

WHY *GATSBY* IS GREAT

“I have never yet known, or, indeed known of, a contemporary American writer who did not admire *The Great Gatsby*. This evidence, admittedly and purely anecdotal, is, also in my experience, unique. I know of no other twentieth-century masterpiece in our language or, for that matter, in our Western tradition about which this can be said. Let it be said again as simply as possible: I have never known an American writer, of my generation or of the older and younger generations, who has not placed *Gatsby* among the rare unarguable masterpieces of our times.”

George Garrett

“Fire and Freshness: A Matter of Style in *The Great Gatsby*”

New Essays on The Great Gatsby, ed. Matthew J. Bruccoli
(Cambridge U, 1985) 101

The alliterative title *The Great Gatsby* is poetic like the prose style throughout the novel, appealing to sensibility, or heart. The modifier “great” becomes both apt and ironic, appealing to intellect, or head. This double tone is sustained throughout the novel, a thematic counterpoint personified in Gatsby and Nick—the heart and the head of Fitzgerald. Appealing to curiosity, the title raises the main question answered by the story: What is “great” about Gatsby? The name Gat-sby is witty, appealing to a sense of humor, because it sounds genteel but contains a pun on *gat*—slang for gun.

The Great Gatsby is a rare novel in the extent to which it appeals to both the common reader and to the literary scholar, like *Huckleberry Finn*, the supreme example. Fitzgerald’s novel is popular in being about basic human interests—romantic love, success, money, passion, sex, murder, death. It is as full of gossip as the tabloids. It is a blend of the literary novel with popular romance, mystery, legend, myth, and fairy tale. Furthermore, the narrator is likeable—straightforward and honest—he makes his story clear, fast-paced and full of action easy to visualize. Fitzgerald uses the “scenic method,” influenced by Edith Wharton and by the movies. *Gatsby* glitters with movie star glamour in a romantic style that sparkles like jewels. The characters are alive and dynamic and clearly recognizable social types. Fitzgerald also expresses views with moral force that remain popular: the rich are too powerful and irresponsible, they get away with murder, government is corrupt, society is going to hell.

Above all, *Gatsby* is economical. It is short. Less is more if it is this good. Economy enhances all the other qualities, making the novel more dramatic, suspenseful, and powerful. Fitzgerald is the most vivid Impressionist since Stephen Crane and Kate Chopin, painting memorable pictures that are also symbolic—as of Gatsby reaching out his arms toward the green light at the end of Daisy’s dock in the moonlight, Daisy and Jordan in the Buchanans’ airy living room, the billboard of the faceless Dr. T. J. Eckleburg brooding with blind eyes over the valley of ashes. These are the images from this novel that most readers never forget. Impressionistic techniques also include the thematic color motifs that unify the book—white, green, yellow, gold, pink--the glimpsing of people and elisions from one image to another in fluid succession in party scenes. With just a few fragments of conversation, in one situation after another, Fitzgerald is able to bring his people to life and evoke their lives and circumstances with incisive Realism. These are some of the qualities that have made *Gatsby* the most popular model of the ideal literary novel in the 20th century. Most inimitable is the poetic style—lyrical, graceful, eloquent, precise, romantic, and enriched by abundant figurative language that is brilliantly apt and often Expressionistic. The average novelist is pleased to come up with a metaphor. Fitzgerald originates metaphors in such abundance they seem an almost “unbroken series of successful gestures.” The synergistic combination of all the literary qualities at a peak in this novel are unique.

The plot is relatively simple, yet is so intricately constructed it generates multiple ironies. Everything in this novel fuses organically into a surprising complexity: Not only does it record in realistic detail the Jazz Age of the 1920s, (1) as most critics finally recognized, Gatsby becomes a symbol of the American Dream and his story an allegory of its fate in the modern world; (2) as a few critics have partially discerned, Gatsby and Nick (heart and head) enact a psychological allegory that expresses the individuation of Fitzgerald, up to the death of Gatsby; (3) Nick’s vision at the end enlarges the scope of the story beyond

Gatsby as a symbol of America to an allegory of western civilization; (4) finally, Dr. Eckleburg is a mock God and Gatsby a mock Christ betrayed by Daisy in a secular perversion of the Christ story. That *The Great Gatsby* contains multiple coinciding allegories is an intellectual feat achieved by few other American novelists—such as Hawthorne, Melville, Twain, and Faulkner.

Michael Hollister (2014)