

50 CRITICS DISCUSS

*The Great Gatsby* (1925)

F. Scott Fitzgerald

(1896-1940)

“Dear Scott: I think you have every kind of right to be proud of this book. It is an extraordinary book, suggestive of all sorts of thoughts and moods. You adopted exactly the right method of telling it, that of employing a narrator who is more of a spectator than an actor: this puts the reader upon a point of observation on a higher level than that on which the characters stand and at a distance that gives perspective. In no other way could your irony have been so immensely effective, nor the reader have been enabled so strongly to feel at times the strangeness of human circumstance in a vast heedless universe. In the eyes of Dr. Eckleburg various readers will see difference significances; but their presence gives a superb touch to the whole thing; great unblinking eyes, expressionless, looking down upon the human scene. It’s magnificent!...

The general brilliant quality of the book makes me ashamed to make...criticisms. The amount of meaning you get into a sentence, the dimensions and intensity of the impression you make a paragraph carry, are most extraordinary. The manuscript is full of phrases which make a scene blaze with life. If one enjoyed a rapid railroad journey I would compare the number and vividness of pictures your living words suggest, to the living scenes disclosed in that way. It seems, in reading, a much shorter book than it is, but it carries the mind through a series of experiences that one would think would require a book of three times its length. The presentation of Tom, his place, Daisy and Jordan, and the unfolding of their characters is unequalled so far as I know. The description of the valley of ashes adjacent to the lovely country, the conversation and the action in Myrtle’s apartment, the marvelous catalogue of those who came to Gatsby’s house—these are such things as make a man famous. And all these things, the whole pathetic episode, you have given a place in time and space, for with the help of T.J. Eckleburg and by an occasional glance at the sky, or the sea, or the city, you have imparted a sort of sense of eternity.”

Maxwell E. Perkins  
legendary editor at Scribner’s  
Letter to Fitzgerald (20 November 1924)  
*Editor to Author: The Letters of Maxwell Perkins*  
ed. John Hall Wheelock  
(Scribner’s 1950)

“It is undoubtedly in some ways the best thing you have done—the best planned, the best sustained, the best written. The only bad feature of it is that the characters are mostly so unpleasant in themselves that the story becomes rather a bitter dose before one has finished it. However, the fact that you are able to get away with it is the proof of its brilliance. It is full of all sorts of happy touches—in fact, all the touches are happy—there is not a hole in it anywhere. I congratulate you—you have succeeded here in doing most of the things that people have always scolded you for not doing.”

Edmund Wilson  
Letter to Fitzgerald  
(March or April 1925)

“*The Great Gatsby* fills me with pleasant sentiments. I think it is incomparably the best piece of work you have done. Evidences of careful workmanship are on every page. The thing is well managed, and has a fine surface. My one complaint is that the basic story is somewhat trivial—that it reduces itself, in the end, to a sort of anecdote. But God will forgive you for that.”

H. L. Mencken  
Letter to Fitzgerald  
(16 April 1925)

“Of course you know that you have written a fine book; but it may be news to you that we know it too. Amanda and I are madly enthusiastic about it, and some of that has gone into a very severely analytical boost of the truly great Gatsby for *The Dial*. (It probably won’t be out for months, but I am doing a little propaganda elsewhere.) It’s so good, Scott, so satisfying, and so rich in stuff. And written; and by the Lord, composed; it has structure and direction and an internal activity.”

Gilbert Seldes  
Letter to Fitzgerald  
(26 May 1925)

“Let me say at once how much I like Gatsby, or rather His Book, & how great a leap I think you have taken this time—in advance upon your previous work. My present quarrel with you is only this: that to make Gatsby really Great, you ought to have given us his early career (not from the cradle—but from his visit to the yacht, if not before) instead of a short resume of it. That would have situated him, & made his final tragedy a tragedy instead of a ‘fait divers’ for the morning papers. But you’ll tell me that’s the old way, & consequently not *your* way; & meanwhile, it’s enough to make this reader happy to have met...the limp Wilson, & assisted at that seedy orgy in the Buchanan flat, with the dazed puppy looking on. Every bit of that is masterly.”

Edith Wharton  
Letter to Fitzgerald  
(8 June 1925)

“In fact it seems to me to be the first step that American fiction has taken since Henry James.”

T. S. Eliot  
Letter to Fitzgerald  
(31 December 1925)

“The novel is one that refuses to be ignored. I finished it in an evening and had to. Its spirited tempo, the motley of its figures, the suppressed under-surface tension of its dramatic moments, held me to the page. It is not a book which might, under any interpretation, fall into the category of a shocking book—one that reveals incredible grossness, thoughtlessness, polite corruption, without leaving the reader with a sense of depression, without being insidiously provocative.”

Walter Yust  
*Literary Review*  
(2 May 1925) 3

“It’s a heavenly book, the rarest thing in the world.”

Victor Llona  
French translator of *The Great Gatsby*  
Letter to Fitzgerald (9 December 1928)

“I was rereading *The Great Gatsby* last night, after I had been going through my page proofs, and thinking with depression how much better Scott Fitzgerald’s prose and dramatic sense were than mine. If I’d only been able to give my book the vividness and excitement, and the technical accuracy, of his! Have you ever read *Gatsby*? I think it’s one of the best novels that any American of his age has done.”

Edmund Wilson  
Letter to Hamilton Basso  
(9 May 1929)

“The book resolves itself into the strongest feeling of a crystal globe, or one of the immense soapbubbles we achieved as children, if it could hold its shape and color without breaking. It is so beautiful, it is so clairvoyant, it is so heart-breaking.”

Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings  
Letter to Fitzgerald  
(mid-1930s)

“Nick Carraway, a young Midwesterner who sells bonds in New York, lives at West Egg, Long Island, which is separated from the city by an ashdump, whose distinctive feature is an oculist’s faded billboard with a pair of great staring eyes behind yellow spectacles, symbolic of an obscenely futile world. Nick’s neighbor is mysterious Jay Gatsby, whose mansion and fabulous entertainments are financed by bootlegging and other criminal activities. As a poor army lieutenant, Gatsby had fallen in love with Nick’s beautiful cousin Daisy, who later married Tom Buchanan, an unintelligent, brutal man of wealth. Through Nick, he manages to meet Daisy again, impresses her by his extravagant devotion and makes her his mistress. Her husband takes as his mistress Myrtle Wilson, sensual wife of a garage-man. When her husband becomes jealous and imprisons her in her room, Myrtle escapes, runs out on the highway, and is accidentally hit by Daisy, and Tom, to whom she has become reconciled, brings his hatred of her lover to a climax by telling Myrtle’s husband that it was Gatsby who killed her.”

James D. Hart  
*The Oxford Companion to American Literature*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition  
(Oxford 1941-83) 296

“*The Great Gatsby* [is] the work by which his name will always live.... Fitzgerald was always supremely a part of the world he there described, weary of it but not removed from it, and his achievement was of a kind possible only to one who so belonged to it. No revolutionary writer could have written it, or even hinted at its inexpressible poignance....

The book has no real scale; it does not rest on any commanding vision, nor is it in any sense a major tragedy. But it is a great flooding moment...and as Gatsby’s disillusion becomes felt at the end it strikes like a chime through the mind. It was as if Fitzgerald, the playboy moving with increasing despair through this tinsel world of Gatsby’s, had reached that perfect moment, before the break of darkness and of death, when the mind does really and absolutely know itself—a moment when only those who have lived by Gatsby’s great illusion can feel the terrible force of self-betrayal....

So the great Gatsby house at West Egg glittered with all the lights of the twenties, and there were always parties, and always Gatsby’s supplicating hand, reaching out to make out of glamour what he had lost by the cruelty of chance.... All the lights of Fitzgerald’s golden time went out with Jay Gatsby—Gatsby, the flower of the republic, the bootlegger who made the American dream his own, and died by it.”

Alfred Kazin  
*On Native Grounds:*  
*An Interpretation of Modern American Prose Literature*  
(Doubleday/Anchor 1942) 246-48

“Not until *The Great Gatsby* did Fitzgerald hit upon something like Mr. Eliot’s ‘objective correlative’ for the intermingled feeling of personal insufficiency and disillusionment with the world out of which he had unsuccessfully tried to write a novel.... But in *Gatsby* is achieved a dissociation, by which Fitzgerald was able to isolate one part of himself, the spectatorial or aesthetic, and also the more intelligent and responsible, in the person of the ordinary but quite sensible narrator, from another part of himself, the dream-sodden romantic adolescent from St. Paul and Princeton, in the person of the legendary Jay Gatsby. It is this which makes the latter one of the few truly mythological creations in our recent literature—for what is mythology but this same process of projected wish-fulfillment carried out on a larger scale and by the whole consciousness of a race? Indeed, before we are quite through with him, Gatsby becomes much more than a mere exorcizing of whatever false elements of the American Dream Fitzgerald felt within himself: he becomes a symbol of America itself...”

