

The Great Gatsby

Novel, 1925

American Writer (1896 - 1940)

Other Names Used: Fitzgerald, Francis Scott; Fitzgerald, Francis Scott Key;

Fitzgerald, F. Scott Key;

Literary Themes for Students: The American Dream. Ed. Anne Marie Hacht. Vol. 1.

Literary Themes for Students Detroit: Gale, 2007. p264-276.

Copyright: COPYRIGHT 2007 Gale, Cengage Learning

Full Text:

The Great Gatsby

F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

1925

INTRODUCTION

F. Scott Fitzgerald's masterpiece *The Great Gatsby* (1925) is the quintessential tale of the American dream: the heights a man may reach, the past he can discard, the joy he may (or may not) find, and the tragedy that living the dream may bring him. The novel is set in what Fitzgerald called the "Jazz Age," a period bridging the 1920s and 1930s, and emphasizes the life of pleasure and decadence after the tragedy and horror of World War I. Gatsby's American dream is essentially the "rags-to-riches" story about overcoming poverty and creating a life of pure luxury and indulgence; Fitzgerald's American dream is a dangerous, romantic myth.

Though *The Great Gatsby* is now an undisputed title in the American literary canon, the novel did not sell well when first published and slipped into near oblivion in the following decades. The economic, social, and political hardships of the Great Depression and World War II seem to have turned away those readers who could no longer afford to dream in their daily lives or those readers who, rather like Jay Gatsby himself, knew all too well how quickly dreams and success could shatter.

Middle-class "middle-westerner" Nick Carraway narrates this novel; he is a keen observer of the American fairy tale come to life. As he uncovers more and more about Gatsby and his obsession with Daisy Buchanan, Carraway realizes the high price of materialism, envy, and

Page 265

desire. The American dream, like Gatsby's house in the end of the novel, is empty, or may never have existed. The editors of *Readings on* describe Fitzgerald in terms of his famous characters:

In some ways, F. Scott Fitzgerald was Jay Gatsby: poor dreamer become financially successful, vitally attached to a romantic dream. He was also Nick Carraway, the participating yet detached observer of life, who admired the dreamer's intensity but regretted his fatal flaws.

Ironically, *The Great Gatsby* actually predated the term "American dream" according to critic Jeffrey Louis Decker, who notes that the concept "was not put into print until 1931." In that sense, *The Great Gatsby's* underlying narrative marks the birth of a myth, one that shaped the definition of success for future American society. Scholar Tara Carter writes,

Fitzgerald writes about the traditional white American dream which is born out of capitalistic ideals, and, thus, reliant on material acquisitions and attaining high social status. And while he does a fine job creating shallow, wealthy characters that cause the reader to think twice about the benefits of wealth, he never shows the American dream from a different perspective other than from people residing in a privileged, white world.

Despite its inauspicious beginnings and the multitude of debates that still rage about Fitzgerald's commentary on race, society, and success, Fitzgerald's glamorous novel has made a remarkable place for itself. Not only does the novel have a permanent slot on school reading lists, but the book has been adapted into four film versions, an opera, and a play, performed in Minneapolis in 2006 for the first time since 1926.

BIOGRAPHY

F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald was born in St. Paul, Minnesota, on September 4, 1896, to a furniture manufacturer and salesman. He began writing early, scribbling in the margins of his textbooks and penning adventure stories for the school newspaper. Though his grades were not good enough to grant him immediate admission into Princeton, he managed to talk the administration into accepting him on probation. In 1917, however, he interrupted his education to join the army and wrote his first novel, which the publisher Charles Scribner's Sons praised, but rejected. Fitzgerald met debutante socialite Zelda Sayre when he was stationed in Montgomery,

Alabama. When the war ended, Fitzgerald, who had never been sent overseas, joined the advertising business, hoping to make enough money to marry Zelda. Unfortunately, Zelda called off their engagement, not wanting to settle for life on his meager salary.

A year later in 1919, Fitzgerald worked with an editor at Scribner to publish his first novel, *This Side of Paradise*. Propelled by the momentum of his new professional writing career, he also sold short stories to popular markets. Inspired by Fitzgerald's newfound success, Zelda married Fitzgerald. They had a tumultuous relationship that produced one daughter, Frances (whom they called "Scottie"), in 1921. Fitzgerald became an icon of the 1920s, synonymous with both the carefree wealth of the Jazz Age, personified by his masterpiece *The Great Gatsby* (1925), as well as the disaffected American abroad of the Lost Generation, epitomized by his earlier novel, *This Side of Paradise* (1920). After Zelda was diagnosed with schizophrenia in the 1930s, Fitzgerald's star dimmed a bit, and he found himself in Hollywood writing screenplays to pay the bills. He died of a heart attack at the age of forty-four on December 21, 1940, with heart, lung, and liver disease from years of excessive drinking and smoking.

PLOT SUMMARY

Chapter 1

The Great Gatsby begins with Nick Carraway introducing himself and providing the reader with background about his prominent family

Page 266



F. Scott Fitzgerald © Bettmann/Corbis

from the "Middle West." After graduating from Yale, Nick decided to go east and learn the bond business, with the "grave, hesitant" approval of his "aunts and uncles" and the financial support of his father. Nick lives in a modest house in West Egg, next to the elegant mansion owned by the enigmatic Jay Gatsby and across the bay from Tom and Daisy Buchanan. Tom, whom Nick knew in college, and Daisy, Nick's second cousin once removed, invite Nick to dinner, along with Miss Jordan Baker, a golf pro. Daisy captivates Nick with her lovely sad air, while Tom makes the biggest impression during the meal with his racist commentary ("It's up to us who are the dominant race to watch out or these other races will have control of things") and his mysterious disappearance during the party. When Daisy follows her husband to the kitchen, Miss Baker tells Nick that Tom has "some woman in New York" who does not "have the decency not to telephone him at dinner time." After Daisy returns, she informs Nick that she heard about his engagement, which he denies as pure rumor. Nick goes home and sees Mr. Gatsby standing outside the mansion looking across the bay; he considers speaking to him, but decides not to intrude on an apparently private moment.

