

## ANALYSIS

*The Great Gatsby* (1925)



F. Scott Fitzgerald

(1896-1940)

## INTRODUCTION

*The Great Gatsby* is first of all a Realist novel of manners in the tradition of Henry James and Edith Wharton, who sought to reveal (1) universal truths of human nature and society through (2) objectivity in the study of (3) representative characters in typical situations. Fitzgerald also uses the influential “method” of James by narrating through the limited consciousness of a character whose awareness increases with experience as the story proceeds, generating ironies and suspense. Unlike James, however, Fitzgerald (1) summarizes what the narrator learns from the story at the outset; (2) then he dramatizes his experiences in detail, expanding his awareness gradually through the narrative; (3) and also through epiphanies at the end. This clarity is an example of why Fitzgerald is popular and James is not.

### I

The opening sentence introduces the narrator as traditional in respecting his father and as thoughtful in thinking about his father’s early advice “ever since.” The advice is traditional morality: appreciate what you have been given in life, respect people less fortunate, and avoid passing judgments on others. The first-person narration is confessional—prompting our recollection that Fitzgerald wrote this novel as a former Catholic who lost his faith at Princeton. *The Great Gatsby* is a confession of lost faith in social progress. In this novel, for once, Fitzgerald transcended his romantic self (heart) by narrating through his objective self (head), making the novel a psychological allegory of his own individuation, dramatizing a quest for transcendence through pursuit of the American Dream. He encouraged such an interpretation when he declared that “My characters are all Scott Fitzgerald.”

That the narrator does not introduce himself by name is evidence of discretion, reserve and modesty—characteristics that set up a contrast with the gaudy Gatsby, yet a parallel is also suggested when Gatsby becomes a mysterious figure not introduced except as a figure in the distance stretching out his arms toward

the green light, until over a quarter of the way into the novel. The narrator presents himself as “inclined to reserve all judgments,” which would make him objective and hence probably reliable—an impression reinforced by his controlled style, self-criticism and chastened tone. He calls himself a “normal person,” that is, with normative moral standards like those of his father. This is his character and his function as narrator—to observe, represent and apply the moral norm of “fundamental decency” to the other characters. The story of *Gatsby* has left him so outraged that “I felt that I wanted the world to be in uniform and at a sort of moral attention forever.” The military image recalls his service in World War I, supposedly a great moral cause. His repetition of the word “snobbishly” implies with irony that people with fundamental decency have become so exceptional in the postwar world they are the only true aristocracy, in contrast to the corrupt rich epitomized by Tom and Daisy Buchanan.

On page 2 the narrator summarizes what he has learned, vaguely enough to generate suspense without giving away the plot: *Gatsby* (1) “represented everything for which I have an unaffected scorn; nevertheless (2) his personality was “gorgeous”; and he had (3) a “heightened sensitivity to the promises of life”; (4) “an extraordinary gift for hope”; and (5) a unique “romantic readiness.” (6) *Gatsby* “turned out all right in the end”; (7) what disillusioned the narrator was “what preyed on *Gatsby*, what foul dust floated in the wake of his dreams.” This “foul dust” is the first manifestation of the “valley of ashes,” the wasteland at the center of the novel like a “vortex”—using the term of Ezra Pound—Fitzgerald’s variation on T. S. Eliot’s vortex in “The Waste Land” published just three years before. Willa Cather countered the waste land in *The Professor’s House* (1925) with her positive vortex of the Blue Mesa in the desert, Hemingway countered with his bullfight metaphor as the vortex of *The Sun Also Rises* in 1926, and Faulkner countered with the dying mother Addie as the vortex in *As I Lay Dying* in 1930. Of the five writers, Fitzgerald is the only one who lost faith. Yet, paradoxically, his style is the most hopeful. His “romantic readiness” lifts his story above Realism into a Romantic fable of the fabulous *Gatsby*.

Almost three pages into the novel, when the narrator gets around to his social identity as distinct from his personal character, he distances himself from his family by referring to “the Carraways,” still not revealing his first name. Though from a “well-to-do” family, Nick is not among the very rich, as he rents an “eyesore” and drives an old Dodge. Withheld identity, his bogus family tradition of an aristocratic lineage, and his great-uncle Carraway who bought himself out of service in the Civil War suggest parallels between Nick and *Gatsby*, establishing them as personifications of the psyche in Fitzgerald’s confessional allegory. Nick even looks like his great-uncle, though his better character is implied by having served in WWI. Most importantly, though one is objective and the other subjective, Nick and *Gatsby* share a rare capacity for “infinite hope”—the spiritual ideal in the novel.

Nick casts himself in a mythic role as well as *Gatsby*: “I was a guide, a pathfinder, an original settler.” He has rediscovered America and will be our guide: “life was beginning over again.” New life is evoked by the major settings—two Eggs. Nick is an American Adam in a New World. The action of the novel is set in 1922, the year Willa Cather said that the world “broke in two”—traditional and modern. In describing Long Island geography, Nick refers to a traditional anecdote about “the egg in the Columbus story.” In literature a reference to Columbus is a reference to the European discovery of America. The anecdote is older than Columbus but he has been given credit for being so clever as to stand an egg on one end. Fitzgerald makes East Egg and West Egg metaphors of a divided America, analogous to the East Coast and the Midwest, connoting thematic polarities of modern versus traditional, urban versus rural, fashionable versus common, decadent versus innocent. Comparable thematic polarities were represented figuratively by Henry James as Europe versus America. Unlike the egg in the Columbus story, East Egg and West Egg are “not perfect.” In fact “they are both crushed flat at the contact end,” which is how Columbus allegedly performed the trick of standing an egg on end—by cheating, by breaking the egg. Fitzgerald may have gotten this idea from Sherwood Anderson’s “The Egg” (1921), in which an egg becomes a symbol of the American Dream.

Nick is implicated in the story by the fact that “Daisy was my second cousin once removed.” He is related to her also by background and heritage. And he attended Yale with her husband the very rich Tom Buchanan, who represents his class—“a national figure in a way.” In the paragraph introducing Tom, Fitzgerald’s romantic awe of the very rich comes through as Nick marvels at Tom’s ability to maintain a string of polo ponies: “It was hard to realize that a man in my generation was wealthy enough to do that.”

As usual in Fitzgerald, the awe is followed by and mixed with a critical attitude that eventually becomes disgust. Nick says of himself, "I was within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled..." As typified by the Buchanans, the very rich are cases of arrested development. They are adolescent, rootless, aimless, overbearing, arrogant, uninformed, racist, amoral and self-indulgent. They "drifted here and there unrestfully wherever people played polo and were rich together"—like the aimless rich Europeans in the opening of "The Waste Land."

The Buchanan house in East Egg is appropriately a Georgian Colonial mansion recalling aristocratic America before the Revolution. The huge lawn runs "jumping" over sundials and walks and gardens and even into the house, as the prose style becomes Expressionistic with excitement. The color motif of gold introduced in the epigraph to the novel with "the gold hat" is identified here with the windows of the Buchanan mansion "glowing now with reflected gold." Nick uses the word "impression" twice in successive paragraphs and his Impressionistic physical description of Tom Buchanan conveys his character as well as his looks: "sturdy," "hard," "supercilious," "arrogant," and "aggressively forward"—a body with "enormous leverage—a cruel body." Leverage becomes another motif in the novel and determines the outcome when Tom prevails.

Impressionism gives the novel a pictorial vividness in the painterly tradition of Stephen Crane, Kate Chopin and the Edith Wharton of *Ethan Frome* (1911), which uses a narrative strategy that probably influenced Fitzgerald as well. Tom turns Nick around by his arm, manipulative and restless, showing off his estate as if trying to convince himself that "I've got a nice place here." It must be, by Tom's standards, since the previous owner was an oil man. The two paragraphs describing the interior of the mansion are the best sustained illustration of Impressionist technique since Crane, rendering the easy, luxurious, expansive, airy, breezy atmosphere of life among the idle rich. Daisy and Jordan Baker are "buoyed" up by wealth "as though upon an anchored balloon." They are both wearing white—another motif—a conventional sign of innocence ironic here. The unreality of it all is evoked by Expressionism: "the groan of a picture on the wall." Tom Buchanan brings everyone down with a boom by closing the windows, the first in a series of such effects—breaking Myrtle's nose, deflating Daisy's affair, and misleading Wilson into shooting Gatsby—"and the two young women ballooned slowly to the floor."

