath this novel. Fitzgerald creates an underworld figure, whose background and actions are so shady that there is little moral certainty. And yet, as a reader there is still something “gorgeous” about Gatsby. Where does this leave the moral integrity of the reader?