Chapter 2

Nick recounts first meeting Tom Buchanan's mistress, Myrtle Wilson, in her husband's car repair shop, which is looked over by a large billboard bearing the image of a pair of large spectacles and eyes advertising Dr. T. J. Eckleburg, an eye specialist. Nick visits George Wilson's shop with Tom, who makes a date with Myrtle when George's back is turned. After giving her husband her usual story about visiting her sister in New York, Myrtle accompanies Nick and Tom to the city, but she rides in a separate train car to keep up appearances. The three go to the apartment Tom and Myrtle use for their rendezvous where they meet Myrtle's sister, Catherine; Mr. McKee, a photographer who lives downstairs; and Mr. McKee's "shrill, languid, handsome, and horrible" wife. Catherine tells Nick she once went to a party at Gatsby's and comments on his power. Catherine also says that neither Tom nor Myrtle like their spouses and that Daisy is the one keeping them apart. Myrtle agrees and comments that her own husband "isn't fit to lick [her] shoe." When Tom and Myrtle fight about whether Myrtle has the right to mention Daisy's name, Tom breaks Myrtle's nose. Mr. McKee leaves the chaotic scene, and Nick follows.

Chapter 3

Nick receives a formal invitation to one of the huge parties Gatsby throws every few weeks. He does not see Gatsby, but when he asks about his host, the guests are appalled. Nick encounters Jordan Baker, and they meet a drunken man with "enormous owl-eyed spectacles" in the library, who excitedly attests that the books in the library are not simply props: "I ascertained. They're real." Gossip about Gatsby abounds: He may be a murderer, a spy, or a German. Amidst the dancing and gaiety, Nick meets a man

sitting at a table with a joyful little girl. Before he introduces himself, the man reveals that he has seen Nick before, possibly in the war when Nick was with the Ninth Machine-Gun Battalion and the man was with the Seventh Infantry. They speak about their experiences in France, and the man invites Nick along on a hydroplane excursion in the morning. The man finally introduces himself as Gatsby, to Nick's surprise. When Gatsby goes inside, Nick demands that Jordan tell him all about Gatsby. Gatsby sends his butler to fetch Jordan, with whom he wishes to speak privately. As the

Page 267

party progresses, Nick notices that most of the remaining party guests, couples, are fighting. Jordan returns from her meeting with Gatsby and says she "just heard the most amazing thing," but does not reveal the secret. Chaos ensues in the parking area when a car is stuck in a ditch, and the parting guests blame the owl-eyed drunk from the library, though he denies involvement. As Nick leaves the party and looks back at the empty house, he gets the distinct feeling of loneliness. At the end of the chapter, Nick says, "I am one of the few honest people that I have ever known."

Chapter 4

Nick chronicles the tide of upper-class guests who come in and out of Gatsby's mansion over the summer. Thus far, Nick has attended "two of his parties, mounted in his hydroplane, and at his urgent invitation, made frequent use of his beach." Gatsby picks Nick up for a lunch date in his shiny, impressive car and, during the ride, addresses the gossip, saying: "I don't want you to get a wrong idea of me from all these stories you hear." Gatsby admits he is from a wealthy California family and was educated at Oxford. After his family died, he inherited a fortune, traveled the world, and went to war, where he received a medal "For Valour Extraordinary" in Montenegro and tried to "forget something very sad that happened to [him] a long time ago." Nick does not necessarily believe Gatsby, but he is fascinated nonetheless. On the way to lunch, Gatsby gets pulled over for speeding, but the policeman lets him go without a ticket after recognizing the powerful man he had stopped. At lunch, Gatsby introduces Nick to Mr. Meyer Wolfsheim, a New Yorker involved in shady business deals. Wolfsheim mistakes Nick for a man "looking for a business connection," but Gatsby quickly tells him that Nick is not the man. Tom shows up at the restaurant where they are having lunch, but before Nick can introduce Tom to Gatsby, Gatsby disappears.

Nick recalls an afternoon with Jordan when she tells him about Daisy Buchanan's (then Daisy Fay) relationship with Gatsby. On the day of Daisy's wedding, Jordan found Daisy drunk and wanting to change her mind about marrying Tom. She married Tom and had a daughter, but she apparently never forgot about Gatsby, whom she had known as an officer from Camp Taylor when she was eighteen. At nineteen, she had intended to run off to the city with Gatsby before he left for the war, but Daisy's mother stopped her. Two summers later, she was engaged to Tom Buchanan. Jordan found out later that Tom was cheating on Daisy: After he got into a car accident, the newspapers reported

that the girl with him, a chambermaid at the hotel where the Buchanans were staying, broke her arm. Jordan tells Nick about Daisy's odd reaction when Jordan mentioned that Nick lived next door to a man named Gatsby. Finally, Jordan reveals Gatsby's secret: Gatsby wants Nick to invite both him and Daisy over to his house so they can reunite.

Chapter 5

Nick tells Gatsby that he has agreed to help him meet with Daisy. Gatsby asks Nick to do some "confidential" business for him, but Nick declines. On a drizzly day, Gatsby and Daisy meet at Nick's; Gatsby pretends to arrive after Daisy, though he had already waited an hour. Nick tries to disperse the awkwardness by having them help him prepare tea and cakes, but he decides to leave them alone to sort out their personal conflict. When Nick returns, Daisy looks upset, but Gatsby appears as if "a new well-being radiated from him." Gatsby invites Nick and Daisy to his home. During the tour, Gatsby tells them, "It took me just three years to earn the money that bought it." Confused, Nick reminds Gatsby that he said he had inherited his money. Gatsby admits his money was lost in the war and that he regained it through drug and oil business. He brings up the business proposition a second time, but Nick does not get the chance to answer. Daisy admires the mansion while Gatsby admires Daisy. Gatsby shows off his massive wealth and material possessions. After watching Gatsby and Daisy, Nick realizes that Daisy has not measured up to Gatsby's fantasy of her, noting, "No amount of fire or freshness can challenge what a man will store up in his heart."

