

## ANALYSIS

### THE STYLE OF F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

(1896-1940)

“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, fragiley 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

"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

"All readers have been affected by Fitzgerald's style, for Fitzgerald was marvelously sensitive to the sounds and cadences of language....Fitzgerald's sentences have movement, grace, clarity, directness when necessary, force when desired, and cadences appropriate to the mood or emotion or scene. Matched with the visual images, simile and metaphor, sentences like this emerge in profusion: 'We drove to Fifth Avenue, so warm and soft, almost pastoral, on the summer Sunday afternoon that I wouldn't have been surprised to see a great flock of sheep turn the corner'....

Fitzgerald's style is remarkably apt and precise, even when he is dealing with nearly ineffable matters: 'He was a Son of God—a phrase which, if it means anything, means just that—and he must be about His Father's business, the service of a vast, vulgar, and meretricious beauty.' Part of that aptness is the quality of Fitzgerald's wit, apparent in that Homeric catalog of guests that begins: 'From East Egg, then, came the Chester Beckers and the Leeches...' Or the bit of such a description as: 'the dim enlargement of Mrs. Wilson's mother which hovered like an ectoplasm on the wall.' These quotations, chosen to exemplify

Fitzgerald's style, serve also to illustrate the inseparability of style and content. Major and minor characters in *Gatsby* are brilliantly created by both what Fitzgerald chooses to reveal about them and how he reveals it....It is...restraint, even more than the virtuosity of effects, that distinguishes Fitzgerald's style in *The Great Gatsby*.

In almost all of his other fiction, the quality of the prose gives otherwise ordinary materials a polish that not only exacted high prices from popular magazines but may have hinted at more profundity than the content delivered. In *Gatsby*, straining for effect is seldom apparent. The whole novel is compactly put together, as much by repetition of images and symbols as by exposition and narrative....James Joyce said of *Ulysses* that he had put in enough enigmas and puzzles to keep professors busy for centuries. *The Great Gatsby* lacks that density, but it has engaged the attention of many professors to date. Color symbolism, patterns of images, sources and analogues, ambiguities, mythical dimensions continue to be worked over. Passages of dialogue are as carefully wrought as descriptive passages. Some have become passwords of *Gatsby* cultists: 'Can't repeat the past?...Why of course you can!' and 'Her voice was full of money' and 'In any case...it was just personal'...

Its nuances of style are not likely to be lost on American readers, for they have the laconic power of sarcasm, the brevity of the one-liner, and the directness of American speech. Its moral dimensions still touch the sense of decency and fair play, without engaging the reader in time-consuming ethical and metaphysical speculations. The novel's topicality is that of the twenties, but is not confined to that decade. The author's rhetorical flourishes are nicely spaced; the story has some action and plenty of pathos shading off into tragedy. It raises basic questions citizens of a democracy have to wrestle with....

Like other modern novels, *Gatsby* does not follow a straightforward chronology: Fitzgerald worked hard to preserve the advantages of a disjointed structure against the confusion such a method may create. One of the effects was to keep *Gatsby* from fully materializing, helping Fitzgerald solve the difficult problem of making a deliberately shadowy figure the central character of the novel."

Kenneth E. Eble  
"The Great Gatsby and the Great American Novel"  
*New Essays on The Great Gatsby*  
ed. Matthew J. Bruccoli  
(Cambridge U 1985) 89-93, 95

"In point of fact, stylistically *Gatsby* is a complicated composite of several distinct kinds of prose, set within the boundaries of a written narration, a composite style whose chief demonstrable point appears to be the inadequacy of any single style (or single means of perception, point of view) by itself to do justice to the story. Which is a story of a world not so much in transition as falling apart without realizing it. New and old clash continually, violently. It is shown to be impossible to escape the one by embracing the other.... French critic Andre Le Vot, in the chapters of his recent biography of Fitzgerald that deal with *Gatsby*, creates an elegant and impressive paradigm of the use of color symbolism and the constant use of light and dark in the story, contrived to hold the discrete parts of the story, in the subtext at least, in a conventional unified coherence. These things seem to work well for that purpose; and there are other elements and patterns that tend to serve roughly the same purpose, all adding up to an impression of unified style. Beneath the surface, however, *Gatsby* is boiling with conflict—chiefly the conflict of new and old, the inadequacy of the old ways and means to deal with the new world of the twentieth century. Thus, behind its seemingly bland and polite surface, *Gatsby* is, in many ways, a wildly experimental novel...

In terms of form, then, more than anything else, it terms of style, *Gatsby* is a pioneering novel. Other masters of the first half of this century may have done more radical and extraordinary things with the novel's shape and substance, but, by and large, these other great books were (are), at the least, inimitable. With *Gatsby*, Fitzgerald advanced the form of the American novel for the benefit of all American novelists who have followed after him, whether they know it or not. They seem to sense this, to bear witness to it, in their continuing admiration for *Gatsby*."

George Garrett  
"Fire and Freshness: A Matter of Style in *The Great Gatsby*"  
*New Essays* (1985) 114-16

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 20<sup>th</sup> 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 is unique.

Michael Hollister (2014)