Jordan Baker is introduced with an impression that defines her: "...chin raised a little, as if she were balancing something on it which was quite likely to fall." Throughout the story she is preoccupied with maintaining her precarious image of herself—"the object she was balancing had obviously tottered a little and given her something of a fright." In his innocence, Nick misreads Jordan and even "half" falls in love with her, a contrasting parallel to Gatsby's infatuation with Daisy: "Almost any exhibition of complete self-sufficiency draws a stunned tribute from me." The joke is that Jordan is actually insecure and dependent. Nick has come East to be a "bond man" but he makes a bad investment. He is likewise enamored of his cousin, enchanted by Daisy's "low, thrilling voice" full of excitement and promise, giving him something further in common with Gatsby. He projects into the sunshine falling with a "romantic affection upon her glowing face; her voice compelled me forward... Then the glow faded..."

Tom puts Nick down by remarking that he has never heard of his employer, then identifies himself totally with the values of the East: "I'd be a God damned fool to live anywhere else." As if he is not already a damned fool. Jordan agrees with Tom "Absolutely!" Though she has been lying on the sofa all afternoon, Jordan now throws her body "backward at the shoulders like a young cadet." The military image recalls Nick saying that he felt like the world should "be in uniform and at a sort of moral attention." However, as we are to see, Jordan is not at moral attention, but at social attention, as expressed in her contemptuous reference to unfashionable West Egg.

One of the most effective similes in the book is an *objective correlative* for Nick's feelings: "Tom Buchanan compelled me from the room as though he were moving a checker to another square." As if for Tom, life is a game he always wins because he owns the board. Nick is "compelled" to be on Tom's side. Looking toward the sunset, the Buchanans represent the spiritual decline of the West. Daisy snuffs out the light of candles and "looked at us all radiantly." Her personality is bright but her mind is dim, her conversation with Jordan repetitive and vacuous: "We ought to plan something," yawned Miss Baker,

sitting down at the table as if she were getting into bed. "All right," said Daisy. "What'll we plan?" She turned to me helplessly: "What do people plan?"

As if she has never had an original thought—let alone a plan—in her entire life. Daisy sees Nick as one of the "people" and confesses that she knows nothing about them—or him, her cousin. The impersonal relations of the rich are just as superficial as their conversation: "Sometimes she and Miss Baker talked at once, unobtrusively and with a bantering inconsequence that was never quite chatter, that was as cool as their white dresses and their impersonal eyes in the absence of all desire." Being rich is cool but boring. Cool becomes another motif in the novel, contrasted to the hot poor who cannot afford air conditioning. The rich are disengaged from other people. Having everything they could want except more money, they are too jaded to enjoy life in the moment and can only be disappointed: The "evening was hurried from phase to phase toward its close, in a continually disappointed anticipation or else in sheer nervous dread of the moment itself." Gatsby has lost what he wants and has been giving his extravagant parties in continual disappointed anticipation that Daisy would happen to drop by sometime.

Tom's tirade against "other races" expresses an intense preoccupation with maintaining power that was not limited to the very rich during the 1920s. Since Fitzgerald was stationed in Alabama during the war and married a southern belle, he may have been influenced in particular by the rise of the Ku Klux Klan during that period. Daisy is satirized for conforming to her husband without independent thought: "'We've got to beat them down,' whispered Daisy." Fitzgerald ridicules the education Tom received at Yale. "'Tom's getting very profound,' said Daisy, with an expression of unthoughtful sadness." Tom goes on, "'This idea is that we're Nordics. I am, and you are, and you are, and--'" After an infinitesimal hesitation he included Daisy with a slight nod..." Tom suddenly realizes that, he has paid so little attention to her, he does not know whether his own wife is a Nordic. "There was something pathetic in his...complacency." While agreeing with her husband, Daisy is winking in this scene, but only because the sun is in her eyes, whereas Fitzgerald is winking at the reader.

When the butler calls Tom from the dinner table to the telephone, Jordan comes to social attention: "Miss Baker leaned forward unashamed, trying to hear." Eavesdropping on your host shows a lack of "fundamental decency." Jordan gets worse, gossiping to Nick: "Tom's got some woman in New York." Then she has the ironic gall to say, "She might have the decency not to telephone him at dinner time." To Jordan, it is not the affair that is indecent but the timing of a phonecall. Nick has to restrain himself from expressing his disapproval. "To a certain temperament the situation might have seemed intriguing—my own instinct was to telephone immediately for the police."

Nick keeps his mouth discretely shut about the situation when alone with Daisy. She is so petty as to hold it against him that he did not attend her wedding, even though he was away in the war at the time—she had never even noticed let alone appreciated his service. She is feeling sorry for herself. Nick changes the subject to her little daughter, but Daisy changes it right back to herself—to what she said when the child was born. The importance of their daughter to the Buchanans may be measured by her brief appearance in the novel. Implicitly, Tom wanted a boy. What Daisy said paraphrases what Zelda said when her daughter was born: "I hope she'll be a fool—that's the best thing a girl can be in this world, a beautiful little fool." Daisy is unhappily resigned to subordination, whereas Zelda bitterly rebelled.

Daisy's inability to think for herself is evident again when she declares that everything is terrible: "Everybody thinks so—the most advanced people." She considers herself superior for being cynical, but only displays a shallow pretense of sophistication, like a bad actress in a melodrama: "Sophisticated—God, I'm sophisticated!" Nick "felt the basic insincerity of what she had said." Daisy has "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." That is, "The rich are different from you and me," as Fitzgerald would say in one of his most anthologized stories, "The Rich Boy" (1926).

Once he recognizes Jordan as a publicized tournament golfer, Nick refers to an "unpleasant story" about her, which turns out to be that she cheated. He is attracted to her nevertheless for Jordan personifies to him the seductive values of the East, just as Daisy represents to Gatsby the romantic fulfillment of all desire—the American Dream. Daisy tells Nick that she and Jordan grew up together out west in Louisville: "Our

white girlhood was passed there. Our beautiful white—" She sounds plaintive, nostalgic for the innocence they lost after they moved East. Fitzgerald named Daisy after Daisy Miller in the popular novella by Henry James, an independent American girl who loses her life due to her innocence. The submissive Daisy Buchanan embodies a decline in spirit. Feminists should note that Nick is attracted to a professional woman and that he thinks Daisy should leave her patriarchal husband.

The chapter begins with a romantic evocation of Gatsby on page 2 and ends with the man himself—a figure mysterious and apparently trembling in the moonlight, with arms stretched out as if in supplication toward the green light at the end of a dock across the bay. A green light in this country means Go. This is one of the most clear, effective and memorable images in American literature—a sign that expands into a symbol of the American Dream. The green motif in the novel also connotes money, envy, growth, and "the fresh, green breast of the new world." We are encouraged by the lyrical romantic tone, especially after meeting Tom Buchanan, to cheer on the lonely devoted lover with his arms outstretched. Go get her, Gatsby! In this first image of him we may infer that Fitzgerald is drawing upon his own feelings after Zelda would not marry him because he did not have enough money.

## II

The valley of ashes is "about half way between West Egg and New York." In the geographic middle, this setting becomes central to the story, with its "foul dust" floating all around onto everything. This place becomes a vortex of themes and events. Tom Buchanan's mistress Myrtle Wilson lives here in a garage, like a vehicle for his use "on the edge of the waste land," and this is where she is killed by Daisy driving Gatsby's car, determining the rest of the plot. The poor must live here in squalor created by the rich. Gatsby's killer is first seen "wiping his hands on a piece of waste," a man who fuels the vehicles passing through the valley of ashes to and from the City. He is covered with ash, an incarnation of the waste land "mingling immediately with the cement color of the walls."