Chapter 6

A reporter comes to the mansion to question Gatsby. The truth about Gatsby is revealed to the reader. He was born James Gatz to "shiftless and unsuccessful farm people." Gatsby changed his name when he was seventeen. He was living hand-to-mouth as a clam digger and salmon fisher when Dan Cody's yacht "dropped anchor in the shallows along shore." Gatsby was enamored with the beautiful boat and the success it

Page 268

symbolized, and a few days after meeting the rich old man, he joined Cody's yachting crew. Gatsby yachted around the world with Cody, and when Cody died, he willed his money to Gatsby. However, Gatsby only received twenty-five thousand dollars, while Cody's young mistress Ella Kaye got the rest of the millions. Gatsby does not reveal this version of the truth to Nick until much later.

Nick spends his time dating Jordan, but he eventually visits Gatsby. Gatsby has another party where Gatsby introduces Tom and Daisy to a variety of celebrities. Daisy and Gatsby dance while Tom amuses himself at another table. As the party winds down, Nick waits with Tom and Daisy as their driver brings the car around. Tom is edgy about

Gatsby, wondering if he made his money by bootlegging. He vows to find out more. Gatsby tells Nick he does not think Daisy enjoyed the party. He is also disappointed that he and Daisy do not connect like they used to and wishes they could "repeat the past." Gatsby flashes back to "one autumn night, five years before" when he kissed Daisy. Nick finds himself caught up in Gatsby's sentimentality.

Chapter 7

When the mansion lights do not come on one Saturday evening, Nick gets concerned and visits Gatsby. A new butler answers the door and turns Nick away. Nick learns that Gatsby fired his old servants and replaced them with people who could not be bribed, explaining, "I wanted people who wouldn't gossip. Daisy comes over quite often—in the afternoons." Eventually Gatsby calls Nick and informs him that the servants are contacts of Wolfshiem. He also tells Nick that Daisy wants Nick to lunch at her house the next day; Jordan Baker would attend as well. Nick is suspicious of the gathering.

When Nick and Gatsby arrive at the Buchanans', the phone rings for Tom. Jordan whispers to Nick that it is "Tom's girl" calling, but Nick reassures her that Tom is discussing a "bona-fide deal" with someone. Daisy kisses Gatsby when her husband ducks out to make drinks for the guests. Soon after, Daisy shows off her daughter to the little party. In the heat of the day, Daisy tells Gatsby that he "look[s] so cool"; Tom begins to recognize the relationship between them and suggests they all go to New York. As they wait for Daisy and Jordan to get ready, Gatsby remarks to Nick that Daisy's voice "is full of money." As Daisy and Gatsby ride toward the city in the same car, Tom tells Jordan and Nick that Gatsby is not who he claims to be. They stop at George Wilson's repair shop for gasoline. In making small talk, George says he and his wife "want to go west," a comment that surprises Tom. Nick realizes that George knows his wife has been having an affair but does not know with whom. Nick sees Myrtle spying on them from the second floor of the shop. Based on her expression, it seems she believes Jordan is Tom's wife.

Tom's relationships both with his mistress and his wife are unraveling. The five decide to rent "the parlor of a suite in the Plaza Hotel" for the afternoon where they drink and talk. Tom tries to poke holes in the story of Gatsby's past by bringing up the fact Gatsby is "an Oxford man," which obviously Tom does not believe. Gatsby explains that he only attended the university for five months; some soldiers were given the chance to go after the war. After Gatsby's smooth response, Tom announces that he knows about Daisy and Gatsby and that he will not allow Gatsby to disregard "family life and family institutions." Gatsby insists that Daisy never loved Tom, and at first, Daisy agrees. Tom is furious and calls Gatsby a liar. Gatsby forces Daisy to admit she never loved Tom, but then she changes her mind. Tom's indiscretions with other women are brought into the argument, and Gatsby informs Tom that Daisy intends to leave him. Tom brings up Gatsby's dark dealings with Wolfshiem, including bootlegging and gambling. Gatsby does not deny the charges and tries to explain himself to Daisy, who retreats inside

herself. Tom tells Daisy to go home with Gatsby, telling her, "Go on. He won't annoy you. I think he realizes that his presumptuous little flirtation is over." Nick, Jordan, and Tom follow in another car.

As the argument among the five winds down and they head home, the narrative switches scenes to George Wilson's repair shop. George has locked Myrtle upstairs. He tells Michaelis, who runs the coffee shop nearby, that "she's going to stay there till the day after tomorrow and then we're going to move away." Later, Michaelis sees Myrtle run outside, yelling at George. She gets killed when hit by a car coming from New York, a car that does not stop. Not long after the accident, Tom, Nick, and Jordan drive past the garage and wonder about the gathering crowd;

Page 269

they stop out of curiosity. Someone in the crowd describes the vehicle as a "big yellow car. New." Tom recognizes the car as Gatsby's. When Tom, Nick, and Jordan arrive at the Buchanans', Gatsby talks with Nick alone and acts cagey about the ride home, asking "Did you see any trouble on the road?" Soon after, Gatsby confesses that he thought the woman had been killed, but Nick sees that he cares more about Daisy's reaction to the accident than the accident itself. Gatsby admits that Daisy was driving the car. Nick wonders what Tom would think if he knew Daisy had been the driver who hit Myrtle.

Chapter 8

The next day, Nick visits Gatsby at the mansion. He advises Gatsby to leave town. Gatsby refuses, wanting to make sure Daisy is all right. Nick tells the reader that Gatsby told him the story of Dan Cody that night and also talked about first meeting Daisy. As an officer, Gatsby had visited Daisy's home and had become enthralled by its mystery and hers. Because of his impoverished background, he decided to "let her believe that he was a person from much the same strata as herself—that he was fully able to take care of her." But in reality, he could not pursue Daisy. While he was at war, he tried desperately to get home to her, but could not. Daisy was confused about her identity without him and turned to Tom Buchanan. After becoming Gatsby's confidant, Nick compliments Gatsby, saying, "They're a rotten crowd. You're worth the whole damn bunch put together."