The device of the intelligent but sympathetic observer situated at the center of the tale...makes for some of the most priceless values in fiction—economy, suspense, intensity. And these values *The Great Gatsby* possesses to a rare degree. But the same device imposes on the novelist the necessity of tracing through in the observer or narrator himself some sort of growth in general moral perception.... By reason of its enforced perspective the book takes on the pattern and the meaning of a Grail romance—or of the initiation ritual on which it is based.”

William Troy

“Scott Fitzgerald—the Authority of Failure,” *Accent* (1945)  
reprinted in *Modern American Fiction*  
ed. A Walton Litz  
(Oxford 1963) 133-34

“Let us mean by (a masterpiece) a work of the literary imagination which is consistent, engaging, and dramatic, in exceptional degrees; which exhibits largely mastered a human subject of the first importance; and which seems in retrospect to illuminate the whole physical and spiritual situation of which it was, by the strange parturition of art, an accidental product. One easy test will be the rapidity with which, in the imagination of a good judge, other works of the period and kind will faint away under any suggested comparison with it. Now a small work may satisfy these demands as readily as a large one, and *The Great Gatsby* satisfies them, I believe, better than any other American work of fiction since *The Golden Bowl*.”

John Berryman  
*Kenyon Review*  
(Winter 1946) 103-04

“And if *The Great Gatsby* fades a little with its last falling cadence, what an eloquent cadence it is! This is a deft and delicate tale, from the opening passages on the Buchanans’ Long Island Georgian mansion, framed by its half-acre of deep, pungent roses, to the trip through the valley of ashes and the final passage on Gatsby’s dream which had always been behind him... In the story of Jay Gatsby’s illusion Fitzgerald caught the story of an age’s illusion too, just as ‘The Diamond as Big as the Ritz’ was a notable parable of our American ruling class.”

Maxwell Geismar  
*Literary History of the United States*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition  
(Macmillan 1946-63) 1299

“In spite of Gatsby’s physical appearance (he is always on the verge of being just a little absurd), he is an attractive person. He has an indefinable grace and charm, a remarkable simplicity of attitude, but also an obvious vulgarity and cheapness, which have come from achieving too early the success he finds indispensable to his purpose. Fitzgerald’s crucial strategy in this novel is to put the two men, Nick Carraway and Gatsby, in relation to each other and in the course of the narrative to ‘prove’ Gatsby to Carraway.... Why the parties at all—and who is the man who gives them? Carraway goes one night to find out what he can.... Much of the novel is taken up by Nick’s attempts to clear up the mystery of Jay Gatsby, who gives these extravagant and vulgar and apparently pointless affairs but is not really a part of them and—so far as Nick can see—has no pleasure in them or in his guests. Gatsby tells a version of his story while he and Nick drive to Manhattan in the cream-colored Rolls-Royce....

The real Gatsby story, scarcely less incredible, is at the core of the novel’s meaning. Fitzgerald narrates Gatsby’s past in isolated fragments, interrupted always by a return to the present of West Egg and East Egg. Its beginnings concern a James Gatz who, at the age of seventeen, rowed out to Dan Cody’s yacht in Lake Superior to warn its owner that ‘a wind might catch him and break him up in half an hour’.... Cody became Gatsby’s symbol of greatness.... In Louisville, in 1917, Gatsby met Daisy Fay, the first ‘nice’ girl he had ever known.... When he went abroad she married Tom Buchanan of Chicago... Gatsby correctly guessed that it was not Tom but the money that had finally convinced her. To win her back, he would have to ‘buy her,’ to exceed in ostentation and power the wealth of Buchanan’s inheritance. Of her love for him Gatsby had no doubt, and he refused to believe that it had been a moment in the past that could not be repeated....

On his first trip to Manhattan with Gatsby, Nick is introduced to Wolfsheim, Gatsby’s boss, the man ‘who fixed the World Series back in 1919.... Wolfsheim is Cody’s successor, and the difference between the two masters suggests clearly the story of several decades of exploitation and money-gathering in the American world. Wolfsheim, friend of gamblers and crooks, was able to help Gatsby to the fortune he needed in such a hurry.... Underlying all the incredible accounts of West Egg and of the parties there, Carraway sees the inflexible purpose of Gatsby’s conduct: he is a coarse, vulgar, ostentatious; he is associated with the principal leaders of New York’s underworld; he has made his fortune in several illegal

manipulations. But Carraway eventually forgets or condones, as he becomes convinced that Gatsby is 'worth the whole damn bunch put together'...

Against the obvious venality of Gatsby's world—the corruption of it, the collapse of all discernible limits and restraints—Fitzgerald opposes one unalterable fact. Gatsby, after all, held to his illusion to the end; his behavior was consistent from the start; he was an *interested* person, involved with and responsible to others. His dedication to his purpose and his integrity finally won Carraway to him, and at the end Carraway set aside the corruption deliberately and wishfully.... Set alongside it, Gatsby's clumsy but deep affection for one person (and his talent for ingratiating others) is a profound virtue, in whose interest the entire dream 'of the republic' deserves to be consulted.... At the end of the novel Daisy has not proved 'worth it' except as the concrete image of Gatsby's illusion.... What follows is a colossal waste of talent, affection, desire, and intelligence....

From being the younger generation's most brilliant and charming spokesman, Fitzgerald in a few short years became its most perceptive and incisive judge. In order to assume that role, he had (or thought he had) in *The Great Gatsby* to measure the younger generation against the only person who merited his respect. Gatsby scarcely deserved the position Fitzgerald gave him, and he deserved not at all the romantic adulation Carraway offered his memory in the last paragraphs of the novel. Fitzgerald's effort to point to the 'disaster' implicit in the behavior of the very young led him to an excess of admiration for Gatsby in untenable and in almost intolerable terms. For all its grace of style and tightness of structure, *The Great Gatsby* was a sentimental novel, with several fatal lapses of taste and judgment....

But his fiction almost never escaped a sudden shift in his attitude toward his characters. His criticism, even in the best of his work, was blunted or turned aside or maneuvered into unlikely compromises with his subject.... Gatsby, his most remarkable creation, is judged only in terms of himself; and Gatsby's indiscretions, which are enormous, are first forgiven, then sanctified and romanticized.... The details are presented with brilliantly accurate insight, greater than any other found in modern American fiction, but there are places where the control fails, and as in the case of Gatsby, the opportunity to judge becomes an occasion for attachment and sentimental defense."

Frederick J. Hoffman  
*The Twenties:*  
*American Writing in the Postwar Decade*  
(Viking/Collier 1949,1962) 136-43

"In contrast to the grace of Daisy's world Gatsby's fantastic mansion, his incredible car, his absurd clothes...all appear ludicrous. But in contrast to the corruption which underlies Daisy's world, Gatsby's essential incorruptibility is heroic. Because of the skillful construction of *The Great Gatsby* the eloquence and invention with which Fitzgerald gradually reveals this heroism are given a concentration and therefore a power he was never able to achieve again. The art of this book is nearly perfect."

Arthur Mizener  
*The Far Side of Paradise*  
(Houghton 1951) 177

"The one novel of Fitzgerald's that probably will outlast all his other writings is *The Great Gatsby* (1925), and the main reason for this is that the author entirely relied on the one great theme that was the experience of his life, namely, the fatal crash of illusory values and the way in which this affects a group of characters of the first post-war generation. This theme appears as the motive power, not only of the main character, but also of the other figures involved in the story, and above all there is no attempt to introduce substitutionary values that could provoke the skepticism of the reader. Thus Gatsby, the hero, builds up his life on the illusion that wealth and position will sufficiently impress the woman of his choice to make her leave her first husband, however crooked the means by which he has become rich.

In the case of the woman, it is the illusory value of 'class' that leads to the crash. In the illicit relationship of the woman's husband, it is another man's disillusionment that brings about a fatal car accident, a murder, and a suicide. The bottom falls out of everything, from the sneaking away of the hero's friends after his death down to the discovery that the gold champion has furtively moved a ball into a better

position. All this makes for an extraordinary unity of purpose in theme, plot, characterization, and atmosphere, not to speak of the element of suspense which arises from the gradual discovery of the hero's real origin and position, and the imperceptible movements between truth and falsehood."

Heinrich Straumann  
University of Zurich  
*American Literature in the Twentieth Century*  
(Harper Torchbooks 1951,1965) 112-13

"Possession of an image like Daisy is all that Gatsby can finally conceive as 'success'; and Gatsby is meant to be a very representative American in the intensity of his yearning for success, as well as in the symbols which he equates with it. Gatsby is a contemporary variation on an old American pattern, the rags-to-riches story exalted by American legend as early as Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* (most mawkishly in the 'History of Andrew, the Hebridean,' significantly appended to the famous Letter III, 'What Is an American'), and primarily fixed in the popular mind by Benjamin Franklin. Franklin's youthful resolutions are parodied in those that the adolescent Gatsby writes on the back flyleaf of his copy of *Hopalong Cassidy*, a conjunction of documents as eloquently expressive of American continuities as of the progress of civilization in the new world....