Eliot had established the waste land as a symbol of the modern soul in his influential poem affirming faith. Fitzgerald expresses his lost religious faith by adding the gigantic blind eyes of Dr. T.J. Eckleburg as a faceless commercial presiding over the waste land in place of God. Beyond his personal tragedy, he saw human life as essentially tragic because he thought there is no God and yet the survival of our humanity in modern civilization depended on belief in something higher, transcending the self, a collective faith traditionally provided by religion. Otherwise most people lose "fundamental decency" and become selfish hedonists like the guests at Gatsby's parties. The billboard Dr. Eckleburg is Fitzgerald's image of what has replaced God—commerce in a materialistic spiritual waste land where idealism is as dead as Gatsby at the end. Eckleburg is a mock deity representing what is worshipped by secularists, aptly for irony an oculist. Both the waste land vortex at the middle of the novel and the "current" Nick is trying unsuccessfully to overcome at the end of the novel represent the forces of Postmodernism.

Tom compels Nick off the commuter train and forces him to meet his mistress—showing off. Myrtle is in many ways the opposite of Daisy. She is poor, stocky, and not pretty, but she is sensuous—especially when pumping gas. Daisy is cool, Myrtle is hot, with a "perceptible vitality about her as if the nerves of her body were continually smoldering." Daisy is refined and submissive, Myrtle coarse and assertive. Tom is so lacking in fundamental decency that as soon as her husband exits momentarily, he orders Myrtle to leave immediately and meet him in the City at a subway station "on the lower level." He treats Wilson "coldly" and ridicules him as "so dumb he doesn't know he's alive."

Myrtle displays her bad taste first in having an affair with Tom Buchanan, then in buying gossip and movie magazines, and most conspicuously in her decoration of the apartment in New York. The lower-class Myrtle proves to be just as acquisitive and pretentious as any rich person, overcrowding the little apartment with furniture now that Tom has given her the green light to pursue her American Dream: "to move about was to stumble continually over scenes of ladies swinging in the gardens of Versailles." Clinging to Tom like a vine on her way up, Myrtle now aspires to be a queen like Marie Antoinette—who got her head chopped off. Myrtle loses her head, gets her nose broken, and is crushed by Daisy.

The only photograph on the wall is what looks like a hen but turns out to be Myrtle's mother, the origin of her egg. Mixed among her scandal and gossip magazines is a copy of a religious book, *Simon Called Peter*. This incongruity suggests that Myrtle's traditional values, expressed by hanging her mother's picture on the wall—comparable to Nick's respect for his father—are being corrupted by her modern values, her dream of acquiring possessions, status and power. Fitzgerald may be confessing his own feelings when Nick reads a chapter of the religious book: "either it was terrible stuff or the whiskey distorted things, because it didn't make any sense to me."

The sister of Myrtle arrives at the apartment, Catherine the "worldly" independent New Woman. She proves to be an airhead, a foolish gambler and a flapper with bobbed hair, rakish false eyebrows and a possessive attitude toward the furniture. Then Mr. McKee is introduced, a photographer in the "artistic game" who enlarged the photo of the mother hen on the wall. "His wife was shrill, languid, handsome, and horrible"—a social climber. McKee comes from "the flat below" and the white spot of shaving lather on his cheekbone is evidence of inattention to detail that does not bode well for his career.

Under the influence of Tom, whiskey and a new dress, the personality of Mrs. Wilson—as Nick calls her, not allowing us to forget her adultery—had "undergone a change." She puts on airs with her new elaborate cream-colored chiffon dress, a vehicle parallel to Gatsby's elaborate cream-colored automobile, then she pretends that "I just slip it on sometimes when I don't care what I look like." She becomes "more violently affected moment by moment," transformed by "hauteur." And "as she expanded the room grew smaller around her." The more she tries to act like a queen, the more she exposes herself as uneducated, vulgar and ridiculous, as when she talks about her foot problems and having her "appendicitis out." Tom is so indifferent to Myrtle except as a mistress that while the McKees fawn over her, he yawns audibly. "'My dear,' she told her sister in a high, mincing shout, 'most of these fellas will cheat you every time. All they think of is money.'" Without realizing it, she has described Tom Buchanan—and herself, since she is cheating on her husband with Tom mainly for his money.

Mr. McKee is there hoping to leverage his career as a photographer. He and his wife flatter Myrtle with lies hoping she will influence Tom on his behalf, but Myrtle is distracted by the incompetence of her servants: "'I told that boy about the ice.' Myrtle raised her eyebrows in despair at the shiftlessness of the lower orders." Then she kisses her little dog with "ecstasy." Catherine contributes to false gossip about Gatsby and claims falsely that Tom can't stand Daisy any more than Myrtle can stand her failure of a husband. Tom makes a joke of McKee's appeal for help in his career and mocks both him and Wilson as unimportant checkers on his game board. The "worldly" Catherine is such a naïve romantic she believes Tom's lies that he cannot get a divorce because Daisy is a Catholic and that eventually somehow he will marry Myrtle: "Tom's the first sweetie she ever had." Myrtle tells Nick how she first met Tom, how romantic it was when he picked her up on a commuter train: "his white shirt-front pressed against my arm, and so I told him I'd have to call a policeman, but he knew I lied."

Myrtle proceeds directly from meeting Tom to buying things and plans to buy a lot more things, her materialistic version of the American Dream: "I'm going to make a list of all the things I've got to get. 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. I got to write down a list so I won't forget all the things I got to do."

Nick displays his generous and fastidious nature when he wipes the spot of dried shaving lather from the cheek of McKee, who has fallen asleep—a particularly effective realistic detail because it is incidental, enhancing the "illusion of real life"—as put by Henry James. Another such detail much admired by Edith Wharton and others, is Myrtle's little dog observing the strange behavior of the humans like a Greek chorus and "groaning faintly." The climax of the chapter comes when Myrtle asserts her right to shout the name of Daisy any time she wants to and, "Making a short deft movement, Tom Buchanan broke her nose with his open hand." In one quick blow he shatters her dream and the illusion of his lies.

McKee is still hoping for leverage "as we groaned down in the elevator"—an echo of the groaning little dog. "'Keep your hands off the lever,' snapped the elevator boy." Unlike Tom, Nick obliges McKee. He compensates with kindness for the cruelty of Tom. Even though he is drunk, it is after midnight and he has

nothing to gain, he goes along to McKee's apartment and pretends to appreciate his "great portfolio" of trite photographs until after three in the morning. McKee, now in his underwear, has exposed himself as interested only in leverage, but Nick has more than a little fundamental decency.

### III

Gatsby's party represents the Jazz Age of the 1920s as Fitzgerald saw it, lived it, and to some extent created it in his many stories in popular magazines and in his first two novels—by far his most popular at that time—*This Side of Paradise* and *The Beautiful and Damned*. This chapter is a classic of literary Impressionism—vivid sensory details, movement, fluidity, glimpsed colors, fragments of conversations—opening with music from Gatsby's mansion playing "through the summer nights"—as if every night, all night. "People were not invited—they went there." They come and go "like moths" attracted to bright lights. This simile and others reducing humans to lower animals is a characteristic of Naturalism, the undertow to tragedy below Fitzgerald's high glittering wave of Romanticism. Gatsby's station wagon "scampered like a brisk yellow bug to meet all trains." Yellow becomes a motif in this West Egg chapter, whereas Nick is wearing white, the normal color of an egg, consistent with his innocence. East Egg would be a golden egg for McKee, and might be for Nick, who takes Jordan's "golden arm." Yellow is not quite gold and Gatsby is not quite up to the social gold standard.

The second paragraph has been especially admired for how effectively it conveys the extravagance of Gatsby's many parties with a single image: "five crates of oranges and lemons arrived from a fruiterer in New York—every Monday these same oranges and lemons left his back door in a pyramid of pulpless halves." He has eight servants, buffet tables loaded with foods, a well-stocked bar during Prohibition, and a large orchestra "playing yellow cocktail music." People come and party and sometimes leave without even meeting the host. "They conducted themselves according to the rules of behavior associated with an amusement park." They typify modern urban society.

Nick is differentiated as normal, polite and traditional by coming only in response to an invitation. He encounters Jordan and two girls in twin yellow dresses who come to Gatsby's parties because, as one says, "I never care what I do, so I always have a good time." That seems to be her philosophy of life. The girls in yellow spread more gossip, like yellow journalists for the tabloids, one saying Gatsby served in the American army during the war and the other that he was a German spy. "It was testimony to the romantic speculation he inspired." Fitzgerald is as droll as Henry James when he describes "Jordan's escort, a persistent undergraduate given to violent innuendo, and obviously under the impression that sooner or later Jordan was going to yield him up her person to a greater or lesser degree." Under the formality, many such drunken male guests are lusting for a fulfillment of their dreams.