Nick's narrative returns to the night of the hit-and-run accident and tells what happened after they left the garage for the Buchanans', a story he learns from the neighbor Michaelis. Michaelis stayed with George all night to help him deal with the tragedy. George reveals to Michaelis that Myrtle "had come from the city with her face bruised and her nose swollen" a few months earlier. George also hints to Michaelis about Myrtle's other strange behaviors recently. George believes Myrtle ran out to speak with the man driving the fancy car that killed her. In addition, George tells Michaelis that he

confronted Myrtle about her affair.

The afternoon after the accident, Nick, the chauffeur, the butler, and the gardener find Gatsby's body in the pool, mortally wounded. George's dead body lies nearby.

Chapter 9

Two years later, Nick can still remember the day he found Gatsby. Rumors swirl about Gatsby and the murder. At the inquest, Myrtle's sister Catherine insists Myrtle was not Gatsby's lover and "was completely happy with her husband." The newspapers cast George as "a man deranged by grief" over his belief that his wife had been unfaithful. Nick calls Daisy, but she and Tom went away and "left no address." Nick tries to get in touch with Wolfsheimer but has no luck. When Nick finally receives a note from the man, the message is cold and selfish. A shady business associate of Gatsby's phones Nick, mistaking him for Gatsby. Unexpectedly, Gatsby's father, Henry Gatz, shows up after reading about his son's death in the paper. Gatz mourns his son's "big future." Later, Nick receives a call from one of Gatsby's so-called friends who does not take the time to express condolences; he simply wants a pair of tennis shoes he had forgotten during a visit. Nick travels to New York where he sees Mr. Wolfsheimer, who informs Nick that he "made" Jay Gatsby, but he cannot come to his funeral because of the risks involved. When Nick returns to the mansion, Gatz shows him a worn photo of the house that Gatsby had sent him; obviously Gatsby's father was proud to show the world what his son owned. Gatz also presents a book, *Hopalong Cassidy*, which Gatsby read as a child. Inside the book, Gatsby had made a schedule that showed his motivation and ambition for the future. Only a handful of people attend Gatsby's funeral: Nick, Owl Eyes, Mr. Gatz, and the minister.

Nick sees the jewels, sparkles, and glitz of the American East as empty, grotesque, and cold. He attempts closure with Jordan Baker, though she has already moved on to an engagement with another man. Nick runs into Tom, who reveals that the day Gatsby was murdered, he told George that Gatsby owned the car that killed Myrtle. "They were careless people—Tom

Page 270

and Daisy," Nick decides. "They smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness or whatever it was that kept them together." Before Nick moves back to the "middle-west," he visits the mansion one last time and realizes that Gatsby's dreams had eluded him.

THEMES

Perception as Reality

The Great Gatsby illustrates the tragic cost of the American dream. In the end, both Jay Gatsby and Myrtle Wilson lose their lives in the pursuit of success, or at least the

appearance of success. For them, the American dream means being able to exchange their impoverished pasts for the good life. Unfortunately for them, the good life is a masquerade.

Jay Gatsby, formerly James Gatz, is murdered as a direct result of the secret affair between Tom Buchanan and Myrtle Wilson. George Wilson, enraged by his wife's illicit relationship with Tom and inspired by the godly artificial eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg, mistakes Gatsby for his wife's lover. However, Gatsby's untimely death can also be attributed to his lifelong quest to erase his humble origins and become someone respectable enough for Daisy Buchanan. For Gatsby, that chameleon-like ability to control outside perceptions was tantamount to his new beginnings, as well as his unexpected end; if people knew the true Gatsby, he would never have achieved his financial power or social reputation, but he might have kept his life. To everyone in the novel, Gatsby was someone different: ambitious boy, former lover, wealthy businessman, con man, success story, murderer. "Who is this Gatsby anyway?" Tom asks, alluding to the fact that no one knows anything about Gatsby except for rumors from the grapevine and dubious "facts" provided by Gatsby himself. Of course, Gatsby did not create his identity alone; after Gatsby's death, Meyer Wolfshiem, a Jewish crime boss also in hot pursuit of the American dream, tells Nick of Gatsby, "I made him ... raised him up out of nothing, right out of the gutter."

By the same token, Myrtle Wilson dies because of her dream of a more worldly and sophisticated existence. This story arc is foreshadowed early in the novel when Myrtle goes with Tom and Nick to New York. When she arrives in the city, Myrtle's physical change reflects her social aspirations:

She had changed her dress to a brown figured muslin which stretched tight over her rather wide hips.... At the news-stand she bought a copy of Town Tattle and a moving picture magazine, and in the station drug store, some cold cream and a small flask of perfume. Upstairs in the solemn echoing drive she let four taxi cabs drive away before she selected a new one, lavender-colored with grey upholstery.

Later, in the apartment that Tom and Myrtle use for their trysts, Nick notes,

Mrs. Wilson ... was now attired in an elaborate afternoon dress of cream colored chiffon, which gave out a continual rustle as she swept about the room. With the influence of the dress her personality had also undergone a change. The intense vitality that had been so remarkable in the garage was converted into impressive hauteur.

Myrtle finds her life with George Wilson too banal. She believes, like Gatsby, that the

trappings of wealth will give her a new identity and, subsequently, a new status in society. Though she tells Mrs. McKee that she only wears her cream-colored chiffon when she does not care about her appearance, the statement is clearly ironic. She feels powerless as Mrs. George Wilson, as if her life is as in need of repair as the cars in her husband's shop. But as Tom Buchanan's lover in the city, she sees endless possibility in the material things; she can dispose of a dress on a whim and easily acquire another without a second thought. She can change whenever she likes, traveling from George's rags to Tom's riches on an afternoon train.

