

## FILM

*The Great Gatsby* (1925)

F. Scott Fitzgerald

(1896-1940)

adaptation by Richard Maibaum (1949)

## ANALYSIS

This is the second filming of *The Great Gatsby*, following a silent version in 1926. This adaptation is interesting as cultural history rather than art, an example of conventional film noir that ends like a morality play. All of the characters who remain corrupt in the novel reform themselves—Gatsby, Daisy and Jordan. Nick the narrator is the outspoken voice of conventional morality in this version of the story, observing like the eyes of Dr. Eckleberg. This Nick is a poet rather than a bond salesman, and he is assertively moral rather than reticent. Also unlike Nick in the novel, this Nick is never corrupted by Jordan, he reforms her, and he has no real identification with Gatsby, he merely judges him, reducing all his complexity to his failure to live up to his potential: “I liked him for what he might have been.”

The movie opens with a cover of the novel in the background, always an indication that this is a mediocre exploitation of a literary classic. In Hollywood, with few exceptions all novels are raw material to be reduced and rewritten. This rewrite opens with Nick and Jordan visiting the grave of Gatsby. This gives away that Gatsby dies prematurely and eliminates the suspenseful tension between Nick and Jordan throughout the novel. Since they are together as a couple, according to the movie conventions of the 1940s we know in advance that Nick is going to forgive Jordan and marry her. This scene is followed by a collage of clichés summarizing the Jazz Age of the 1920s “when all the lights were green.” Since the movie is in black and white, the color symbolism must be verbalized. The time is moved from 1922 to 1928 in order to set the action on the verge of the economic crash of 1929.

A quotation from the *Bible* establishes a Christian framework for the movie to placate the religious organizations who at that time were picketing and boycotting movies they considered immoral. The movie industry had instituted a conservative Production Code to censor itself. At this time also, the U.S House of Representatives had resumed public hearings that were exposing hundreds of Communists in Hollywood, which had outraged the public. The quotation is from Proverbs 14:2: “He that walketh in his righteousness feareth the Lord: but he that is perverse in his ways despiseth him.” This movie is not subversive by insinuating Communist propaganda into the script, but by subverting traditional moral values. What is perverse to the Christian, or even to the public in general, is not perverse in Hollywood.

Jay Gatsby is first shown with a “gat” shooting out a car window at members of a rival bootlegging gang, a cliché in crime movies set during Prohibition. In Hollywood especially, bootlegging was not taken seriously as a crime. Most people in the movie industry were drinkers who appreciated bootleggers. To them Gatsby is actually a hero, more dashing and handsome than the main bootlegger in Hollywood, the spectacled Joseph P. Kennedy, father of the future President. Alan Ladd was already an icon of film noir and he is well cast as Gatsby the fake, a short actor who sometimes had to stand on a box so as not to look ridiculous in love scenes or when standing up to thugs. Ladd gives the best acting performance in the movie. All the other actors are ordinary or weak. Myrtle as played by Shelley Winters, a typecast bimbo, spends most of her few minutes on camera in a fit of rage because her husband has locked her in a room. When she escapes and runs out into the road and gets run over we have no pity for her because the scene of Tom breaking her nose was cut from the script.

Dr. Eckleberg gazing down upon the action from his billboard is not a mock commercial deity symbolizing the replacement of belief in God by materialism, as he is in the novel. This script inverts the moral values of Fitzgerald by not identifying Eckleberg with materialism because Hollywood itself is

materialistic. And while Eckleberg is made analogous to the popular concept of God--“sees all, knows all”—in fact, belief in God is subverted by making the apparent movement of the all-seeing eyes an “optical illusion.” This is consistent with the Atheism implied in the novel by Fitzgerald, who eventually joined the Hollywood crowd himself. The movie ends with Dr. Eckleberg staring at you, but by then his meaning has been reduced merely to moral disapproval of having no values except money and of improving your lie in a golf match. Nick disapproves of adultery, even though he is supposedly a poet, but adultery is considered a right and even a career necessity by most actors.

This *Gatsby* is a rationalization for the values prevailing in Hollywood. Gatsby’s only fault is adopting the view of his mentor Dan Cody that money is *everything*, that nothing else matters. Cody is like a movie producer as seen by a director exceeding his budget. Cody calls himself “a devil,” but he is “always right” and he dies happy. Like many actors, Gatsby is always acting. He invents a glamorous persona, changes his name, relies on his looks, shows off his wealth, lives in a palace, has gaudy taste, is actually not well educated, is insecure about what people think of him, pursues an illusory goal, and dies young. He lies all the time, but that is what people do for a living in Hollywood. He proves himself a decent guy when he rejects Cody’s girlfriend who jumps him moments after the old man dies, yet when he courts Daisy, both of them admit they want to marry for money.

This rewrite exalts Gatsby by making him a war hero, contrary to the novel. Klipspringer is changed from a nobody playing the piano to a veteran who testifies to Gatsby’s heroism under fire and respectfully calls him “the Major”—“I served under him.” It also turns out that this Gatsby really did go to Oxford, though only for five months. Gatsby redeems himself simply by trying to leave his criminal past behind and become respectable. Daisy redeems herself by confessing that she was driving the car when it ran over Myrtle. She even wants to go tell the police, but Tom wants to let Gatsby take the blame. Daisy did not mean to run over Myrtle and seems in this rewrite to be innocent of anything but adultery, and as for that, in Hollywood “all lights are green.” Even the cruel, egotistical hypocrite Tom redeems himself by refusing to tell Wilson that Gatsby was driving the car and then, at Daisy’s urging, by trying to reach Gatsby by phone and warn him that Wilson is coming after him with a gun. By the end, the eyes of Dr. Eckleberg seem to be the eyes of the censors enforcing the industry Production Code, yet the guilty are not in fact punished, they all get away with it—except for the hero, unjustly murdered by a critic.

Michael Hollister (2015)