The owl-eyed man in the library who claims to have been drunk for a week is impressed that Gatsby's books are real, a detail implying that Gatsby himself is not completely a fake, though he seems not to have read the books. The two girls in yellow turn out to be stage twins and do "a baby act in costume"—in diapers?—vulnerable innocents among the lusty male drunks. The techniques of Impressionism leave a lot to the imagination. Nick is sitting at a table with Jordan drinking champagne when he strikes up a conversation with a man about his age and admits that he has not met Gatsby the host of this party. "'I'm Gatsby,' he said suddenly." After all the buildup to the great Gatsby, not recognizing him when he is right beside you is an ironic anti-climax that emphasizes the inflation of his romantic legend. After all, as we are to learn, he is really only a roughneck named Jim Gatz.

Looking at him more closely in the next paragraph, though, he is an exceptional man at that. He is incredibly likeable. He has "one of those smiles with a quality of eternal reassurance in it" and he pays attention to you "with an irresistible prejudice in your favor." He takes people at face value—"understood you just as far as you wanted to be understood, believed in you as you would like to believe in yourself." Then, looking again, Nick sees merely "an elegant young roughneck...whose elaborate formality of speech just missed being absurd." Fitzgerald himself uses elaborate formality of speech to ridicule the absurd, as when describing the expectations of Jordan's escort.

Gatsby is one of those people who creates a persona to get ahead in the world that becomes his whole self, and because he never looks within he never attains self-knowledge. Hence he cannot read himself or others any more than he reads the books in his library with their uncut pages. This explains how he could fall in love with such a shallow girl as Daisy. She is the girl he fell in love with in his youth, the girl he lost, the girl who rejected him. No other girl will do. It is not what she is that matters to him, it is what she represents—redemption and the fulfillment of his dream.

Fitzgerald juxtaposes the description of Gatsby's personality with a revelation of his character: "a butler hurried toward him with the information that Chicago was calling on the wire." The face of Chicago in the 1920s was the gangster Al Capone. That Gatsby is a gangster is implied by his real name, Gatz. *Gat* was slang for gun. The name Gatsby is a front that looks upper-class. Edith Wharton thought there should have been more background information about Gatsby for Realism, whereas Fitzgerald is Modernist in simply connecting Gatsby to Chicago without any background. Such economy was advocated by Ezra Pound and practiced by the Imagists, by Cather, and by Hemingway with his "iceberg principle." The economy emphasizes the meaning of Gatsby as an figure in an allegory of America.

Though a gangster, Gatsby behaves like a gentleman and is devoted to the woman he loves, unlike the cheating Tom Buchanan—implying ironically that the crook has a better character: "He excused himself with a small bow that included each of us in turn." Jordan increases the ambiguity of Gatsby when she does not believe his claim to be "an Oxford man." The orchestra plays the *Jazz History of the World* and in another room a drunken lady from a famous chorus is sobbing in the throes of a song, with mascara running down her cheeks in inky rivulets. The indifference of onlookers is expressed by the "humorous suggestion that she sing the notes on her face." She had a fight with a man said to be her husband. "I looked around. Most of the remaining women were now having fights with men said to be their husbands." Nick blames the husbands for being "wayward men." Some of the wives are selfish for not wanting to leave, but their husbands lift and carry them out kicking.

Jordan returns from an "amazing" confidential talk with Gatsby in the library and leaves Nick in more suspense. The butler tells Gatsby he is wanted again, this time to answer a call from Philadelphia, where the nation was founded, now another metropolis of crime. On his way out Nick comes upon a car wrecked in the ditch with a missing wheel, one of the episodes most discussed by critics. He chastizes the apparent driver, Owl Eyes from the library, until the actual driver emerges—so drunk he wants to back up the car with a missing wheel: "Put her in reverse." Like Gatsby in relation to Daisy, he says, "No harm in trying." Only a drunk or a romantic would think so. The mistake about who was driving this car prefigures the mistake about who was driving Gatsby's car when it killed Myrtle, leading to his death. This scene ends with an image of Gatsby holding up his hand in farewell.

In his story "Winter Dreams" (1922) Fitzgerald had depicted the dream girl Judy Jones as a careless driver on the golf course who hits another golfer in the gut. Jordan Baker the golfer is a careless driver of cars and a liar. While Nick is dating her, she lies about leaving a borrowed car in the rain with its top down. In a semi-final round of tournament golf, she improves a "bad lie." The pun emphasizes that "She was incurably dishonest. She wasn't able to endure being at a disadvantage and, given this unwillingness, I suppose she had begun dealing in subterfuges when she was very young in order to keep that cool, insolent smile turned to the world." Her competitiveness makes her similar to Zelda. Nick reveals his outdated Victorianism when he says, "It made no difference to me. Dishonesty in a woman is a thing you never blame deeply." Feminists have criticized Fitzgerald for this, failing to notice that Nick evolves out of this attitude and later blames Jordan enough to break off with her.

For the present he merely calls her a "rotten driver" after she "passed so close to some workmen that our fender flicked a button on one's man's coat." Jordan is so selfish that she expects other drivers to "keep out my way." An unapologetic hypocrite, she says "I hate careless people. That's why I like you." Nick has begun to feel like the car she is driving, for "she had deliberately shifted our relations." He then branches the metaphor: "for a moment I thought I loved her. But I am slow-thinking and full of interior rules that act as brakes on my desires, and I knew that first I had to get myself definitely out of that tangle back home." His fundamental decency in this situation once again confirms his claim that he is honest. In fact, "I am one of the few honest people that I have ever known."



#### IV

On Sunday morning religion is in the background as church bells ring, displaced by secular hedonism: “the world and its mistress returned to Gatsby’s home and twinkled hilariously on his lawn.” Nick compiles a list of Gatsby’s guests that is a mock heroic Homeric catalogue of parasitic ciphers like eager Edgar Beaver and “the Leeches.” Eliot’s rendering of cultural degradation in “The Waste Land” includes a pop tune called “the Shakespearean rag.” Fitzgerald includes the Willie Voltaires, Ulysses Swett, Faustine O’Brien, and descriptive names—Miss Haag, Rot-Gut Ferret, S.W. Belcher, Gulick the Senator, Newton Orchid, the Dancies, the Catlips, the Smirkes, the Chromes, and the Hammerheads. This is cartoonish satire in the manner of Sinclair Lewis, who is monotonal and lacks the stylistic virtuosity of Fitzgerald. Here the cartoonish names are mixed with mostly ordinary names, maintaining a realistic tone while making joke after joke with a straight face like the tall-tale humor of Mark Twain.

The guests are reduced to their names and to Nick’s scant impressions. The tone further reduces all events to the same level of insignificance in the spiritual waste land: hair turning white “for no good reason”; driving a car over somebody’s right hand (does it really matter which hand it was?); jumping in front of a subway train in Times Square; or getting one’s nose shot off in the war. The import of it all is that in the secular modern world people are living meaningless lives without higher purpose—“for no good reason.” In this valley of ashes, the only one with a flame is Gatsby.

Nick attributes characteristics to Gatsby that are “peculiarly American”: resourcefulness, formless grace, restlessness, and impatience—he is anxious to get somewhere. This equates Gatsby with a corrupted yet still idealistic America in an allegory of social history. Americans express their identities with their cars. Gatsby’s gaudy vehicle is one of the first examples in literature of the car as a status symbol. A “rich” cream-color like Myrtle’s new dress, it too is a dream and it kills them both. The car, as materialism, is “monstrous.” Sporting “triumphant” boxes and a terraced labyrinth of windshields, it is “swollen” with excess, an ostentatious vulgar boast of wealth. Fitzgerald shares the scorn of Henry James for the bad taste of the new rich.

Just when Nick grows disappointed with Gatsby because he “had little to say,” Gatsby tells him “God’s truth”—a succession of lies. In the secular modern world Man is his own God. When asked what part of the Middle West he comes from, Gatsby answers San Francisco, an indication of his poor education—contrary to his claim to be an Oxford man—of his unreliability, and of his grandiose extravagance, as if the country were so much larger than it actually is that San Francisco could be in the middle instead of at the end of it. At first his outrageous boasting makes it difficult for Nick to restrain incredulous laughter, but eventually Gatsby persuades him with mementos that “it was all true.”