They crave money and status because they believe that happiness will follow; misery and destruction, however, are all their quests achieve. In effect, Gatsby's and Myrtle's deaths show a dark side to striving to achieve the American dream.

The Price of Success

The American dream is an ideal: a picture-perfect life with everything one could want behind a white picket fence. Life behind the fence is happy, peaceful, and, above all, moral. Wealth and success has been achieved through hard work and straight shooting. However, the characters in *The Great Gatsby* show that in order to reach social and financial success a person might have to sacrifice his ethics by telling lies, oppressing others, or breaking laws.

Page 271

Many characters in the novel lie to get what they want. For Myrtle Wilson, the truth gets in the way of her personal goal: to become a woman of class. She hides her affair with Tom Buchanan because the truth would prevent her from living life in the city as the well-kept mistress of a wealthy man. As Tom's lover, she can live a better life than George can provide.

Of course, to become Jay Gatsby, James Gatz had to lie to the public, in essence creating the illusion of the American dream from the ground up. The only way Gatsby can be with Daisy is by building a social mystery around his identity and involving himself in illegal dealings. In this way, the younger Gatsby mirrors Fitzgerald himself: just as Fitzgerald could not woo his beloved Zelda without some form of viable income, Gatsby the soldier cannot woo Daisy.

Tom Buchanan's American dream is about entitlement and excluding those not entitled. When he looks down on Gatsby for his connections to con man Meyer Wolfshiem, the American dream becomes a measure of morality. In Tom's eyes, Gatsby's accomplishments and possessions are tainted by how he acquired them. Early in the novel, Tom Buchanan claims that "civilization's going to pieces" and believes the "white race ... will be utterly submerged." Racist ideas appeal to Tom: For him, the American dream is being usurped by "other races," and he sees himself as "standing alone on the

last barrier of civilization." Though Tom is having an affair with a married woman and is married himself, he stands as a moral judge not only for Gatsby, but also for society at large. Tom does not think all men should have an equal shot at the American dream and looks down on those whom he deems undeserving. He is jealous of his status as one of the deserving because it is his by inheritance, not achievement, and thus more difficult to justify.

Meyer Wolfsheimer is one of those men Tom Buchanan wants to deny entrance to the club. As a Jewish businessman with shady dealings, Wolfsheimer represents "those other races" who will eventually "submerge" the white race. To Tom, Wolfsheimer is not worthy of what America has to offer because of his ethnicity, which is a bigger flaw than his immorality. In addition, Wolfsheimer "made" Gatsby, as Wolfsheimer tells Nick late in the novel, alluding to Tom's biggest fear that the lower classes and races will eventually prevail by "making" each other into American success stories.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Jazz Age

Fitzgerald coined the term "Jazz Age," naming a time after World War I when the public longed for frivolity, decadence, and pleasure despite the national prohibition on alcoholic beverages. Women had won the right to vote in 1920, the same year that Prohibition went into effect, and were reveling in their newfound strength. In Fitzgerald's own words, "It was an age of miracles, it was an age of art, it was an age of excess, and it was an age of satire." Modernism burst onto the scene during this period, as did many modern technological conveniences. The bold lines of Art Deco became popular, along with the free-form style of Jazz music. This musical trend gets ironic treatment in chapter 3 of *The Great Gatsby* when the orchestra leader announces, "At the request of Mr. Gatsby," that he will play "Vladimir Tostoff's *Jazz History of the World*." Tostoff is an imaginary composer whom Fitzgerald cynically references to show how jazz is rivaling classical music as the soundtrack for the rich. As the sound of pleasure, danger, and eroticism found in the seamy lower class, jazz gave the newly wealthy a vicarious thrill. For them, jazz symbolized one version of the American dream: the journey from rags to riches in the traditional face of old money.

World War I

Like Jay Gatsby and Nick Carraway, Fitzgerald was part of the American military effort in World War I, which lasted from 1914 until 1918. France, together with the Russian Empire, the United Kingdom, and ultimately the United States, enabled the Allied Powers to defeat the Central Powers, comprised of Austria-Hungary and the German and Ottoman Empires. The United States did not want to enter the conflict at first. However, after the 1915 sinking of the passenger ship *Lusitania* as well as several merchant ships by German submarines, the United States declared war in April 1917. Though Fitzgerald never fought overseas "in wet, grey little villages in France" like Gatsby and Carraway, he did join the army in 1917. Known as "The War to End All

Wars," World War I introduced modern mechanized weaponry and poison gas to the battlefield and paved the way for wars to come.

Page 272

Prohibition

In *The Great Gatsby*, Tom Buchanan suspects that Gatsby is a bootlegger and accuses him of using his chain of drug stores as a front for illegally selling grain alcohol. In December 1917, the Eighteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was passed, prohibiting the "manufacture, sale, or transportation of intoxicating liquors" in the United States, but the amendment did not officially go into effect until January 16, 1920. Prohibition fostered illegal brewing and selling of alcohol, particularly by groups of gangsters and corrupt government officials. Prohibition also provided the seed money and profit to develop organized crime, suggested in *The Great Gatsby* through Wolfshiem's shady dealings. The Twenty-first Amendment repealed national Prohibition but allowed states to control the purchase and sale of alcohol.

CRITICAL OVERVIEW

In 1922, Fitzgerald wrote to his publisher, "I want to write something *new*—something extraordinary and beautiful and simple & intricately patterned." In an advertisement dated April 19, 1925, in the *New York Times*, Charles Scribner's Sons, publisher, claims "Scott Fitzgerald has done it!" Also on that date, Edwin Clark, a critic for the same newspaper, writes:

The philosopher of the flapper has escaped the mordant, but he has turned grave. A curious book, a mystical, glamorous story of today. It takes a deeper cut at life than hitherto has been enjoyed by Mr. Fitzgerald. He writes well—he always has—for he writes naturally, and his sense of form is becoming perfected.