Gatsby's philosophy of history is summed up in his devotion to the green light burning on Daisy's dock. Nick first sees Gatsby in an attitude of supplication, a gesture that pathetically travesties the traditional gestures of worship. He finally discerns that the object of that trembling piety is precisely this green light, which, until his disillusion, remains one of Gatsby's 'enchanted objects'... With no historical sense whatever, yet trapped in the detritus of American history, Gatsby is the superbly effective fictional counterpart of that native philistine maxim that 'history is bunk'.... For Fitzgerald, this contemptuous repudiation of tradition, historical necessity, and moral accountability, was deluded and hubristic. When he finally came to see—as he clearly did in *Gatsby*—that in this irresponsibility lay the real meaning behind the obsessive youth-worship of popular culture in his own day, he was able to identify Gatsby as at once the man of his age and the man of the ages, a miserable twentieth-century Ponce de Leon. His fictional world was no longer simply the Jazz Age, the Lost Generation, but the whole of American civilization as it culminated in his own time....

Such was the romantic perception of wonder, when finally stripped of its pleasing and falsifying illusions. Such was Fitzgerald's maturest vision of the United States of America, perhaps the most magnificent statement in all of our literature of the cruel modernity of the 'new world,' its coldness, unreality, and absurdity nourished (if one may use so inappropriate a word) by that great mass neurosis known as 'the American Dream'."

Edwin Fussell  
"Fitzgerald's Brave New World" (1952)  
*American Literature: A Critical Survey 2*  
eds. Thomas Daniel Young and Ronald Edward Fine  
(American Book Company 1968) 357-58

"And over it all brood the eyes of Dr. Eckleburg, symbols—of what? Of the eyes of God, as Wilson, whose own world disintegrates with the death of Myrtle, calls them? As a symbol of Gatsby's dream, which like the eyes is pretty shabby after all and scarcely founded on the 'hard rocks' Carraway admires? Or—and I think this most likely—do not the eyes in spite of everything they survey, perhaps even because of it, serve both as a focus and an undeviating base, a single point of reference in the midst of monstrous disorder?"

Tom Burnham  
"The Eyes of Dr. Eckleburg: A Reexamination of *The Great Gatsby*"  
*College English*  
(October 1952)

"The Diamond as Big as the Ritz' can have a happy ending for the two lovers because it is a fantasy; but the same plot reappears in *The Great Gatsby*, where for the first time it is surrounded by the real world

of the 1920s and for the first time is carried through to what Fitzgerald regarded as its logical conclusion.... To put the facts on record, *The Great Gatsby* is a book of about fifty thousand words, a comparatively small structure built of nine chapters like big blocks. The fifth chapter—Gatsby's meeting after many years with Daisy Buchanan—is the center of the narrative, as is proper; the seventh chapter is its climax. Each chapter consists of one or more dramatic scenes, sometimes with intervening passages of narration. The scenic method is one that Fitzgerald possibly learned from Edith Wharton, who had learned it from Henry James; at any rate, the book is technically in the Jamesian tradition (and Daisy Buchanan is named for James's Daisy Miller).

Part of the tradition is the device of having events observed by a 'central consciousness,' often a character who stands somewhat apart from the action and whose vision frames it for the reader. In this instance the observer plays a special role. Although Nick Carraway does not save or ruin Gatsby, his personality in itself provides an essential comment on all the other characters. Nick stands for the older values that prevailed in the Midwest before the First World War. His family is not tremendously rich like the Buchanans, but it has a long-established and sufficient fortune, so Nick is the only person in the book who has not been corrupted by seeking or spending money. He is so certain of his own values that he hesitates to criticize others, but when he does pass judgment—on Gatsby, on Jordan Baker, on the Buchanans—he speaks as for ages to come.

All the other characters belong to their own brief era of confused and dissolving standards, but they are affected by the era in different fashions. Each of them represents some particular variety of moral failure... Tom Buchanan is wealth brutalized by selfishness and arrogance; he looks for a mistress in the valley of ashes and finds an ignorant woman, Myrtle Wilson, whose raw vitality is like his own. Daisy Buchanan is the butterfly soul of wealth and offers a continual promise...but it is a false promise, since at heart she is as self-centered as Tom and even colder. Jordan Baker apparently lives by the old standards, but she uses them only as a subterfuge. Aware of her own cowardice and dishonesty, she feels 'safer on a plane where any divergence from a code would be thought impossible.'

All these except Myrtle Wilson are East Egg people, that is, they are part of a community where wealth takes the form of solid possessions. Set against them are the West Egg people, whose wealth is fluid income that might cease to flow. The West Egg people, with Gatsby as their tragic hero, have worked furiously to rise in the world, but they will never reach East Egg for all the money they spend; at most they can sit at the water's edge and look across the bay at the green light that shines and promises at the end of the Buchanan dock. The symbolism of place plays a great part in *Gatsby*, as does that of motorcars. The characters are visibly represented by the cars they drive: Nick has a conservative old Dodge, the Buchanans, too rich for ostentation, have an 'easy-going blue coupe,' and Gatsby's car is 'a rich cream color, bright with nickel, swollen here and there in its monstrous length with triumphant hat-boxes and supper-boxes and tool-boxes, and terraced with a labyrinth of wind-shields that mirrored a dozen suns'—it is West Egg on wheels. When Daisy drives the monster through the valley of ashes, she runs down and kills Myrtle Wilson; then, by concealing her guilt, she causes the death of Gatsby.

The symbols are not synthetic or contrived, as are many of those in more recent novels; they are images that Fitzgerald instinctively found to represent his characters and their destiny. When he says, 'Daisy took her face in her hands as if feeling its lovely shape,' he is watching her act the character of her self-love. When he says, 'Tom would drift on forever seeking, a little wistfully, for the dramatic turbulence of some irrecoverable football game,' he suggests the one appealing side of Tom's nature. The author is so familiar with the characters and their background, so absorbed in their fate, that the book has an admirable unity of texture; we can open to any page and find another of the details that illuminate the story. We end by feeling that *Gatsby* has a double value: it is the best picture we possess of the age in which it was written, and it also achieves a sort of moral permanence. Fitzgerald's story of the suitor betrayed by the princess and murdered in his innocence is a fable of the 1920s that has survived as a legend for other times."

Malcolm Cowley  
"Fitzgerald: The Romance of Money" (1953, revised 1973)  
*The Portable Malcolm Cowley*  
ed. Donald W. Faulkner

“Fitzgerald—at least in this one book—is in a 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 toward 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.... *The Great Gatsby* is an exploration of the American dream as it exists in a corrupt period, and it is an attempt to determine that concealed boundary that divides the reality from the illusions....

Fitzgerald does not actually let us meet Gatsby face to face until he has concretely created this fantastic world of Gatsby’s vision, for it is the element in which we must meet Gatsby if we are to understand his impersonal significance.... Suddenly Gatsby is not merely a likable, romantic hero; he is a creature of myth in whom is incarnated the aspiration and the ordeal of his race. ‘Mythic’ characters are impersonal.... His love affair with Daisy is...of no depth or interest in itself. But Gatsby not only remains undiminished by what is essentially the meanness of the affair: His stature grows, as we watch, to the proportions of a hero....

The scene in which Gatsby shows his piles of beautiful imported shirts to Daisy and Nick has been mentioned as a failure of Gatsby’s, and so of Fitzgerald’s, critical control of values. Actually, the shirts are sacramentals, and it is clear that Gatsby shows them, neither in vanity nor in pride, but with a reverential humility in the presence of some inner vision he cannot consciously grasp, but toward which he desperately struggles in the only way he knows.... In this sense Gatsby is a ‘mythic’ character, and no other word will define him. Not only is he an embodiment (as Fitzgerald makes clear at the outset) of that conflict between illusion and reality at the heart of American life; he is an heroic personification of the American romantic hero, the true heir of the American dream. ‘There was something gorgeous about him,’ Nick Carraway says, and although ‘gorgeous’ was a favorite word in the ‘twenties, Gatsby wears it with an archetypal American elegance.... The cataloging of American proper names with poetic intention has been an ineffectual cliché in American writing for many generations. But Fitzgerald uses the convention magnificently.... He shares with Eliot a remarkable clairvoyance in seizing the cultural implications of proper names....