When Gatsby drives them through the valley of ashes, Nick “had a glimpse of Mrs. Wilson straining at the garage pump with panting vitality as we went by.” They are pulled over by a motorcycle policeman and Gatsby waves away his infractions with a “white card.” The policeman even apologizes. “I was able to do the commissioner a favor once,” Gatsby explains to Nick, “and he sends me a Christmas card every year.” Like the call from Chicago, this incident is intended to evoke the corruption prevailing in society, an example of synecdoche--a part standing for the whole. The Christmas cards are merely political gestures, an absurd mockery of what the holiday is supposed to mean.

The sight of New York in the distance inspires romantic awe that recalls the first sight of Chicago in *Sister Carrie* (1900) by Dreiser: “The city seen from the Queensboro Bridge is always the city seen for the first time, in its first wild promise of all the mystery and beauty in the world.” In the tradition of Benjamin Franklin, Dreiser, and Fitzgerald the American Dream is fulfilled in the City. “A dead man passed us in a hearse” is the next sentence, however. The juxtaposition implies the death of the altruistic American Dream personified in Franklin and his replacement by gangsters like Gatsby and Wolfsheim.

It is an irony in literary history that in this novel published in 1925, not long before the Holocaust, a Jewish character is depicted wearing human molars as cuff buttons. Wolfsheim illustrates Gatsby’s lack of moral judgment and he is untrustworthy himself when he claims that Jordan would “never do anything that wasn’t all right” and that Gatsby “would never so much as look at a friend’s wife.” Wolfsheim is merely a

sentimentalist, not a romantic idealist like Gatsby. He is “the man who fixed the World’s Series back in 1919.” Baseball is the most American of sports, a pastoral game associated with boyhood innocence. To get away with fixing the “national pastime,” as actually happened in 1919 involving the Chicago White Sox—remember the call from Chicago—epitomizes the corruption of American culture. Wolfsheim “played with the faith of fifty million people—with the single-mindedness of a burglar blowing a safe.” Tom Buchanan, appropriately, comes from Chicago.

Jordan takes over the narration to tell the story of Gatsby falling in love with the most popular girl in Louisville, as if *because* she was the most popular girl—the prize—Daisy Fay, who “dressed in white, and had a little white roadster.” Then he went away to war and Daisy married the wealthy Tom Buchanan, who gave her a string of pearls worth a fortune. Before the bridal dinner she got drunk and changed her mind, implicitly in love with Gatsby—but she married Tom anyway. One night Tom got drunk and “ran into a wagon on the Ventura road...and ripped a front wheel off his car.” He was with a chambermaid from his hotel and the incident got into the papers, disillusioning Daisy. The loss of a wheel echoes the accident after Gatsby’s party and continues the motif of careless driving. Tom gets away unscathed and returns to Chicago and settles there with Daisy, where they “moved with a fast crowd.”

Nick moves slowly with Jordan and we are reminded of his residual Victorianism when they go “driving in a victoria through Central Park,” past the tall apartments of the movie stars. They hear little girls in the park singing “I’m the Sheik of Araby,” from a pop tune identified with the current romantic movie idol Valentino—who is now implicitly compared with Gatsby when Jordan recalls that Gatsby bought his mansion in West Egg just to get close to Daisy. Nick finally understands: “He came alive to me, delivered suddenly from the womb of his purposeless splendor.”

Jordan explains that, since Daisy has never dropped by his mansion during the parties he gave as bait, Gatsby now wants Nick to invite her over to his house for tea and “then let him come over.” This prospect is paralleled and contrasted to Nick’s developing relationship: “I put my arm around Jordan’s golden shoulder and drew her toward me,” even though he can see that she is a “hard, limited person, who dealt in universal skepticism.” Jordan is his opposite. Gatsby is enchanted by Daisy, whereas Nick is ambivalent about Jordan and with her only because he has no girlfriend.

## V

Nick agrees to Gatsby’s request but turns down his offer to give Nick some “confidential” work for easy money. He invites Daisy to tea and Gatsby is so eager he arrives an hour early, in a white suit with a “gold-colored tie.” Nick plans to serve lemon cakes. Gatsby has prepared for this for five years and yet, with only two minutes to go, he is so impatient he acts like he has another appointment: “I can’t wait all day.” When she arrives on time Gatsby quickly sneaks outside and around the house and knocks on the front door so it will appear he just got there himself. Nick is in the awkward position of introducing them to each other. “We’ve met before,” muttered Gatsby—is a comical understatement.

The intensity of Gatsby’s romantic passion is dramatized in his nervous clumsiness while trying to act as perfect ease, even bored, leaning back against the mantelpiece and knocking off the clock—“whereupon he turned and caught it with trembling fingers and set it back in place.” Setting back the clock is what he hopes to accomplish with Daisy. “I’m sorry about the clock,” he said.” Embarrassed for him, Nick makes an absurd yet apt response: “It’s an old clock,” I told them idiotically.”

Nick calls attention to the immaturity of Gatsby, the arrested development of the American male: “You’re acting like a little boy,” I broke out impatiently.” In relation to this romantic neighbor, Nick compares himself to the philosopher Kant, a reserved and objective recluse who provided the conceptual foundation for the Romantic movement. Romanticism has taken many forms. Gatsby’s mansion, with its “feudal silhouette against the sky,” was built by a romantic brewer who dreamed of reducing his neighbors to peasantry by paying them to thatch their roofs and lording over them like a nobleman in a castle. Gatsby’s affectation of a British accent and his claim to have attended Oxford are evidence of the traditional American inferiority complex and veneration of titles and aristocracy—contradicting democratic American values. This was a major theme of Henry James and a subject of intense satire by Mark Twain.

Though it is a British expression, calling everybody “old sport” without discrimination conveys Gatsby’s underlying American character.

Daisy responds once again to Gatsby and “he literally glowed” with exultation. It stops raining and “there were twinkle-bells of sunshine in the room” like the happy ending to a fairy tale. Gatsby shows off his mansion to Daisy in the “pale gold odor of kiss-me-at-the-gate.” His “Marie Antoinette music rooms” parallel him again to Myrtle with her multiple “scenes of ladies swinging in the gardens of Versailles.” His bedroom dresser is “garnished with a toilet set of pure dull gold.” Gatsby “was consumed with wonder at her presence. He had been full of the idea so long...at an inconceivable pitch of intensity. Now, in the reaction, he was running down like an overwound clock.”

Gatsby’s pile of expensive shirts brings Daisy to tears. As he throws them one after another onto the pile, their abundance and his casual extravagance imply unlimited wealth. The prose turns increasingly rich, opulent and lush with colors and textures, musical with alliteration and assonance. “Suddenly, with a strained sound, Daisy bent her head into the shirts and began to cry stormily.” Both her head and her heart are into the shirts. Her emotion over shirts is both pathetic and comic. “‘They’re such beautiful shirts,’ she sobbed, her voice muffled in the thick folds. ‘It makes me sad because I’ve never seen such—such beautiful shirts before.’” Daisy makes love to his shirts before she makes love to him, confirming that Gatsby was right all along, that to move her he had to get rich enough to “wear the gold hat.” In *Babbitt* (1922) Sinclair Lewis satirized Americans for making a religion of business. In *Gatsby* Fitzgerald satirizes them for making a religion of materialism—mansions, cars, yachts, dresses, shirts.

Daisy’s materialism is contrasted to Gatsby’s romantic idealism at the moment that she puts her arm through his. He seems to sense that, paradoxically, in attaining his goal he has lost the meaning of his life: “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.” This prefigures his depression just before he gets shot, and the possibility of his awareness encourages us to see Gatsby as tragic rather than merely a romantic fool. Gatsby is immature in having invested all his hope in pursuing a finite goal in the material world—merely plucking a shallow Daisy—rather than pursuing a spiritual goal, an unattainable ideal such as moral perfection in the tradition of Christ or Ben Franklin. “Man’s reach should exceed his grasp, or what’s a heaven for,” as the poet Robert Browning said.