But his contemporary public did not agree; in actuality, the novel did not sell well, despite testimonial advertisements from social celebrities. It was not until the 1940s that *The Great Gatsby* was read with excitement and appreciation. Arthur Mizener, in the January 1946 *Sewanee Review*, says, "Fitzgerald's great accomplishment is to have realized in completely American terms the developed romantic attitude." Along these same lines, John Berryman in the Winter 1946 *Kenyon Review* calls *The Great Gatsby* "a masterpiece," defining the term as "a work of the literary imagination which is consistent, engaging, and dramatic, in exceptional degrees." Reflecting on the book thirty-five years after it was published, Mizener declares:

Almost for the first time Fitzgerald created with that voice an image of The Good American of our time in all his complexity of human sympathy, firm moral judgment and ironic self-possession. We can now afford to turn our attention to

such things—because, whatever disagreements we may have over Fitzgerald's work as a whole, there remain few doubts of the greatness of "Gatsby" or of its imaginative relevance to American experience.

In the 1960s, as America entered a state of political and social turmoil, some critics such as Tony Tanner in his 1965 book, *The Reign of Wonder*, tried to make Fitzgerald and his work relevant to the times, noting, "Into the figure of Gatsby [Fitzgerald] put much of what he admired in America.... There is something in Gatsby's generous, ideal aspirations which transcends their sordid base and survives their squalid destiny." By 1980, Charles Scribner III states confidently in his new introduction to the novel, "It now rests far above the shifting winds of literary fortune."

Today, many scholars possess varying notions of Gatsby's true nature, many of which are explored in *Readings on The Great Gatsby*. Robert Ornstein, with his article "Gatsby is a Classic Romantic," claims the novel illustrates the futile and "unending quest of the romantic dream," while in "Gatsby is a Sinister Gangster," Thomas Pauly discusses Gatsby as an "upscale, stylish" thug. Brian Way finds the "social comedy" in Gatsby, theorizing that "Gatsby is a Profoundly Comic Character." At the same time, Giles Mitchell has given Gatsby's personality a "clinical analysis" with his stance that "Gatsby is a Pathological Narcissist." These vastly different approaches to the title character in Gatsby reflect Fitzgerald's own characterization of Gatsby: He is an invention not only created by himself, but by others as well.

However, in his preface to Scribner's 1995 "definitive, textually accurate edition" of *The Great Gatsby*, Matthew Bruccoli argues that Fitzgerald did accomplish his goal of creating something "extraordinary and beautiful and simple," calling the book a "masterpiece." He also declares the book "the defining novel of the Twenties, which have become trivialized and vulgarized by people who weren't there." He goes on to explain the novel's and its protagonist's "greatness":

Page 273

It has become convenient to refer to The Great Gatsby as "the great American novel." If this phrase means anything, it means that the novel is a great work of fiction with defining American thematic qualities and that James Gatz/Jay Gatsby is the great American character.... Gatsby is a self-made—indeed, self-invented—man. He believes in the American dream of success,... he fulfills it;... he is betrayed by it. The appellation great as applied to Gatsby reverberates with irony. He is truly great by virtue of his capacity to commit himself to his aspirations.

CRITICISM

Meredith Goldsmith

In the following excerpt, Goldsmith explores the ways Gatsby attempts to "pass" for a member of the Anglo-American leisure class by adopting its styles and mannerisms.

The Performative Apparatus of Americanization

Fashion makes explicit the imitative trajectories of narratives of both passing and Americanization. In *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*, the gift of tailor-made clothing allows the ex-coloured man to reconstitute himself as white, while Cahan's David Levinsky "was forever watching and striving to imitate the dress and the ways of the well-bred American merchants with whom [he] was, or trying to be, thrown." The imitative qualities of Gatsby's clothing—like that of the novel's other sartorial social climbers—ironizes his efforts at originality. As Gatsby exposes the contents of his armoire to Daisy, for example, his clothing compensates for his lack of familial lineage. Figuring his closet as a kind of Fort Knox, with "bricks" of shirts "piled a dozen feet high," Gatsby appropriates images of might to mask the deficiencies of his origins. If in his "hulking cabinets" Gatsby attempts to approximate Tom Buchanan's brutish economic and physical mastery, Gatsby's acquisition of his clothes signals his alienation from it. Significantly, Gatsby is unaccountable for his own sartorial style, relegating the job to a middleman: "I've got a man in England who buys me clothes. He sends over a selection of things at the beginning of each season, spring and fall." Allowing Dan Cody to outfit him with a new set of clothes, Gatsby, like Levinsky and the ex-coloured man, capitalizes on his homosocial, professional, and personal associations to facilitate his social mobility.

MEDIA ADAPTATIONS

The 1974 film version of *The Great Gatsby* was directed by Jack Clayton and stars Mia Farrow as Daisy and Robert Redford as Gatsby. It is available on DVD and VHS from Paramount.

Director Robert Markowitz made a television version in 2000 with Academy Award-winner Mira Sorvino as Daisy. It is available on DVD and VHS from A & E Home Video.

In 1999, the New York Metropolitan Opera House debuted the novel adaptation as an opera by John Harbison and Murray Horowitz. A recording is available on CD from Naxos.

Like his clothing, Gatsby's efforts to transform his physical appearance also suggest his bodily alienation from the Anglo-American leisure class. We remember that Gatsby

watches mesmerized as Daisy raises his "pure dull gold" brush to her blonde hair. The monosyllabic description of the brush, with its lack of serial commas, suggests an inimitable quality ostensibly matching Daisy's own perfection. But as Gatsby notes to Nick, "It's the funniest thing, old sport ... I can't—when I try to—" Gatsby's near-speechless moment as he watches Daisy brush her hair, emphasized by its dashes, calls attention to hair itself, another link between *Gatsby* and the fiction of passing and Americanization. Hair lies on a bodily boundary, occupying a liminal position between self and world, and alterations to male hair certify the self-transformation in narratives of both passing and Americanization. For example, the loss of David Levinsky's sidelocks on his first day in America effects his symbolic transformation into an American. When the ex-coloured man vows to live as a white man, he claims that he will "change his name, raise a mustache, and let the world take [him] for what it would." As a child, the narrator exploits the light/dark contrasts of his skin and