The intelligence of no other important novelist has been as consistently undervalued as Fitzgerald’s, and it is hardly surprising that no critic has ever given Fitzgerald credit for his superb understanding of Daisy’s vicious emptiness. Even Fitzgerald’s admirers regard Daisy as rather a good, if somewhat silly, little thing; but Fitzgerald knew that at its most depraved levels the American dream merges with the American debutante’s dream—a thing of deathly hollowness.... Daisy likes the moving-picture actress because she has no substance.... Fitzgerald’s illustration of the emptiness of Daisy’s character—an emptiness that we see curdling into the viciousness of a monstrous moral indifference as the story unfolds—is drawn with a fineness and depth of critical understanding, and communicated with a force of imagery so rare in modern American writing, that it is almost astonishing that he is often credited with giving in to those very qualities which *The Great Gatsby* so effectively excoriates....

For Gatsby, Daisy does not exist in herself. She is the green light that signals him into the heart of his ultimate vision. Why she should have this evocative power over Gatsby is a question Fitzgerald faces beautifully and successfully as he recreates that milieu of uncritical snobbishness and frustrated idealism—monstrous fusion—which is the world in which Gatsby is compelled to live....Daisy’s significance in the story lies in her failure to represent the objective correlative of Gatsby’s vision. And at the same time, Daisy’s wonderfully representative quality as a creature of the Jazz Age relates her personal failure to the larger failure of Gatsby’s society to satisfy his need. In fact, Fitzgerald never allows Daisy’s failure to become a human or personal one. He maintains it with sureness on a symbolic level where it is identified with and reflects the failure of Gatsby’s decadent American world....

Gatsby’s gold and Gatsby’s girl belong to the fairy story in which the Princess spins whole rooms of money from skeins of wool. In the fairy story, the value never lies in the gold but in something beyond. And so it is in this story. For Gatsby, Daisy is only the promise of fulfillment that lies beyond the green light that burns all night on her dock.... It is hardly too much to say that the whole being of Gatsby exists



only in relation to what the green light symbolizes. This first sight we have of Gatsby is a ritualistic tableau that literally contains the meaning of the completed book, although the full meaning of what is implicit in the symbol reveals itself slowly, and is only finally rounded out on the last page. We have a fuller definition of what the green light means in its particular, as opposed to its universal, signification in Chapter V [when] Gatsby is speaking to Daisy as they stand at one of the windows of his mansion.... In the end the most that can be said is that *The Great Gatsby* is a dramatic affirmation in fictional terms of the American spirit in the midst of an American world that denies the soul.”

Marius Bewley  
“Scott Fitzgerald’s Criticism of America”  
*The Sewanee Review* LXII  
(Spring 1954)

“Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*...demonstrates once more the dramatic appeal of the hero as a self-created innocent. Fitzgerald was right, despite Edith Wharton’s stricture, not to give us any more of Gatsby’s ‘background’; Mrs. Wharton argued that the tragedy was diminished because we know too little about Gatsby’s origins, but the fact is that, as Jay Gatsby, Fitzgerald’s hero had no background. He had repudiated his former self, with its ancestry, as represented by his former name of James Gatz. And in his new role he had...’just begun to be.’ That is what is acknowledged by the novel’s narrator, Nick Carraway, when he says about Gatsby that he ‘sprang from his Platonic conception of himself.’

The legend of the second chance is thus poignantly re-enacted by Gatsby, as he carries forward his incorruptible dream beneath the surface of his guessed-at corruption. In *The Great Gatsby*, the Adamic anecdote retains a singular purity of outline; the young hero follows the traditional career from bright expectancy to the destruction which, in American literature, has been its perennial reward. But the image of the New World as a second, last chance for humanity—an image with which, in retrospect, the murdered Gatsby is associated—is subtly exploited by Fitzgerald as a mirror to reveal the true ugliness of society’s hard malice and shallow sophistication.”

R. W. B. Lewis  
*The American Adam:  
Innocence, Tragedy and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century*  
(U Chicago 1955) 197

“The special charm of *Gatsby* rests in its odd combination of romance with a realistic picture of raw power—the raw power of the money that has made a plutocracy and the raw power of the self-protective conventions of this plutocracy assume when they close in a united front against an intruder. *Gatsby* gives us an unforgettable, even though rather sketchy, sense of the 1920’s and what the people were like who lived in them.... At the same time the hero who comes to his spectacular grief is not only a man of the 1920’s but a figure of legend.... And this will apply whether we think of the book as a romance or as a novel of manners.

The story of Jay Gatsby is in origin an archetype of European legend and it is fascinating to observe how, in Fitzgerald’s hands, this legend is modified and in some way fundamentally changed in accordance with American ideas.... The legend of ‘the Young Man from the Provinces’ which finds expression in certain great novels, such as Stendhal’s *The Red and the Black*, Dickens’s *Great Expectations*, and Balzac’s *Pere Goriot*. The young hero of the legend is likely to come from obscure or mean beginnings. There is some mystery about his birth; perhaps he is really a foundling prince. He is ‘equipped with poverty, pride and intelligence’ and he passes through a series of adventures which resemble the ‘tests’ that confront the would-be knight in Arthurian legend. He has an enormous sense of his own destiny. The purpose of his quest is to ‘enter life,’ which he does by launching a campaign to conquer and subdue to his own purposes the great world that regards him as an insignificant outsider....

He has come to the more socially advanced East and made his way to a position of wealth and influence. He is more or less a mythic figure; he seems to have sprung from ‘a Platonic conception of himself’ rather than from any real place; he is rumored to be the nephew of the Kaiser; he pretends to be an Oxford man and to have lived like a young rajah in all the capitals of Europe; he has committed himself ‘to the following of a grail.’ A good deal of this legendary build-up is comic in tone and satiric in intent.... In

Gatsby, that is, we have a figure who is from one point of view a hero of romance but from another is related to the gulls and fops of high comedy.... But...the ironies of *The Great Gatsby* are never allowed to destroy the credence and respect given by the author to the legend of his hero.... For although there had been reckless and doomed semi-legendary heroes in American fiction, none had been made to play his part in a realistically presented social situation. Fitzgerald opened out the possibility, but scarcely more. It was not in him to emulate except for a brilliant moment the greatest art....

The life and death of Gatsby inevitably call to the mind of Nick Carraway, the narrator, the ideal meaning of American itself.... [The] concluding lines are so impassioned and impressive...that we feel the whole book has been driving toward this moment of ecstatic contemplation, toward this final moment of transcendence.... In *The Great Gatsby* society and its ways, so far as the hero knows them, are not ends but means to a transcendent ideal. Finally, as Nick Carraway thinks, the ideal is so little connected with reality that it consists merely in having an ideal. Ideality, the longing for transcendence, there are good in themselves.”

Richard Chase  
*The American Novel and Its Tradition*  
(Doubleday/Anchor 1957) 162-67

“Most critics of the novel have amply demonstrated its economy, the clarity of its narrative outline and the forceful, unbroken drive of it forward from the first page to the last, an impulse which incorporates, and even gains momentum from, the cunningly interpolated flashbacks....co-existing with economy, clarity and force, an extreme density of texture. It is this which ultimately gives richness and depth to the novel, this without which the larger symbols would lose their power of reverberating in the reader’s mind and the major themes of the book would seem intellectual or emotional gestures, without the pressure of felt and imaginatively experienced life behind them....

I would like to suggest that far below the surface of *The Great Gatsby*—below the particular interest of the narrative, below Fitzgerald’s analysis of society, below even the allegedly ‘mythic’ qualities of the book—is a potent cliché, a commonplace of universal human experience to which we all respond. To say one of the bases of the novel is a cliché is not to dispraise Fitzgerald—most great art is build upon similar platitudes and it is probably why the novel is alive for another age than Fitzgerald’s and for non-Americans—what we should admire is the way in which he has refreshed the cliché, given it a new accession of life in his story. The cliché I refer to is easily summed up; in the words of a popular hymn it is this: ‘Time, like an ever-rolling stream, / Bears all its sons away; / They fly forgotten, as a dream / Dies at the opening day.’ The simple truth of this fact of life is everywhere implicit in the texture of the novel, and sometimes it is more than implicit....

The theme, basic to *The Great Gatsby*, is not merely adumbrated, is not merely translated into terms of narrative and character, but is also expressed in the very texture of the prose, in the phrases and images, for example, which centre on words like *restless* and *drifting*.... In a sense what *The Great Gatsby* is about is what happens to Nick.... Similarly, the ambiguity of Gatsby himself comes over to us in these terms. He is not the simple antithesis of Tom and Daisy; he is implicated in their kind of corruption too, and his dream is proved hollow not only by the inadequacy of the actual correlative—that is, Daisy—to the hunger of his aspiring imagination, but also by the means he uses to build up the gaudy fabric of his vision. He, too, shares in the restlessness of the actual world which will defeat his ideal Platonic conceptions.... Thus, starting with the idea of restlessness and going by way of its enlargement into the idea of drifting we are brought to face the largest issues that the novel propounds.”