Through falling rain there is a “pink and golden billow of foamy clouds above the sea.” Seduced into Gatsby’s romantic illusion Daisy says, “I’d like to just get one of those pink clouds and put you in it and push you around.” She finally has a plan. Gatsby takes them to one of the Marie Antoinette music rooms and on the piano his sleepy houseguest Klipspringer plays “The Love Nest”—though not well. “Ain’t we got fun.... The rich get richer and the poor get—children.”

Nick surmises that Daisy could not possibly live up to Gatsby’s dreams “because of the colossal vitality of his illusion. It had gone beyond her, beyond everything.” This is what redeems Gatsby in the end: Although his dream is immature and the object of it unworthy, he is devoted to an ideal beyond material reality. Unlike everybody else in the valley of ashes, Gatsby is capable of transcendence.

## VI

Finally the background of Gatsby is revealed, though not in as much detail as Edith Wharton would have preferred. The teenager James Gatz, wearing a torn green jersey, swam out to the white yacht of a rich man—“a pioneer debauchee”—anchored “in the shallows [of] Little Girl Bay.” He “invented just the sort of Jay Gatsby that a seventeen-year-old boy would be likely to invent, and to this conception he was faithful to the end.” His dedication to a shallow adolescent dream arrested his development. Gatsby is a self-made man in more than the practical sense of Franklin, and in more than the modern Existentialist sense. “He sprang from his Platonic conception of himself.” The word “Platonic” verifies the idealism of Gatsby, that he believes in a spiritual dimension, but he is also limited in growth by “overwhelming self-absorption.” He is Modernist in his idealism, Postmodernist in his egocentricity. “He was a son of God”—that is to say, a son of himself—a mock Christ. “His Father’s business” is his criminal activity in the service of his romantic dream. He knows no other God.

Ironically when a Buchanan just happens to drop by Gatsby's mansion, it is Tom, in a party of three on horseback. Tom takes a dislike to Gatsby when he learns that he knows Daisy and applies a double standard: "By God, I may be old-fashioned in my ideas [Medieval actually], but women run around too much these days to suit me." Later when he brings Daisy to one of Gatsby's parties, she jokes with Nick that all he has to do if he wants to kiss her is mention her name or "present a green card." Like a traditional dance card at a ball, except that as a modern woman Daisy is willing to skip the dance and go straight to the kiss—or more. Her acceptance of a green card from anyone who asks contrasts with the faithfulness of Gatsby to the green light at the end of her dock. Hollywood has been a major influence in the loosening of morals as suggested by the presence at the party of producers, a movie actress and her director. Tom wants to eat with someone else and Daisy, with genial cynicism, offers him her gold pencil "to take down any addresses." Her heart is inclining to Gatsby: "After all, in the very casualness of Gatsby's party there were romantic possibilities totally absent from her world."

After the Buchanans have gone home, Nick sees that Gatsby wants "nothing less of Daisy than that she should go to Tom and say: 'I never loved you'." Nick says reasonably, "You can't repeat the past," but Gatsby cries "incredulously. 'Why of course you can!'" He wants Daisy to divorce Tom, go back to her "white girlhood" in Louisville and marry him "just as if it were five years ago." As if Tom had never existed. He wants to "Put her in reverse," like the drunk with the wheel off his car. Nick realizes that Gatsby "wanted to recover something, some idea of himself perhaps, that had gone into loving Daisy." He tells Nick about the night in Louisville five years before, about a romantic stroll he took with her where "the sidewalk was white with moonlight." Her "white face came up to his own" and when he kissed her Daisy "blossomed for him like a flower and the incarnation was complete."

Now, however, though he is walking "down a desolate path of fruit rinds and discarded favors," Gatsby does not realize that the party is over. Nick identifies with him in his nostalgia and melancholy, feeling the loss of wonder and beauty that he experienced in his own youth, but unlike Gatsby he is not able to objectify his feelings. He has outgrown them. The tone, style, and theme of mutability at the end of this chapter is in the tradition of the English Romantic poets, in particular Keats.

## VII

Gatsby's career "as Trimalchio was over." The freed slave Trimalchio is a character in *The Satyricon*, a satirical novel in fragments (100 A.D.) by Petronius, during the reign of Nero. He is analogous to Gatsby in that he (1) rose from poverty; (2) became new rich; (3) aspires to be a man of culture and refinement; (4) but apes the aristocracy; (5) can think only in terms of wealth; (6) is vulgar and egotistical; (7) affects to be well educated but makes comical errors proving otherwise; and (8) gives extravagant ostentatious parties. He has none of Gatsby's redeeming qualities. This allusion to Trimalchio is Fitzgerald's approximation of the "mythic method" advocated by T. S. Eliot, to the simple extent of implying a general parallel in contrast to the complex systems of correspondences to ancient myths in "The Waste Land" and in *Ulysses* by Joyce, both in 1922, the year of the action in *Gatsby*.

On a broiling hot day Nick takes the train past hot factory whistles, sweating among hot commuters—"Hot!...Hot!...Hot!...Hot!..." says the conductor. "Is it hot enough for you? Is it hot? Is it...?"—out to the cool mansion of the Buchanans on Long Island. Nick enters the hall of the mansion in a faint wind. "The room, shadowed well with awnings, was dark and cool. Daisy and Jordan lay upon an enormous couch, like silver idols weighing down their own white dresses against the singing breeze of the fans." Cool, sheltered, and too comfortable to move, the women seem frozen in place, whereas Tom Buchanan is on the move showing off his place to Gatsby.

Daisy's daughter makes a brief appearance in the care of her nurse and then is pulled out of the room without even seeing her father. Daisy gushes over the child, calling her "bles-sed precious" and a "dream" but she is consistently shallow. She gives her dream a few minutes out of her day, in contrast to the total devotion of Gatsby for five years. After being seduced by his wealth, romantic charm and passion, in the end, as a materialist, Daisy loves Gatsby for his appearance: "'You always look so cool,' she repeated. She had told him that she loved him, and Tom Buchanan saw."

Gatsby looks glamorous to Daisy, like a man in an advertisement. Tom is “astounded” by the way she looks at Gatsby. He tries to break the spell by demanding that they all go into the City, losing his cool. “His temper cracked a little” and his hand is “trembling with his effort at self-control.” In one of the most celebrated lines in the novel, Gatsby says of Daisy, “Her voice is full of money.” That is her charm. Nick too hears “the jingle of it” and sees her now as an American princess of wealth living a fairy tale: “High in a white palace the king’s daughter, the golden girl....”

At his car outside, trying to remain cool, Gatsby feels “the hot, green leather of the seat.” Trying to take control of the situation, Tom insists on driving Gatsby’s car, whereupon Daisy chooses to ride with Gatsby in Tom’s coupe. On the way to the City, they stop for gas at Wilson’s garage under the faded eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg, the mock secular deity blind to evil. Wilson suspects his wife Myrtle of having an affair with someone he has not yet identified and he appeals to Tom because he needs money “pretty bad” to take her away out West. His dream is buying Tom’s coupe for resale. Bending over the gas tank, “In the sunlight his face was green.” Myrtle peers out a window and “her eyes, wide with jealous terror, were fixed not on Tom, but on Jordan Baker, whom she took to be his wife.” The ironies multiply as almost every character gets a wrong impression and acts upon it, emphasizing the Naturalist theme of chance. All the misperceptions and accidents in the novel prepare for the coincidences in which a man fearing his wife has a lover without knowing who begs the lover to help him make enough money to take her away from him, a wife kills the mistress of her husband without knowing it or meaning to, and the mistress is killed by reaching out to the wife she thinks is the husband.

In a suite at the Plaza Hotel, they drink mint juleps and Tom confronts Gatsby like a southern overseer: “I suppose the latest thing is to sit back and let Mr. Nobody from Nowhere make love to your wife.” As if it would be acceptable if Gatsby were a Somebody from Somewhere. Nick says, “Angry as I was, as we all were, I was tempted to laugh whenever he opened his mouth. The transition from libertine to prig was so complete.” Tom the cheater is suddenly a defender of traditional values: “‘Nowadays people begin by sneering at family life and family institutions, and next thing they’ll throw everything overboard and have intermarriage between black and white.’ Flushed with his impassioned gibberish, he saw himself standing alone on the last barrier of civilization.” Fitzgerald responds to Tom’s racism with a quip from Jordan that is no compliment to their race: “We’re all whites here.”