Page 274



Robert Redford and Mia Farrow in a scene from the 1974 film The Great Gatsby Getty Images

hair to convince himself that he is white: upon learning of his mother's blackness, the ex-coloured man "notice[s] the softness and glossiness of [his] dark hair that fell in waves over my temples, making [his] forehead appear even whiter than it really was." Fitzgerald's depiction of Gatsby's hair casts class mobility in the terms of the manipulation of both self- and external perception both Johnson and Cahan's narratives suggest. While Gatsby's hair "looks as if it were trimmed every day," Nick accentuates the continuities between Gatsby's body and the objects around him, noting that his own

lawn has been "well-shaved" by Gatsby's gardener. During Gatsby's tenure as Dan Cody's assistant, he styles his hair in a dashing pompadour, making himself "just the sort of Jay Gatsby that a seventeen year old boy would be likely to invent." Like Cahan's David Levinsky and Johnson's ex-colored man, Gatsby's changes to his hair style encode his efforts at self-revision on the body for the external gaze.

In the *Gatsby* manuscripts, Fitzgerald underscores the class and gender implications of hairstyle, linking Gatsby's style choice more closely to those of Daisy's. At Gatsby's second party, Daisy and Tom encounter the Star. The Star's eagerness to copy Daisy's haircut flatters Gatsby; Daisy, refusing to be "the originator of a new vogue," claims that being imitated would "spoil it for me." Reversing the norms of fandom, in which audiences yearn to resemble those on screen, here the star yearns to appropriate Daisy's perfection. However, for the working actress to imitate the woman of leisure threatens the boundary between the classes that the Buchanans deem essential: the Star is sustained by publicity, from which Daisy must protect herself to preserve her class position. The circulation of men's images may enhance their reputation, while it threatens those of women: the reproduction of Gatsby's image, whether through news, rumor, or legend increases his power; Tom's scandals land him in the papers but fail to unseat him from his class position.

Page 275

However, the circulation of the female image harbors particular dangers, evoking the historical connection between public women, actresses, and prostitutes. Fitzgerald links Daisy and the Star through parallel kissing scenes: when Gatsby recalls kissing Daisy on the Louisville street in 1917, the author uses the same images of whiteness, moonlight, and flowers that he distributes around the director's embrace of the Star. For Daisy to admit such parallels, however, is impossible: the circulation of Daisy's image would force her into uneasy familiarity with the actress, endangering both her class and sexual position.

While Fitzgerald might be expected to draw a contrast between those aspects of "personality" that may be externally manipulated—like possessions, clothes, and hair—and those more ostensibly a function of the body—like physical characteristics, Fitzgerald renders just such characteristics the function of imitation and repetition. While Gatsby's smile, for example, first appears to harbor singularity, Fitzgerald ultimately reveals it too as a reproducible commodity:

He smiled understandingly—much more than understandingly. It was one of those rare smiles with a quality of eternal reassurance in it, that you may come across four or five times in life. It faced—or seemed to face—the whole external world for an instant, and then concentrated on you with an irresistible prejudice in your

favor. It understood you just so far as you wanted to be understood, believed in you as you would like to believe in yourself and assured you that it had precisely the impression of you that, at your best, you hoped to convey.

The passage enacts the movement from mass audience to individual viewers; metonymizing the smile until it stands in for Gatsby, Nick allows himself to bask in its glow. Stepping out of the role of mass viewer for a moment, Nick experiences a moment of communion with Gatsby, feeling that their relationship, like Gatsby's with Daisy, is "just personal," liberated from the realm of objects.

However, Gatsby's smile works as a commodity that extends his social power, recalling that of David Levinsky, who develops a "credit face" to solicit investments despite his own lack of capital. Like Levinsky, Gatsby's smile enables him to elicit trust, facilitating his economic rise. Like an advertisement in its use of the second person, the passage reports Nick's seduction by Gatsby's charisma, marketing Gatsby's smile to the reader as if it were a commodity. In the manuscript, however, Fitzgerald transformed Gatsby's face into an art object: "He was undoubtedly one of the handsomest men I had ever seen—the dark blue eyes opening out into lashes of shining jet were arresting and unforgettable." The transition from the language of art—with its aura intact—to that of reproducible object or advertisement suggests Fitzgerald's increasing awareness of the problem of commodity aesthetics. As Daisy remarks later in the novel, Gatsby "resemble[s] the advertisement of the man," although Tom prohibits her from telling us precisely which one. In her identification of Gatsby's nonspecificity, Daisy gets it closer to right than she knows: even Gatsby's seeming uniqueness is bound up with his likeness to a set of commodified representations.

Fitzgerald's collapsing of the boundary between the frankly imitative and the ostensibly authentic links the character at the very top of the novel's economic and racial hierarchy—Daisy—with Wolfshiem, who resides on or near the bottom. *The Great Gatsby* links Daisy and Wolfshiem by contrasting the ostensibly innate class superiority of her voice with the openly imitative aspects of both his and Gatsby's. Most memorably, of course, Daisy's voice metaphorizes the seeming innateness of her class position, while Gatsby's near-Victorian formality recalls the immigrant struggle to master American speech and etiquette, poignantly presented in Cahan's *Rise of David Levinsky*. In addition, Meyer Wolfshiem, the novel's worst speaker, creates a degraded copy of English through his transformation of "Oxford" into "Oggsford" and "connection" into "gonnegtion." Fitzgerald appears to endorse a kind of vocal nativism, in which the decline of English mimics Tom's anxieties about the decline of "Nordic" superiority.