W. J. Harvey  
“Theme and Texture in *The Great Gatsby*”  
*English Studies* 38  
(February 1957) 12-20

“*The Great Gatsby*, then, begins in a dramatization, as suggested, of the basic thesis of the early Van Wyck Brooks: that America had produced an idealism so impalpable that it had lost touch with reality (Gatsby) and a materialism so heavy that it was inhuman (Tom Buchanan). The novel as a whole is another turn of the screw on this legend, with the impossible idealism trying to realize itself, to its utter

destruction, in the gross materiality.... Still *The Great Gatsby* would finally suggest, at a level beyond all its legends and in the realm of the properly tragic, that it is right and fitting that the Jay Gatzes of the world should ask for the impossible, even when they do so as pathetically and ludicrously as does Gatsby... For, in his own fumbling, often gross way, Gatsby was obsessed with the wonder of human life and driven by the search to make that wonder actual. It is the same urge that motivates visionaries and prophets, the urge to make the facts of life measure up to the splendors of the human imagination, but it is utterly pathetic in Gatsby's case because he is trying to do it so subjectively and so uncouthly, and with dollar bills....

Still Nick's obscure instinct that Gatsby is essentially all right is sound. It often seems as if the novel is about the contrast between the two, but the bond between them reveals that they are not opposites but rather complements, opposed together, to all the other characters in the novel. Taken together they contain most of the essential polarities that go to make up the human mind and its existence. Allegorically considered, Nick is reason, experience, waking, reality, and history, while Gatsby is imagination, innocence, sleeping, dream, and eternity.

Nick is like Wordsworth listening to 'the still sad music of humanity,' while Gatsby is like Blake seeing hosts of angels in the sun. The one can only look at the facts and see them as tragic; the other tries to transform the facts by an act of the imagination. Nick's mind is conservative and historical, as is his lineage; Gatsby's is radical and apocalyptic—as rootless as his heritage. Nick is too much immersed in time and in reality; Gatsby is hopelessly out of it. Nick is always withdrawing, while Gatsby pursues the green light. Nick can't be hurt, but neither can he be happy. Gatsby can experience ecstasy, but his fate is necessarily tragic. They are generically two of the best types of humanity: the moralist and the radical.... The genius of the novel consists precisely in the fact that, while using only the stuff, one might better say the froth and flotsam of its own limited time and place, it has managed to suggest, as [his editor Maxwell] Perkins said, a sense of eternity."

John Henry Raleigh  
"F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*"  
*The University of Kansas City Review* 24  
(Autumn 1957)

"*The Great Gatsby* is a character study of a wealthy Long Island parvenu, Jay Gatsby, who has acquired his fortune through bootlegging and other shady means, is the archetype of the American self-made man seen through the alcoholic and frenzied haze of the Jazz Age; he throws enormous and colossally expensive parties, he recalls his struggling youth with maudlin romanticism, and he seeks brutally and confidently to rearrange his friends' lives to suit himself. When he reencounters Daisy Fay, a youthful flame whose memory he has long cherished but who is now married to Tom Buchanan, he seeks to take up the affair where he left off; but Daisy lacks his decisiveness and the matter ends tragically. Daisy driving Jay back from New York to Long Island in his car, runs over and kills a woman named Myrtle Wilson, who by an improbable coincidence is Tom's mistress. Myrtle's husband, who has seen the car before in the possession of Buchanan, follows Jay, murders him and kills himself. Gatsby's funeral is attended only by Nick, the bond-salesman narrator of the novel, and Jay's father.

*The Great Gatsby* is a study of success and its poisoning influence on character, as well as a carefully drawn picture of the manners of the Long Island rich during the Twenties. The novel, usually considered Fitzgerald's most important, embodies a situation that recurs throughout his work: a poor boy is snubbed by a rich and beautiful girl, spends his life struggling to acquire wealth in order to become worthy of her or to 'get even' with her, then finds, after he has achieved success, that his prize crumbles in his hands because the girl has fallen in society while he has risen, or because she was not what he thought her to be. The 'mystery' of Gatsby, uncovered by Nick Carraway as the novel proceeds, is that his extravagant and vulgar way of life represents an attempt, perhaps subconscious, to win the recognition of the beautiful Daisy who rejected him years before because he was poor and unknown."

Donald Heiney  
*Recent American Literature* 4  
(Barron's Educational Series 1958) 144-45

“Amazing enough, one reflects each time, that so short a work should contain so much, and its impact remain so fresh. Thirty-six years after its appearance I would say with confidence, then, that *Gatsby* has not only outlived its period and its author, but that it is one of the books that will endure.... The action takes place in ‘the waste land’ (this phrase is actually used), and is, at one level, the study of a broken society. The ‘valley of ashes’ in which Myrtle and Wilson live symbolizes the human situation in an age of chaos.... Though the actual setting of the valley is American, and urban, and working-class...the relevance, as in Eliot’s own ‘Waste Land,’ is to a universal human plight.... Fitzgerald’s ironic awareness of life’s perversities is...in the fact that [Myrtle’s] one positive quality, her vitality, should find expression in the waste land only as vulgarity and disloyalty, and that it should become the instrument of her death. In the same way, *Gatsby*’s great positive quality—his faith, and the loyalty to Daisy that goes with it—finds expression only as a tawdry self-centeredness, and it, too, contributes to his death.”

A. E. Dyson  
“*The Great Gatsby: Thirty-Six Years After*”  
*Modern Fiction Studies* VII  
(Spring 1961)

“This is Fitzgerald’s most perfect work. The narrative thread is concerned mainly with marital infidelity and violent revenge, but the power of the novel derives from its sharp and antagonistic portrayal of wealthy society in America, specifically in New York and Long Island. Jay Gatsby is a man with a shady past who has achieved social rank; the world in which he moves is shown to be one of ill-breeding, moral emptiness, and desperate boredom. The ‘Jazz Age,’ Fitzgerald’s constant subject, is exposed here in terms of its false glamour and cultural barrenness. Yet in the end the novel transcends its own bitter view and is probably Fitzgerald’s most humane work; certainly it is his most finished and is written in a fully developed and easy style. It has enjoyed a continuous popularity since it was first published and is now considered one of the chief texts of the American literary renaissance in the post-World War I period.”

Max J. Herzberg & staff  
*The Reader’s Encyclopedia of American Literature*  
(Crowell 1962) 404

“No one can read *The Great Gatsby* without being aware that one has a little jewel of a novel, beautifully shaped and polished with a sureness of craftsmanship which renders each page and each paragraph into a contribution to the whole.... There are, for example, the brilliantly contrasting and mutually defining, successive descriptions of parties with which *The Great Gatsby* opens....

If it were not for Carraway’s response to Gatsby, Gatsby would not emerge so validly in the novel as a mythological figure. For in the truly mythological figure we see ourselves enlarged not only as individuals but as a race. Gatsby’s dream becomes in a measure our own dream too, his power the power we might crave in ourselves. We share Carraway’s experience of it.... And like America itself, with its Franklinian image of a society in which there were no absolute barriers and a man could become what he wished to become, Daisy gave him the green light to move ahead. Only it took money to buy the car to join the traffic. Everything in Gatsby’s life was intended for this dream expressed always in whiteness: the perhaps white yacht; the white home and dress and car in Louisville, and the white mansion and white clothing of the Buchanans at East Egg. No wonder that Gatsby himself wore white. Even the daisy for which Daisy was named was white flower...

There was Dan Cody, the old kind of economic exploiter. And there was Wolfsheim (the home of the wolf), the gangster, the completely amoral accumulator of free capital.... They represented...two stages in the development of America.... Nick Carraway could recognize a good deal of himself in the aspiration of Jay Gatsby. He is our surrogate in the novel...the dream is in part his when he leaves the West for New York and a Wall Street fortune, leaving his girl behind, lying a little in his letters to her, being second cousin to Daisy and a classmate of Tom’s at Yale, half-loving Jordan even when he knows she is untruthful, that she is a careless driver like all the careless, restless drivers who move swiftly everywhere in the book.”

Norman Holmes Pearson  
*Reports and Speeches of the Eighth Yale Conference of the Teaching of English*  
(Yale Office of Teacher Training 1962) 73-82

“In *The Great Gatsby*, as in *Walden*, *Moby-Dick*, and *Huckleberry Finn*, the machine represents the forces working against the dream of pastoral fulfillment....Gatsby’s uncommon ‘gift for hope’ was born in that transitory, enchanted moment when Europeans first came into the presence of the ‘fresh, green breast of the new world.’ We are reminded of...Crèvecoeur and Jefferson: in America hopefulness had been incorporated in a style of life, a culture, a national character. Hence Gatsby’s simple-minded notion that everything can be made right again. Daisy is for him what the green island once had been for Dutch sailors; like them he mistakes a temporary feeling for a lasting possibility. As Fitzgerald’s narrator pieces it together, accordingly, Gatsby’s tragic career exemplifies the attenuation of the pastoral ideal in America.... Nick, the real hero of *The Great Gatsby*, is the only one, finally, to understand, but it takes him a long while to grasp the subtle interplay between Gatsby’s dream and his underworld life....