Gatsby faces Tom with his great truth: “Your wife doesn’t love you.... 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!” Daisy, however, cannot confirm his illusion: “‘Oh, you want too much!’ she cried to Gatsby. ‘I love you now—isn’t that enough?... I did love him once—but I loved you too’.” Tom then exposes Gatsby as a bootlegger, a gangster and a partner of Wolfsheim. Gatsby denies everything but Daisy is terrified and withdraws into herself. Suddenly, after all his effort, his dream is dead. Nick likewise must face the fact that Gatsby is truly a crook like Wolfsheim. Tom is so convinced of his triumph over his adversary that, to rub their faces in it, he insists “with magnanimous scorn” that Daisy and Gatsby drive home together in Gatsby’s yellow car: “Go on. He won’t annoy you.” Daisy is distraught yet wants to steady herself by driving. In the valley of ashes, a distraught Myrtle trying to escape her husband and wave down the big yellow car she had seen as being driven by Tom when he stopped for gas—runs out into the road and gets hit by Daisy, who keeps on going.

The garage is “lit only by a yellow light.” The witness Michaelis tells the police he is unsure but he thinks the “death car” might have been light green. Myrtle ran from the yellow light into the road like she had a green light. Then a “well-dressed negro stepped near. ‘It was a yellow car,’ he said.” Tom assures Wilson the yellow car is not his. He assumes that Gatsby was driving it, but does not yet reveal that to Wilson. Later, when leaving the Buchanans’ mansion, Nick encounters Gatsby still playing the romantic hero, watching over Daisy from the shadows. Gatsby thinks his big yellow car was not observed at the accident and intends to claim that he was driving. Nick says, “I disliked him so much by this time I didn’t find it necessary to tell him he was wrong.” Gatsby confirms that Myrtle “wanted to speak to us, thought we were somebody she knew.” The plot turns on the question, Who killed Myrtle? Consider how many different characters are implicated in some way. The moral complexity is comparable to that in “The Blue Hotel” (1898) by Stephen Crane—both writers Impressionists with Naturalist themes—who grew up near

where Fitzgerald went to school: “Usually there are from a dozen to forty women really involved in every murder, but in this case it seems to be only five men.”

There is a pink glow from Daisy’s room upstairs in the mansion and Gatsby is wearing a pink suit in the moonlight. Nick leaves him there maintaining his “sacred” vigil—“watching over nothing.” Nick knows it is nothing because he has peeked in a window and seen that Daisy is not up in her pink room but down in the kitchen with Tom and a plate of cold chicken. Implicitly the two of them are back together again and cooking up a coldhearted scheme to escape accountability. Daisy could have turned away from Myrtle toward an oncoming car but “lost her nerve”—she chickened out. She has confessed to Tom “and anybody would have said that they were conspiring together.”

## VIII

Nick has a tactile experience of Gatsby’s mansion when the two feel their way through the dark already dusty rooms searching for cigarettes and find only two gone stale. The “long secret extravaganza was played out.” The vacancy of his enormous place makes his parties seem already remote in the past, yet Gatsby still “was clutching at some lost hope.”

Gatsby reveals more about his courtship of Daisy, that he was amazed by her home in Louisville, that he had imagined her bedroom as “more beautiful and cool than other bedrooms,” that her popularity, “that many men had already loved Daisy—it increased her value in his eyes.” He approached Daisy as he would later approach the world: “He took what he could get, ravenously and unscrupulously—eventually he took Daisy one still night, took her because he had no real right to touch her hand.” He lied to her about himself. Then “he found that he had committed himself to the following of a grail.” Daisy caught a cold,” hinting at a cold heart, while she remained “safe and proud above the hot struggles of the poor.”

Unable still to accept defeat, sounding like a lovesick teenager, a pathetic Gatsby tries to rationalize that Daisy “‘might have loved him just for a minute, when they were first married—and loved me more even then do you see?’.... ‘In any case,’ he said, ‘it was just personal’.” What is love of another person if not personal? This remark is Romanticism dissociated from Reality. Gatsby imagines that her love for him, supposedly like his for her, had gone beyond this world---“beyond everything”—it was transcendent. By investing such love in a person, especially a Daisy, he was bound to lose it eventually. In Jungian terms, Jay Gatsby fell in love with a projection of his anima—his ideal love. In truth the shallow Daisy is too narcissistic ever to have felt much love for anyone, not even her daughter.

By now Nick has come to an ironic judgment about this gangster in the pink suit: “‘They’re a rotten crowd,’ I shouted across the lawn. ‘You’re worth the whole damn bunch put together’.” Although he “disapproved of him from beginning to end,” Nick sides with Gatsby in the end because he is an idealist who has pursued an “incorruptible dream.” Nick is a dreamer too, but he has matured beyond adolescence and is learning how to invest in bonds. At his office he gets a call from Jordan, another driver who cheated on the way to her green: “Usually her voice came over the wire as something fresh and cool, as if a divot from a green golf-links had come sailing in at the office window, but this morning it seemed harsh and dry.” The dissolution of their relationship contrasts with the end of Gatsby’s, consistent with Nick’s mature temperament and character.

After the death of Myrtle, the neighbor and witness Michaelis stays up until dawn with her distraught husband, George Wilson. Michaelis tells Wilson, “You ought to go to church, George, for times like this.” Wilson mistakenly thinks his wife was having an affair with the driver of the yellow car that killed her: “She ran out to speak to him and he wouldn’t stop.” Michaelis “believed that Mrs. Wilson had been running away from her husband, rather than trying to stop any particular car.” Wilson says he does not belong to any church but he blurts out to Michaelis, “‘I told her she might fool me but she couldn’t fool God. I took her to the window...’ Standing behind him, Michaelis saw with a shock that he was looking at the eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg... ‘God sees everything,’ repeated Wilson. ‘That’s an advertisement,’ Michaelis assured him.”

The strongest implication here is that Wilson's belief that "God sees everything" is a false dogma, that if a deity exists at all, He is as blind as Dr. Eckleburg. Fitzgerald's plot confirms this belief. Wilson is not a religious man. He invokes God only in desperation. His outburst is comparable to swearing. If he truly believed what he declares—that "God sees everything"—he would not commit murder. A victim himself, he lives in the secular wasteland covered with ash. He is in effect a blind disciple and agent of Eckleburg, embodying the wasteland—the death of religious faith, morality, hope, and truth in the modern world. That is the allegorical meaning of his killing Gatsby.

Michaelis is only partly reliable as a witness, having told police that the yellow car was "light green" and lacking knowledge of why Myrtle ran into the road. On the other hand he is implicitly right that going to church might have helped Wilson. He calls attention to the fact that Wilson has replaced God with Eckleburg without realizing it. As a consequence, also without realizing it, in his blindness Wilson will take revenge on an innocent man. Gatsby the gangster is not innocent of murder himself, however. His chauffeur, the one who drives him, is "one of Wolfsheim's proteges." Fitzgerald's plot expresses the view that mainly because the Wolfsheims and the Buchanans—the very rich—get away with their wrongdoing, there is no justice. That seems to be an overstatement. After all, there is some justice in Tom and Daisy having to live with each other. Overall the poetic justice in *Gatsby*, much of it happening by "chance," looks somewhat like the divine justice that Fitzgerald believed did not exist.

Gatsby is still hoping for a phonecall from Daisy, though Nick thinks he "didn't believe it would come, and perhaps he no longer cared." The style becomes Expressionistic as Nick imagines Gatsby's depression and how it must have changed his perceptions: "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." The secular world is "material without being real" because reality transcends the material in the human spirit—in love and hope and fundamental decency for example. The idealist never sees the end coming, in the form of "that ashen, fantastic figure gliding toward him through the amorphous trees." For all he got, a gat got Gatsby. In a sense he was dead already and killed himself—and might have literally—as Wilson does. His blood forms a "thin red circle in the water."

