

FILM

The Great Gatsby (1925)

F. Scott Fitzgerald

(1896-1940)

adaptation by John McLaughlin (2000)

ANALYSIS

This is by far the best film of *The Great Gatsby* and one of the finest adaptations of a literary classic that I have ever seen—exceptional for its complexity, subtlety, and depth. Screenwriter John McLaughlin is faithful to the novel by quoting all the key passages and speeches word for word in the flow of his own narrative. Most commendably, he supplements major themes with more emphasis on symbolism such as *bonds*, and by extending motifs, in particular *cufflinks* and the *eyes* of Dr. T. J. Eckleberg on the billboard in the Valley of Ashes.

This adaptation is far superior to the one in 1974, in which actors were cast for their familiarity to the public and their looks, in particular Robert Redford and Mia Farrow as Daisy. Farrow alone made that film unconvincing because she is too plain to fire the lifelong passions of men like Buchanan and Gatsby. She is also a far less talented actress than Mira Sorvino, whose performance is the most outstanding in this film. All the actors in this production are excellent, all more convincing and nuanced than the actors in the 1974 film. Tom Buchanan, for example, is made complex. Fitzgerald reduces him to his worst characteristics and satirizes his hypocrisy with ironies, whereas McLaughlin makes him more human. He is still a cruel egotist, yet also sympathetic at times and occasionally kind.

Similarly, this Gatsby, played by Toby Stephens, is less glamorous than Redford and a far more subtle actor. He is able to convey the character of Gatsby with his smile alone, which is variously innocent, naïve, awestruck, charming, seductive, cocky, arrogant, defiant, shallow, dumbfounded, embarrassed, crushed, and fake. This Gatsby becomes more universal by toning down his personal glamour as distinct from his wealth. For example, Fitzgerald dresses Gatsby in a pink suit, whereas McLaughlin dresses him in a more ordinary greenish suit associating him with the green light at the end of Daisy's dock. And Nick the narrator as played by Paul Rudd projects more humanity, warmth and depth than Sam Waterson. The whole earlier production displays the shallow emphasis on appearances that Fitzgerald criticizes.

McLaughlin is boldly original in adding implications. The most striking is that his Gatsby and Nick look a lot alike, both with dark hair cut short, suggesting that Gatsby represents a romantic ideal in Nick. When they first meet, they are *linked* by discovering that both are military veterans who served in World War I. Likewise, Jordan and Myrtle look somewhat alike, both with dark hair about the same length, both of them sluts at opposite levels of society. Wolfsheim the gangster, the epitome of corruption, also has short dark hair, but his looks fake. The only "fairhaired" ones in the cast are the rich and privileged Buchanans. McLaughlin establishes the symbol of cufflinks when Wolfsheim boasts that his are made from human molars, then he extends cuff-*links* as a linking motif along with *bonds*. In a flashback to five years before, Daisy gives Gatsby cufflinks (not in the novel) after they first meet and fall in love. Then, after they meet again and Gatsby shows her through his mansion, she finds the cufflinks in one of his drawers. Gatsby is holding these cufflinks when he gets shot and they sink to the bottom of his swimming pool. Nick later drops these *links* when he answers the phone and learns more about Gatsby's life as a crook. At the very end, while burning Gatsby's fake bonds, he throws the cufflinks into the bay.

McLaughlin also adds to the corruption by depicting Jordan having an affair with both Nick and Gatsby at the same time (not in the novel)—another connection between the two men. He adds an image of Jordan floating on Gatsby's air cushion in his swimming pool with her arm trailing in the water as if she is dead, a prefiguration of Gatsby in the same position in the end when he gets shot, implying that Jordan will suffer a

comparable fate. He adds the symbolic detail that Daisy is wearing white gloves insulating her from the dirty world when she smashes into dirty Myrtle with Gatsby's white car. Fitzgerald made the car yellow as part of a color motif evoking cowardice, McLaughlin chooses to emphasize the irony of Daisy's apparent innocence. McLaughlin heightens the atmosphere of opulence by giving Nick's "bungalow" a huge interior and by setting the scene where Tom slaps Myrtle not in a rented flat but in a luxury suite of the Biltmore Hotel.

Adapting a novel to film requires such extreme compression that much has to be left out. In this case, for instance, Nick's affair with Jordan omits most of their dialogue and continues until the end when he simply walks away from her and she casts him a nasty look. Economy is also achieved by flashbacks and by reducing whole scenes to a few images. McLaughlin uses a non-linear Modernist structure to intensify drama, as in presenting the sad aftermath of Myrtle's death, creating suspense, before dramatizing the event with horrific violence. He does not emphasize the image of Gatsby gazing across the bay at the green light nor picture him in his pink suit with arms outstretched, despite its visual appeal. Nor does he dramatize Daisy weeping with materialistic ecstasy over Gatsby's imported silk monogrammed shirts. In the novel these are powerful images full of implications, but in our cynical age such intensely romantic sentiments would seem ridiculous to most people.

One of the most significant changes is that in this version of the story, Gatsby does not invent himself as he does in the novel. He introduces himself to Daisy as Jay Gatz and she mistakenly calls him Gatsby, as if she unconsciously elevates him in social status because he is handsome. Also, Tom is not depicted as winning Daisy back by giving her a pearl necklace. She marries Tom simply because she gets tired of waiting for Gatsby for a year to return from the war, emphasizing that she is more shallow than mercenary. McLaughlin merely shows Daisy wearing a pearl necklace, indicating that he knows what happens in the novel. By replacing the gift of a pearl necklace from Tom to Daisy with the gift of cufflinks from Daisy to Gatsby, this script attributes the corruption of Gatsby to Daisy. After all, she is the personification of the superficial materialistic values that Gatsby must adopt to win her and achieve the American Dream. In placing all the blame for originating corruption on Tom and Gatsby, Fitzgerald was being a gallant late Victorian gentleman. In our Feminist age men are more egalitarian.

The most significant change in this adaptation of *Gatsby* is increased repetition of the Dr. Eckleberg billboard as a background for many scenes. The repetition is insistently judgmental. In the novel after Myrtle's death, while in a daze of grief, looking at the eyes of Dr. Eckleberg on the billboard her husband cries out, "My God," and declares that God sees everything. Then his friend Michaelis says that is just an "advertisement." He is referring to the billboard, whereas Fitzgerald is referring to God. McLaughlin redeems the novel from Atheism. He excludes Michaelis while retaining "My God." All critics have recognized that Dr. Eckleberg is a mock commercial deity gazing blindly over the Valley of Ashes, the spiritual wasteland of modern life in the tradition of "The Waste Land" by T. S. Eliot, published just 3 years before *Gatsby*. Ironically, Eckleberg the eye doctor sees nothing. His billboard is so old and faded, he is probably dead by now. His vision is meaningless. McLaughlin makes the billboard old and faded like belief in the true God, rather than current like commercialism. He places the billboard in the background of scenes that illustrate the corruption in a commercial society without morality or God, while also implying by repetition that behind the illusory material world, God still "sees everything."

Fitzgerald ends the novel by evoking "the fresh green breast of the New World" when first discovered in contrast to its current corruption. He affirms striving for ideals despite futility—"boats against the current." His vision remains Christian in its morality and in predicting inevitable failure to reform this corrupt world. In McLaughlin's final scene, the only color is red. The sky is all flaming red in the background and in the foreground a fire is burning. This culminates the judgmental theme conveyed by the eyes of Dr. Eckleberg in the background. The world is going to Hell. Before going home, Nick burns all the fake bonds of Gatsby and throws his cufflinks away into the bay, saving his soul.

Michael Hollister (2015)