The difference between Gatsby’s point of view and Nick’s illustrates the distinction...between sentimental and complex pastoralism. Fitzgerald, through Nick, expresses a point of view typical of a great many twentieth-century American writers. The work of Faulkner, Frost, Hemingway and West comes to mind. Again and again they invoke the image of a green landscape—a terrain either wild or, if cultivated, rural—as a symbolic repository of meaning and value. But at the same time they acknowledge the power of a counterforce, a machine or some other symbol of the forces which have stripped the old ideal of most, if not all, of its meaning. Complex pastoralism, to put it another way, acknowledges the reality of history... [Nick] realizes that Gatsby is destroyed by his inability to distinguish between dreams and facts. In the characteristic pattern of complex pastoralism, the fantasy of pleasure is checked by the facts of history.... Nick’s repudiation of the East is a belated, ritualistic withdrawal in the direction of ‘nature’... The outcome of *Walden*, *Moby-Dick*, and *Huckleberry Finn* is repeated in the typical modern version of the fable; in the end the American hero is either dead or totally alienated from society, alone and powerless, like the evicted shepherd of Vergil’s eclogue.”

Leo Marx  
*The Machine in the Garden:  
Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*  
(Oxford 1964) 358, 360-64

“Several patterns in the novel are obvious. The first three chapters present the different settings and social groupings of three evenings: dinner and strained conversation at Tom Buchanan’s house, drinks and a violent argument at Myrtle’s apartment, a party and loutish behavior at Gatsby’s mansion.... There are, moreover, numerous less obvious patterns in the novel which have the important functions of deepening characterization, shaping the reader’s attitudes toward events and major themes, and creating and controlling unity and emphasis. These patternings which affect characterization include the repetition of dialogue, gesture, and detail. For example, Daisy’s speech is used to characterize her in two comparable scenes which are far apart.... Through this repetition Fitzgerald emphasizes Daisy’s lack of growth within the novel....repetition of the reaching gesture explains the first picture of Gatsby, establishes the durability of his devotion, and thereby evokes sympathy for one who loves so fervently....

The accident is primarily another indictment of Tom’s lust, but the repetition of detail—the loss of a wheel in a night accident—associates Tom with the irresponsible drunken driver.... Repetition also includes a case of poor driving. Surprisingly few commentators have criticized Fitzgerald for the highly improbable plot manipulation whereby Daisy runs down her husband’s mistress. The reader’s uncritical acceptance of the accident is influenced, I suggest, by something Nick says...about his relationship with Jordan Baker: ‘It was on that same house party that we had a curious conversation about driving a car. It started because she passed so close to some workmen that our fender flicked a button on one man’s coat.’ This near-accident subliminally prepares the reader to think of Daisy’s hitting Myrtle not as an unbelievable wrenching of possibility but as a possible event. After all Jordan nearly did a similar thing. Nick’s ensuing conversation with Jordan reveals his attitude toward carelessness....

Nick’s scornful attitude toward romance refers...primarily to the love of Gatsby for Daisy, but the situation parallels Myrtle’s first meeting with Tom and reflects a disillusioned view of such an event. Fitzgerald has controlled his material to make each of the attitudes—Myrtle’s desperate romanticism and Nick’s uncomfortable realism—valid in its own moment of presentation; but in the context of the novel

each thematic attitude toward love is juxtaposed to and qualifies the other.... The reader's attitude toward romantic idealization and realistic disillusionment is also shaped by the elaborate patterning of a natural enough event—a man and woman kissing.... In this patterning Fitzgerald has presented in order Nick's disenchanted personal account, his sarcastic third-person narration, and Gatsby's romantic, personal version of a kiss; in addition, Fitzgerald includes a scene which draws a parallel between the kisses involving major characters. The sheer idealization of Gatsby's love is qualified by this elaborate repetition, and the reader develops a complex attitude toward a major theme....

Each chapter from the first, with Daisy's bruised finger, to the last, with Tom's story of Wilson's forced entry, includes some sort of violence. The only exception to this, of course, is the more or less idyllic Chapter V, in which Daisy and Gatsby are reunited.... At the novel's conclusion Nick likens the human struggle to 'boats against the current.' And the...image of Gatsby, his struggle over, on a boat going against the current, as the faint wind and a cluster of leaves disturb the course of his mattress in the current of the pool.... The insertion of the green light picks up other uses of green as a symbol of romance which occur later in the novel, such as the 'green card' which Daisy jokes about as entitling Nick to a kiss, the 'long green tickets' which carried young Nick to Midwestern parties, and the 'fresh, green breast of the new world' of the conclusion."

Victor A. Doyno  
"Patterns in *The Great Gatsby*"  
*Modern Fiction Studies* 12  
(Autumn 1966) 415-26

"Finally [1921] their baby was born. Zelda's labor was long and difficult. Scott, as nervous as a cat, was not too unnerved by the waiting to miss recording Zelda's groggy comment as she came out from under the anesthesia: 'Oh, God, gofo I'm drunk.... I hope its beautiful and a fool—a beautiful little fool.' She would never quite forgive him his detachment. He would later use the experience in describing Daisy Buchanan's reaction to the birth of her daughter in *The Great Gatsby*... He had two alternative titles which he rejected for their lightness: *Gold-hatted Gatsby* and *The High-bouncing Lover*. But Zelda preferred *The Great Gatsby* and he trusted her instinct."

Nancy Milford  
*Zelda*  
(Avon 1970) 113, 146, 149

"*Gatsby* has since become the Fitzgerald novel everyone agrees on—the book that assures Fitzgerald his place in the first rank. It is the novel that in 1925 T. S. Eliot called 'the first step that American fiction has taken since Henry James.' *Gatsby* is so good, in fact, that critics tend to confront it with a hint of grateful incredulity: as if Fitzgerald simply couldn't have gone *that* far in the five years that separate *Gatsby* from *This Side of Paradise*. There is also, among recent critics at least, a strong consensus that *The Great Gatsby* must be understood as a meditation on American history. As early as 1937, John Peale Bishop recognized in Jay Gatsby 'the Emersonian man brought to completion and eventually to failure'....

*Gatsby* is really an extended flashback: events are narrated by Nick Carraway some two years after they have occurred. This technique gives the novel a formal circularity (starting at the end, we move to the beginning and proceed back to the end) which reflects structurally a series of circular movements within the story itself (circles of movement from West Egg to East Egg and back, from Long Island to Manhattan and back, from East to West and back). The image of the circle is perhaps most obviously apparent in the egg-shaped geography (hence the name) of East and West Egg. Ultimately this circularity reiterates the novel's perspective upon American history; and since that perspective is contained in Gatsby's personal history, it is perhaps inevitable that in death Gatsby describe with his own life's blood 'a thin red circle' in the water of his swimming pool. Gatsby's romantic quest for Daisy Fay is circular in essence: his sustained and single-minded thrust into the future is an attempt to recapture, not merely Daisy, but *that moment of wonder which she had once inspired*....

Gatsby's urge is transcendental: His vision of life acknowledges neither time nor limit. But throughout this passage an image of discarded favors and crushed flowers reminds us of the irrevocability of time and of the fatal materiality of the terms of Gatsby's transcendentalism.... He had kissed Daisy, and 'At his lips'

touch *she blossomed for him like a flower* and the incarnation was complete' (my emphasis). Now the crushed flowers at his feet comment ironically upon the tragic terms of Gatsby's transcendental vision, and we suddenly realize why the girl who has given focus to that vision is named Daisy. Throughout the novel, then, a flower metaphor reveals the essential materiality at the core of Gatsby's transcendentalism.... Throughout the novel, Fitzgerald underscores the transcendental nature of Gatsby's love for Daisy. To repeat, it is not just Daisy Gatsby wants but something *beyond* her: he wants that moment when life seemed equal to his extraordinary capacity for wonder, and that moment is indissolubly wedded to Daisy herself, to materiality.... 'where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night'....

Gatsby's dream, the dream inspired by Daisy, is here identified with the dream which pushed the frontier ever westward. The assumption contained in this identification is that, like Gatsby's history, American history has been the record of a futile attempt to retrieve and sustain a moment of imaginative intensity and promise. By reaching into the future, by pushing continually up against the receding frontier, we have tried to recapture that original sense of wonder evoked when the whole continent was a frontier—that original sense of wonder which soured because its evocation was essentially meretricious, a reading of spiritual, transcendental promise into mere materiality....