However, where Daisy's "thrilling voice" ostensibly evokes her aristocratic class and racial position, Jordan senses in it the conflict between repression and desire, noting that "perhaps Daisy never went in for amour at all—and yet there's something in that voice of hers." Fitzgerald's manuscripts reveal the conflict between class, gender, and

sexuality that Daisy's voice harbors: when Gatsby comments on Daisy's voice, Nick first responds, "She loves you. Her voice is full of it." Nick's sentimentalization of Daisy, notably absent from the novel's final version, reads her voice as the vessel for her suppressed emotions; Gatsby, who has forcibly assimilated the trappings of the

Page 276

leisure class, assesses it more coldly, interpreting the richness of her voice as a signifier of the class position she works to sustain.

Similarly, Wolfshiem's immigrant diction, which Fitzgerald takes such care to differentiate from the Anglo-American norm, reiterates one of *Gatsby's* signal themes. In a novel whose plot turns on causal uncertainty—notably, Nick reads the fixing of the World Series as something "that merely *happened*, the end of some inevitable chain" (emphasis added)—references to "connection," or the lack thereof, suggest the repression of causal links necessary to the maintenance of both the Buchanan and Gatsby worlds. The word "connection," reshaped by Wolfshiem's immigrant accent, becomes literally unspeakable, underscoring the economic and homosocial imperatives underlying the novel's ambiguous causal linkages. Wolfshiem's business "gonnegtions" link men for profit, exposing the conflation of economic and gendered power that is partially responsible for Myrtle's death. Wolfshiem's interest in forging "gonnegtions" registers his mastery of American mores of class and gender rather than his failed imitation of them.

Reading *Gatsby* in tandem with narratives of racial passing and ethnic Americanization complicates Fitzgerald's class politics, transforming Gatsby's persona into one in which the ostensibly biological imperatives of "race" and the supposedly more fluid boundaries of class are complexly and ambiguously intermingled. Inauthenticity, the trope of identity in passing and Americanization fiction, emerges as close to the norm for almost all of *Gatsby's* characters, even those whose class and ethnic status are usually considered unshakeable. Where this section has located *Gatsby* in respect to African-American and Jewish-American ethnic literary texts of the 1910s, the next section situates it in relation to the racial and ethnic performance culture of the era, which lends Gatsby's West Egg parties their "spectroscopic gayety."

Source: Meredith Goldsmith, "White Skin, White Mask: Passing, Posing, and Performing in *The Great Gatsby*," in *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 49, No. 3, Fall 2003, pp. 443-68.

SOURCES

Bender, David, et al., eds., *Readings on The Great Gatsby*, Greenhaven Press, 1998,

pp. vii, ix, xi, 15.

Berryman, John, "F. Scott Fitzgerald," in the *Kenyon Review*, Winter 1946, pp. 103-12; excerpted in "Fitzgerald, F. Scott (1896–1940)," in *Modern American Literature*, Vol. 1, 5th ed., St. James Press, 1999, p. 369.

Brucoli, Matthew, "A Brief Life of Fitzgerald," *F. Scott Fitzgerald Centenary*, www.sc.edu/fitzgerald/biography.html (December 4, 2003); originally published in *F. Scott Fitzgerald: A Life in Letters*, Scribner, 1994.

Brucoli, Matthew, "Preface," *The Great Gatsby*, Scribner, 1995, pp. vii-xvi.

Carter, Tara, "The Migrant in New York: In Pursuit of an American dream in Rudolph Fisher's 'The City of Refuge' and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*," *SMACK!*, www.uiowa.edu/~smack/archive/smack1.2/2ess2.htm (September 10, 2006).

Clark, Edwin, "Gatsby's Scott Fitzgerald Looks Into Middle Age," in the *New York Times*, April 19, 1925, www.nytimes.com/books/00/12/24/specials/fitzgerald-gatsby.html (October 11, 2006).

Decker, Jeffrey Louis, "Gatsby's Pristine Dream: The Diminishment of the Self-Made Man in the Tribal Twenties," *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, Vol. 28, Autumn 1994, pp. 52-71.

Fitzgerald, F. Scott, *The Great Gatsby*, Scribner, 1925; reprint, 1995.

First World War.com-A multimedia History of WWI, www.firstworldwar.com (September 7, 2006).

Mizener, Arthur, "Gatsby, 35 Years Later," in the *New York Times*, April, 24, 1960, www.nytimes.com/books/00/12/24/specials/fitzgerald-gatsby60.html (November 1, 2006).

—————, "Scott Fitzgerald and the Imaginative Possession of American Life," in the *Sewanee Review*, January-March 1946. pp. 66-67; excerpted in "Fitzgerald, F. Scott (1896–1940)," in *Modern American Literature*, Vol. 1, 5th ed., St. James Press, 1999, p. 369.

Mitchell, Giles, "Gatsby is a Pathological Narcissist," in *Readings on The Great Gatsby*,

Greenhaven Press, 1998, pp. 61-67.

Ornstein, Robert, "Gatsby is a Classic Romantic," in *Readings on The Great Gatsby*, Greenhaven Press, 1998, pp. 33-40.

Pauly, Thomas H., "Gatsby is a Sinister Gangster," in *Readings on The Great Gatsby*, Greenhaven Press, 1998, pp. 41-51.

Scribner, Charles, III, "Introduction," in *The Great Gatsby*, Scribner, 1980, p. xx.

Tony Tanner, *The Reign of Wonder*, Cambridge University Press, 1965; excerpted in "Fitzgerald, F. Scott (1896–1940)," in *Modern American Literature*, Vol. 1, 5th ed., St. James Press, 1999, p. 370.

Way, Brian, "Gatsby is a Profoundly Comic Character," in *Readings on The Great Gatsby*, Greenhaven Press, 1998, pp. 52-60.

Source Citation (MLA 8th Edition)

"The Great Gatsby." *Literary Themes for Students: The American Dream*, edited by Anne Marie Hacht, vol. 1, Gale, 2007, pp. 264-276. *Literary Themes for Students. Gale Virtual Reference Library*, go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?p=GVRL.litcrit&sw=w&u=sacr16736&v=2.1&id=GALE%7CCX2895300032&it=r&asid=0230122213d159155bdc6f11d406f669. Accessed 11 Jan. 2017.

Gale Document Number: GALE|CX2895300032