## IX

Nick is decent enough to look after the body of Gatsby, and even appeals to people to attend his funeral: "I was responsible, because no one else was interested—interested, I mean, with that intense personal interest to which every one has some vague right at the end." His personal interest contrasts with the impersonal behavior of the guests at Gatsby's parties and with Gatsby's impersonal dream. The call from Chicago might be Daisy but turns out to be a gangster, equating the two morally. Then Gatsby's father arrives and "his grief began to be mixed with an awed pride." He does not really care how his son made his money, implicitly in contrast to Nick's father.

In another accidental irony, Fitzgerald places the Jewish gangster Wolfsheim behind a front business called, of all things, "The Swastika Holding Company." The swastika was an ancient symbol long before the Nazis, whose rise to power in Germany came in the decade after this novel was published. In retrospect, however, the association of a Jew with a swastika is disturbing and adds a sinister dimension as well as a weird irony to the novel. That Gatsby is the partner of Wolfsheim attributes criminality to both gentile and Jew. Wolfsheim says of Gatsby, "Start him! I made him"—but even the sentimental gangster refuses to attend the funeral, as does everyone else. Nick wonders if Gatsby was involved in fixing the World's Series of 1919, increasing the tension between his criminality and his redeeming qualities: "I found myself on Gatsby's side, and alone."

Gatsby's father shows Nick the old copy of *Hopalong Cassidy* that his son had as a boy. The title identifies the young roughneck Jimmy Gatz with a cowboy movie hero who rode a white horse and fought Bad Guys in the wild West. On a fly-leaf is a schedule in the spirit of self-improvement traditional since Benjamin Franklin, the icon of the self-made man and an originator of the concept of the American Dream. Fitzgerald parodies Gatsby's adolescent adaptation of Franklin's list of virtues to be developed in pursuit of moral perfection, dramatized in his *Autobiography* (Franklin was also satirizing himself). Gatsby planned to emulate Franklin: "Study electricity, etc." and "Study needed inventions." His boyhood schedule implies

that he was once a Good Guy like Ben and Hopalong, but he got corrupted in pursuit of his dream. His limited intelligence and unlimited ambition are comical: "Read one improving book or magazine per week"; "Dumbbell exercise and wall-scaling." In the allegory of social history, this is what is left of the American Dream in the modern world.

Nick tries so hard to get people to come to the funeral that his generosity makes it sad when "Nobody came." If Eckleburg is a mock God then Gatsby, though self-sacrificial, is a mock Christ with no disciples who cannot even save one Daisy. Only the owl-eyed man found looking at books in the library is decent enough to come. Owl Eyes was modeled on the writer Ring Lardner, who was also the model for Abe North in *Tender Is the Night*. The connotations of owl, glasses, and books leads to an expectation that he will be articulate, perhaps even profound, making his blunt assertion of how we should feel about Gatsby ironic: "'The poor son-of-a-bitch,' he said." Born to the bitch goddess Success, the rich man died poor in spirit. Owl Eyes makes a moral judgment against Gatsby in appropriately vulgar language that is also respectful and warmly sympathetic. That is how Nick feels too.

As a hopeful young student Nick used to return home with friends, going beyond Chicago in "yellow" train cars with "green tickets clasped tight in our gloved hands." The geographical symbolism of West and East is enlarged to include all western civilization: "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." The ironic tone is also modest, since Nick is the only one to reject the East. He sees it as a "night scene by El Greco," the Expressionist religious painter. The cold moon over the waste land of ashes is "lustreless." Romance died with Gatsby. A drunk woman in a white dress, her limp hand sparkling "cold with jewels," is carried on a stretcher into the wrong house and "no one cares."

In his break-up scene with Jordan, Nick is honest and straightforward, whereas she lies by claiming to be engaged to another man, saying, "Well, I met another bad driver, didn't I? I mean it was rather careless of me to make such a wrong guess. I thought you were a rather honest, straightforward person." He does not deny it: "'I'm thirty,' I said. 'I'm five years too old to lie to myself and call it honor'." This differentiates him from the immature Gatsby. Nick was careless enough to get involved with Jordan in the first place, but he has come to "moral attention." He is going back West, rejecting the corruption in civilization like Huckleberry Finn. In the *Bible* the Hebrew people cross over Jordan River from the wilderness into the Promised Land. That event became symbolic of dying and crossing over into Heaven, as in gospel hymns: "I looked over Jordan and what did I see, coming for to carry me home." *The Great Gatsby* dramatizes the successful individuation of Nick as well as the tragedy of Gatsby, concluding with his own spiritual death and rebirth. Crossing beyond Jordan, he implicitly attains a maturity of vision expressed in the last pages of the novel, in which he realizes that life is essentially tragic in that our idealism will never prevail "against the current" of all that is personified in Jordan.

One afternoon Nick encounters Tom Buchanan in New York looking into the windows of a jewelry store. He objects to shaking hands with Tom. Then he asks him what he said to Wilson that day he shot Gatsby. "'I told him the truth,' he said." Tom has been so consistently wrong, we expect him to be wrong again. Wilson came to his front door and "I sent down word that we weren't in." Tom lied as usual. Wilson then "tried to force his way upstairs" with a revolver. Wilson is depicted as weak, whereas Tom is large and athletic, with "a body capable of enormous leverage." Nothing "could hide the enormous power of that body." Since he prevented Wilson from forcing his way upstairs, Tom must have overpowered him, yet he let him go. "He was crazy enough to kill me if I hadn't told him who owned the car." For once Tom tells the truth, when he should have told a lie to save Gatsby. Instead he took advantage of the opportunity to take revenge and get rid of Gatsby. "What if I did tell him? That fellow had it coming to him." Tom is just as guilty of murder as Wolfsheim sending out a hit man.

Tom's final statements are a climax to the pattern of ironies in the book: "He threw dust into your eyes just like he did into Daisy's." At the outset of the novel Nick states that the "foul dust"—of the spiritual waste land—"is what preyed on Gatsby." Tom is the one who spreads that foul dust around wherever he goes. Now he is throwing the dust into other people's eyes by spreading the lie that Gatsby "ran over Myrtle like you'd run over a dog and never stopped his car." Tom is the one who broke her nose and



treated her like a dog. Tom's intensity and the pattern of irony indicate that he does not know that Daisy was the one driving the car. She lied to him. She threw foul dust into *his* eyes. Daisy shifted the blame to Gatsby. In effect, she condemned her lover to death. She crucified him.

Now instead of being seen as a self-sacrificing romantic hero, Gatsby is being portrayed as nothing but a lying son-of-a-bitch. In case the reader has not followed the implications and the irony of Tom's claim to know the truth, Nick is straightforward: "There was nothing I could say, except the one unutterable fact that it wasn't true." The fact is "unutterable" because if Nick told him the truth, Tom would use it as leverage against Daisy for the rest of her life. Nick shows his fundamental decency and his respect for Gatsby by protecting Daisy, as Gatsby wanted to do, even though she does not deserve it.

The careless driving motif culminates in the "vast carelessness" of Tom and Daisy—the irresponsible rich. "I felt suddenly as though I were talking to a child. Then he went into the jewelry store to buy a pearl necklace—or perhaps only a pair of cuff buttons." The reference to a pearl necklace recalls that Tom bought Daisy a pearl necklace before their marriage and implies that he is continuing to buy her off, probably because he is continuing to have affairs. The reference to cuff buttons equates the inhumanity of Tom with that of Wolfsheim, who wears cuff buttons made of human molars.

On his last visit to the deserted mansion of Gatsby, aptly by moonlight, Nick erases an obscenity scrawled on the white steps. In telling the true story, he does the same for Gatsby. The moon, romantic imagination, melts away the material world and the spirit revives, affirming the reality of the ideal. "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 a new world." The unspoiled land that once "flowered" is contrasted to Daisy. Reviving the original vision revives hope and America is reborn as "the last and greatest of all human dreams."

Gatsby believed in the green light with such intensity that he did not realize his immature dream was unattainable from the start: "He did not know that it was already behind him." But due to human nature, the mature dream of social progress as well as individual improvement—the altruistic collective ideal—that too is unattainable. Yet we must strive for it all the more—"boats against the current"—as Gatsby did for his dream, or else we are likely to become like the selfish hedonists at his parties, living "for no good reason." As Fitzgerald said elsewhere, "One should...be able to see things as hopeless and yet be determined to make them otherwise."

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