The Buchanans, standing for the modern American upper class, embody a materialism which is totally cynical, undirected by idealism or transcendental hope.... Jordan Baker, also a representative of this class, mirrors Tom's materialist orientation and consequent athleticism as well as his dishonesty.... Daisy represents the materialism of her class as well as the materialism at the core of Gatsby's transcendental idealism. The class to which Daisy and Tom and Jordan Baker belong, the class represented in somewhat broader terms by East Egg itself, has completely lost touch with the transcendental spirit which once shaped American history and which renders Gatsby's materialism tragic rather than shallow. Although Nick deeply disapproves of Gatsby, a sense of the transcendental emotion at the bottom of Gatsby's materialism makes Nick stop, turn, and call out, 'They're a rotten crowd... You're worth the whole damn bunch put together!'...

It was the American pioneer who carried the burden of this historical progression into the twentieth century. The American pioneer was the proper heir of those Dutch sailors; he inherited their transcendental spark and the promise of the frontier kept the spark alive; but after pursuing that promise all the way to the Pacific Ocean, he discovered that it had somehow eluded him, and he was left with nothing but the material which had fed the flame. He was rich but that was all: direction was gone, meaning was gone; the dream began to turn back upon itself. Gatsby was the adoptive son of such a pioneer—a pioneer with the prototypical name of Dan Cody.... Like all the characters in the novel, Carraway has come from the Midwest to the East—an inversion of the earlier, westward movement. The total progression implied here is, once again, circular: beginning in the East, America pushed westward, pursuing the frontier to California, and then turned back upon itself. The ultimate dead end of that historical thrust lay not in California then but in East Egg, at the original point of departure: it is there that the circle closes.... And Fitzgerald compared their circular movement to a serpent turning back upon itself, 'cramping its bowels, bursting its shining skin'....

So it is appropriate that Wilson spend his energy feeding the automobile of the wealthy, of those who make the circular journey from New York to East or West Egg and back again. One of those automobiles destroys his wife.... Myrtle is killed in a desperately foolish attempt to intercept Gatsby's car; she is destroyed by the class (Daisy) and the materiality (the yellow car) she had so fervently pursued. Finally, Myrtle's death becomes a metaphor for human resources wasted in pursuit of and exploited by unregenerate materialism.... The foul dust is the corruptive materialism, like a worm in an apple, at the center of the transcendental dream.... In twentieth-century America God has become a thing of cardboard, ineffectual and passive, robbed of power by a short-sighted, materialistic displacement of spiritual values. This displacement is only underscored by the fact that Eckleburg's enormous, spectacled eyes are in actuality an oculist's abandoned roadside advertisement.... The novel concludes on this note of irretrievable loss, of inchoate nostalgia for a past which no longer exists. The wheel of American history has revolved full circle, and the end is in the beginning."

Kermit W. Moyer  
"The Great Gatsby: Fitzgerald's Meditation on American History"

“From its first appearance, *The Great Gatsby* won critical applause for the excellence of its form, and it has continued to do so ever since. Critics have praised the novel for meticulous construction, rigorous selection of episodes, ingenuity in weaving past and present together, careful control of tone and point of view, and effective use of symbols. The style, too, has been often praised, although rather less pointedly, for its clarity, vitality, and flavour. Almost all discussion of the novel, however, has turned rapidly from a perfunctory, not deeply considered, tribute to the ‘brilliance’ of Fitzgerald’s style, and gone on instead to what are supposed the bigger topics raised by the novel—its legendary quality, its quintessential vision of the American dream, romantic hope and romantic disillusion....

*The Great Gatsby* is the sort of novel that tempts one to make lists of felicitous expressions—it is a sort of treasure-chest of language used with originality, dexterity, sparkle—lists of adverbs and adjectives in phrases like ‘the young breath-giving air’ and a ‘bright rosy-colored space, fragilely bound into the house by French windows, and ‘the pale gold odour of kiss-me-at-the-gate.’ Or lists of similes like the celebrated one describing Daisy and Jordan on the couch in the wind-filled room, ‘buoyed up as though upon an anchored balloon,’ or the one, less well known but equally astonishing and right, which describes how Myrtle Wilson dominates the party in her small living-room: ‘as she expanded the room grew smaller around her, until she seemed to be revolving on a noisy, creaking pivot through the smoky air’...

The whole novel is strung together by repeated phrases, by motifs, ideas that appear and modulate and return.... W. J. Harvey has traced some of these, especially the words ‘drifted’ and ‘restless’... Several other trains of connected expression or imagery run through the novel—those, for example, of flowers and freshness, of clocks and time, of riot and order, of coolness and of carelessness; and there is an important series of references to boats.... Highly Impressionistic in its methods, [the novel] is enamoured of the visual aspect of things, of sea, sky, and city, of the interiors of rooms, and of groups of people composed as in a tableau...

*The Great Gatsby* is notable for its disciplined restraint...[with a] flair for the condensed, rapid narrative, which summarizes a lengthy action in a few hard, laconic phrases, yet preserves a sense of physical reality throughout and almost never lets the story lapse into mere abstraction.... It is a novel radiant with feeling, various, subtle, delicate and tender. But the feelings are not, in general, expressed directly, through characters in speech and action.... Instead they are brought into the novel obliquely, through description, narrative, meditation, and symbol. To provide just such expression of feeling for characters who in the nature of the case cannot express it themselves is one of the chief functions of the narrator, Nick Carraway.... This is lyrical prose in an unusually ample sense of the term, permeated by the feeling of admiration that it names and carrying in its rhythms the impetus of Gatsby’s compulsive emotion.... Fitzgerald’s antidote to sentimentality is to play up the inherent absurdity of the situation while somehow preserving respect for the intensity and reality of the emotions....

It is our recognition of this tact, I think, that makes the book seem so poised, so polished. The humor itself is sufficiently critical to keep us aware that everything is observed by an assessing, evaluating mind, without allowing the implied judgments to impair the tone. The tone for the most part remains light, detached, even when the judgments are at their most straitened. Fitzgerald does not need solemnly to lament the break-down of family life, the decline of religion, the lapse of moral standards, the universal pursuit of frivolity.... [Gatsby is] a figure of potency and magical appeal, romantically linked with danger and evil. And in the imagination of that world, God having vanished behind the empty eyes of Dr. Eckleburg, the devil is not to be taken seriously. The real spell is cast by the gangster, the bootlegger and the killer of men. The people who talk of Gatsby this way aren’t horrified, of course, or disgusted; they are thrilled. What they attribute to him corresponds to their own inward desires and admirations: they admire, or thrill to, violence, ruthlessness, lawlessness....

Just as Jordan Baker with her white dresses and her incurable dishonesty provides a kind of understudy for Daisy, so the story of Tom and Myrtle in its tawdry violence mirrors the romance of Daisy and Gatsby, as well as providing a contrast.... Tom discovers Daisy’s relationship with Gatsby at the same time as



Wilson discovers that Myrtle had been carrying on an affair. Fitzgerald brings the two betrayed husbands together precisely so as to underline the similarities within the differences.... Bad, careless, drivers—Tom, Daisy, Jordan, Nick, and how many others. Fitzgerald’s use of the field of ashes as a wasteland symbol has been praised often, and deservedly, but it seems to me very much slighter—less developed in the novel and expressing a less impressive insight—than his use of driving to represent a strain of irresponsibility deep in the whole society....

Nick’s role...is to experience what Gatsby experiences—the yearning for success, for wealth, for love, for the richness and magic of life, so that he (and through him the reader) can understand the inward quality of Gatsby’s drives. But Nick is one who can only feel these things, not translate them into action.... For the theme of the novel...is about the need to accept limitations, if life is to be practicable. It is, on the other hand, about the need to aspire beyond limitations, if life is to seem meaningful.”

F. H. Langman  
“Style and Shape in *The Great Gatsby*”  
*Southern Review* (Adelaide) 6  
(March 1973) 48-67

“Though confined geographically to the area near the Wilson garage, the valley of ashes spreads like a contagious fungus psychically through all the novel, leaving in its wake a trail of images of death. They appear sometimes only on the periphery of vision, as on the drive to New York (Nick with Gatsby): ‘A dead man passed us in a hearse heaped with blooms’... The hearse and its contents may serve as an omen for Gatsby’s car... In a world become ash-heap, one’s fate has no relevance to one’s life: *accident* rules supreme. As the valley of ashes is introduced early in the novel to become a kind of pervasive presence, gradually becoming the psychic setting for all the novel’s action, so ‘the night scene by El Greco’ in the last chapter tends to take over the reader’s memory of the novel and to distort the action into a kind of surrealist dream.... The night scene by El Greco seems to be the dark underside of the valley of ashes, the night of its day, the nightmare of its reality....

Fitzgerald’s novel is a more powerful embodiment of the spirit of the times than the collected works of Sinclair Lewis, perhaps because Fitzgerald *dramatized* while Lewis *stated*. The corruption of the 1920’s saturates *The Great Gatsby*.... In many ways Tom Buchanan is the most sinister character in *The Great Gatsby*, as he seems to typify the American business man (man of power) who remains the perpetual adolescent intellectually.... Gatsby is not the only character capable of *trembling* in the ‘unquiet darkness’ of the novel, but surely he is the only character in pursuit of something transcendent and worthy of his own submission. And it is his tragedy that his vision of transcendence comes to focus on an object that is enchanting on the surface, rotten at the core...even before the encounter with Daisy, the dream appears unworthy of the dedication of the dreamer, and curiously at odds with his astonishing innocence. The adventure of the Cody yacht concludes with Gatsby as victim (cheated of the money left him by his rich patron)....

It is the moral awareness that Nick achieves in the progress of the action of the novel that enables him, in spite of Gatsby’s ‘corruption,’ to affirm that he came out all right in the end. His ambivalent moral judgment is not unlike that of Owl Eyes, the party guest who earlier was startled to find the books in Gatsby’s library real. He is the only one of the multitudinous party-goers to attend Gatsby’s funeral, and says the final word at the graveside: ‘The poor son-of-a-bitch.’ It is moral sympathy for a victim whose innocence transcended his corruption....

In short, the novel embodies and expresses the simple, basic human desire and yearning, universal in nature, to snatch something precious from the ceaseless flux and flow of days and years and preserve it outside the ravages of time.... *The Great Gatsby* is a novel relentlessly devoted to the present, set, as it is, in its total action in the summer of 1922. But it is a novel that is haunted by the past—Gatsby’s and America’s—and it is the past which reaches into and shapes the present.... We are all Gatsby’s yearning to recreate the past; we are all Nick Carraways lyrically regretting the rush of time swiftly past our grasp. And as we close the book and look about us, touched by an ‘elusive rhythm, a fragment of lost words,’ we may feel something of the impulse of the protagonist at the end of ‘The Waste Land’—to gather its fragments to shore up against our ruin.”

James E. Miller, Jr.  
"Fitzgerald's *Gatsby*: The World as Ash Heap"  
*The Twenties: Fiction, Poetry, Drama*  
(Everett/Edwards 1975) 181-202

"More detailed than any of the characters, the houses are a major part of the intricate pattern to which Fitzgerald aspired as he wrote. The houses are so completely patterned within themselves that they countermand the intricacy with which Nick laces the story. And much of the resonant depth the novel still has derives from the crucial standoff between Nick's complex romanticism and Fitzgerald's edifice complex.... Fitzgerald demonstrates social position most notably by his characters' ability to order environmental elements: material space, time, and people. And the opening presentation of their three houses carefully places the novel's classes... *Gatsby*'s dreams are not fantastic; all he wants is what Tom has. All he lacks, all that ruins him, is Tom's power."

W. T. Lhamon, Jr.  
"The Essential Houses of *The Great Gatsby*"  
*Markham Review* 6  
(Spring 1977) 56-60

"The vision begins with a return to the origins of the American nation, to a primitive past, imagined as pastoral and idyllic, for which Americans have nostalgically been yearning since the remote beginning ...and it is called 'a fresh, green breast,' and these few words are sufficient to suggest the essence of that pastoral past; but the maternal image 'breast,' betrays an even deeper longing in man, the desire to be united again to nature as mother (the buried cause of America's attraction to its pastoral past). Nick, who is from the rural Middle West, is liable to be particularly aware of that nostalgia (and he gives hints of his insight when he remarks on the pastoral character of Fifth Avenue in summer)...the very mention of *Gatsby*, the man, suggests the deceiving, adulterated quality of his dream and of the broader dream as well; just as the verb 'pandered,' in the context of the 'fresh, green breast of the new world,' is bound to evoke the Fall from the Garden of Eden."

Christiane Johnson  
"*The Great Gatsby*: The Final Vision"  
*Fitzgerald / Hemingway Annual 1976*  
(Englewood, CO: Information Handling Services 1978) 109-15

"*The Great Gatsby* has an apparently simple, pellucid surface, but its patterning is intricate, so much so that the novel comes to seem, on examination, like a large structure of interwoven detail and nuance in the tradition of Flaubert. It makes extensive use of iterative imagery, leitmotifs, character doubles, parallel and symbolic scenes, and has been given an intense visual focus that contributes to the novel's scenic and dramatic form. *The Great Gatsby* develops in a series of sharply focused scenes, like Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome*, but Fitzgerald's scenes are more intricately modeled than Mrs. Wharton's. Beneath the enamel of their realistic surfaces there is an elaborate play of implication and suggestion.

The first three of Fitzgerald's 'scenic' chapters work together, particularly, as a novelistic unit. All of the principals appear in these chapters, and the reader is introduced to their backgrounds and situations as they are defined by the three distinctly separate social spheres to which they belong—East Egg...the valley of ashes...and West Egg... By the end of these opening chapters, the several social worlds to be explored have been presented to the reader distinctly, and it remains, suspensefully, to be seen how they will interact....

Myrtle's name has a number of associations that confirm her role as a character double of several others in the work. With her green name, she is a double of Gatsby, and her aspiration is played off, in a horrible way, with his, heightening Gatsby's stature by contrast. At the same time, she is a double of Daisy, for she, too, has a floral name. But if the daisy is a flower with a bright, petite, and particular distinctness, myrtle is an ivy, growing close to the earth, with no individual distinctness at all."

Robert Emmet Long  
"*The Great Gatsby*: The Intricate Art"  
*The Achieving of "The Great Gatsby": F. Scott Fitzgerald, 1920-25*

(Bucknell 1979) 119-29

“*The Great Gatsby* repeatedly investigates how photography expresses and affects the ways its characters think. Fitzgerald’s novel surveys and evaluates many uses of photography and borrows cinematic techniques for Nick Carraway’s narration.... Photography, in its ability to freeze time—or to run it backwards—may be a symbolic denial of history, a metaphor of transcendence.... The characters in *The Great Gatsby* live in a world of photographic images, and have developed habits of mind, tacit philosophies of ideal existence.... Nick Carraway, too self-conscious and detached an intelligence to be caught up utterly in Gatsby’s dream world, becomes a critic of his defiantly non-historic solipsism and of the habitual faith in the illusions of photography.... Like his father, Gatsby counts on photographs to validate his problematic history....

Photography by its distortion of time is a begetter and sustainer of illusion, but it is also a potential aid to truer seeing, to revelation.... Gatsby’s dream of recapturing his past relationship with Daisy is prefigured and parodied by McKee’s repeated attempts, since his marriage, to capture the ideal essence of his wife on photographic film... McKee has Gatsby’s old faith in his chances—in the chances, in this America, for effort to be rewarded.... McKee’s aspirations, like his photographs, hardly seem promising, but who is to say that he will not meet his appropriate Dan Cody, his saving ‘gonnegtion’....

*The Great Gatsby* can be considered a work of social realism, but its prose style and narrative manner are very far removed from the typical nineteenth-century realists. Fitzgerald gives Nick a richly decorative, metaphoric and imaginative prose style. He has so assimilated photographic ways of seeing that he only rarely names the particular photographic techniques he is borrowing. Their distortions, particularly of time, are unobtrusive because of the large place photography has come to have in our visual consciousness. (One might say that Gatsby’s insistence on repeating even recapturing the past, is the morbidly exaggerated result of seeing too many movies.)”

Lawrence Jay Dessner  
“Photography and *The Great Gatsby*”  
*Essays in Literature* 6  
(Spring 1979) 79-89

“In the nearly six decades since its publication, *The Great Gatsby* has probably elicited more scholarly, critical, and popular attention than any other modern American novel. On three separate occasions, in 1926, 1949, and 1974, it has served as the basis of a major Hollywood movie; the 1974 version received extensive media coverage, including *Time* and *Newsweek* cover stories. In 1926, it was adapted into a successful Broadway play by Owen Davis. Its fate among journalists and academic critics has been even more spectacular.... By actual count, since 1940 there have been well over three hundred books, book chapters, essays, articles, and notes solely devoted to *Gatsby*.... A very high proportion of these have clustered around such oft-debated topics as the novel’s affinity with Eliot’s ‘Waste Land,’ Nick’s reliability as a narrator, the symbolism of Dr. Eckleburg’s eyes, *Gatsby* as a criticism of the American experience, and its universality....

A focus on the smallest elements of language...his choices of individual words and phrases, shows recurrent patterns that achieve three simultaneous and deliberate objectives: (1) they are marvelously descriptive and evocative; (2) they are often so original and witty that they surprise and capture the reader’s attention; in Fitzgerald’s own words, they astonish by their ‘newness’; and (3) they metaphorically encapsulate or suggest in microcosmic form the meanings of the novel as a whole [synecdoche].”

Jackson R. Bryer  
“Style as Meaning in *The Great Gatsby*: Notes Toward a New Approach”  
*Critical Essays on F. Scott Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby*  
ed. Scott Donaldson  
(G.K. Hall 1984) 117-18, 123-24

Michael Hollister (2015)