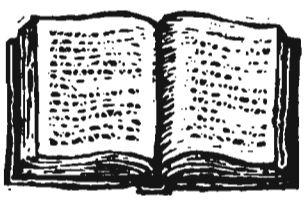
The Great Gatsby

F. Scott Fitzgerald

1925



In 1925, *The Great Gatsby* was published and hailed as an artistic and material success for its young author, F. Scott Fitzgerald. It is considered a vastly more mature and artistically masterful treatment of Fitzgerald's themes than his earlier fiction. These works examine the results of the Jazz Age generation's adherence to false material values. In nine chapters, Fitzgerald presents the rise and fall of Jay Gatsby, as related in a first-person narrative by Nick Carraway. Carraway reveals the story of a farmer's son-turned racketeer, named Jay Gatz. His ill-gotten wealth is acquired solely to gain acceptance into the sophisticated, moneyed world of the woman he loves, Daisy Fay Buchanan. His romantic illusions about the power of money to buy respectability and the love of Daisy—the "golden girl" of his dreams—are skillfully and ironically interwoven with episodes that depict what Fitzgerald viewed as the callousness and moral irresponsibility of the affluent American society of the 1920s. America at this time experienced a cultural and lifestyle revolution. In the economic arena, the stock market boomed, the rich spent money on fabulous parties and expensive acquisitions, the automobile became a symbol of glamour and wealth, and profits were made, both legally and illegally. The whirlwind pace of this post-World War I era is captured in Fitzgerald's Gatsby, whose tragic quest and violent death foretell the collapse of that era and the onset of disillusionment with the American dream. By the end of the novel, the reader slowly realizes that Carraway is transformed as he

recognizes Gatsby's moral superiority to the Buchanans. In fact, the triumph of Gatsby's legacy is reached by Nick Carraway's ruminations at the end of the book about Gatsby's valiant, however futile, attempts to regain his past love. The discrepancy between Gatsby's dream vision and reality is a prominent theme in this book. Other motifs in the book include Gatsby's quest for the American Dream; class conflict (the Wilsons vs. the Buchanans and the underworld lowbrows vs. Gatsby); the cultural rift between East and West; and the contrast between innocence and experience in the narrator's life. A rich aesthetic experience with many subtleties in tone and content, this novel can be read over and over again for new revelations and continued pleasure.

Author Biography

F. Scott Fitzgerald was an American novelist and short-story writer of the Roaring Twenties. Since his early work shows a romantic feeling for "the promises of life" at college and in "The East," he acquired the epithet "the spokesman of the Jazz Age." His first novel, *This Side of Paradise,* was the first American novel to deal with college undergraduate life in the World War I era. A handsome and charming man, Fitzgerald was quickly adopted by the young generation of his time. His second novel, *The Beautiful and the Damned,* is a lively but shallow book, but his third, *The Great Gatsby,* is one of the most penetrating descriptions of American life in the 1920s.

Born in St. Paul, Minnesota, on Sept. 24, 1896, Scott Fitzgerald was the son of Edward Fitzgerald, who worked for Proctor and Gamble and brought his family to Buffalo and Syracuse, New York for most of his son's first decade. Edward Fitzgerald's great-great-grandfather was the brother of the grandfather of Francis Scott Key, who wrote the poem "The Star-Spangled Banner." This fact was of great significance to Mrs. Fitzgerald, Mollie McQuillan, and later to Scott. Mollie Fitzgerald's own family could offer no pretensions to aristocracy but her father, an Irish immigrant who came to America in 1843, was a self-made businessman. Equally important was Fitzgerald's sense of having come from two widely different Celtic strains. He had early on developed an inferiority complex in a family where the "black Irish half ... had the money and looked down on the Maryland side of the family who had, and really had ... 'breeding,' " according to Scott Donaldson in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography.* Out of this divergence of classes in his family background arose what critics called F. Scott's "double vision." He had the ability to experience the lifestyle of the wealthy from an insider's perspective, yet never felt a part of this clique and always felt the outsider.

F. Scott Fitzgerald

As a youth Fitzgerald revealed a flair for dramatics, first in St. Paul, where he wrote original plays for amateur production, and later at the Newman Academy in Hackensack, New Jersey. At Princeton, he composed lyrics for the university's famous Triangle Club productions. Fitzgerald was also a writer and actor with the Triangle Club at college. Before he could graduate, he volunteered for the army during World War I. He spent the weekends writing the earliest drafts of his first novel. The work was accepted for publication in 1919 by Charles Scribner's Sons. The popular and financial success that accompanied this event enabled Fitzgerald to marry Zelda Sayre, whom he met at training camp in Alabama. Zelda played a pivotal role in the writer's life, both in a tempestuous way and an inspirational one. Mostly, she shared his extravagant lifestyle and artistic interests. In the 1930s she was diagnosed as a schizophrenic and was hospitalized in Switzerland and then Maryland, where she died in a fire.

For some time, Fitzgerald lived with his wife in Long Island. There, the setting for *The Great Gatsby,* he entertained in a manner similar to his characters, with expensive liquors and entertainment. He revelled in demonstrating the antics of the crazy, irresponsible rich, and carried this attitude wherever he went. Especially on the Riviera in France, the Fitzgeralds befriended the elite of the cultural world and wealthy classes, only to offend most of them in some way by their outrageous behavior. Self-absorbed, drunk, and eccentric, they sought and received attention of all kinds. The party ended with the hospitalization of Zelda for schizophrenia in Prangins, a Swiss clinic, and, coincidentally, with the Great Depression of 1929, which tolled the start of Scott's personal depression.

In the decade before his death, Fitzgerald's troubles and the debilitating effects of his alcoholism limited the quality and amount of his writing. Nonetheless, it was also during this period that he attempted his most psychologically complex and aesthetically ambitious novel, *Tender Is the Night* (1934). After Zelda's breakdown, Fitzgerald became romantically involved with Sheila Graham, a gossip columnist in Hollywood, during the last years of his life. He also wrote but did not finish the novel *The Last Tycoon,* now considered to be one of his best works, about the Hollywood motion picture industry. Fitzgerald died suddenly of a heart attack, most likely induced by a long addiction to alcohol, on December 21, 1940. At the time of his death, he was virtually forgotten and unread. A growing Fitzgerald revival, begun in the 1950s, led to the publication of numerous volumes of stories, letters, and notebooks. One of his literary critics, Stephen Vincent Benet, concluded in his review of *The Last Tycoon,* "you can take off your hats now, gentlemen, and I think perhaps you had better. This is not a legend, this is a reputation—and, seen in perspective, it may well be one of the most secure reputations of our time."

Plot Summary

A dinner party

Nick Carraway, the narrator, announces that he is writing his account two years after the events described. Aged twenty-nine, in the spring of 1922, he travels East from his midwestern home to work as a bond salesman in New York. He has rented a house on West Egg, sandwiched between the mansions along the shore of Long Island Sound. He knows nobody except his distant cousin Daisy Buchanan, who lives with her wealthy husband Tom on East Egg, across the bay. Nick drives over to dinner with the couple, whom he has not seen in years, and their guest Jordan Baker. Tom, an athletic polo player, betrays his boorish arrogance as he expounds a racist theory he has read. Daisy's magical voice compels Nick forward to listen to her, but he suspects her sincerity when she says she is unhappy. In contrast, dark-haired Jordan strikes Nick with her jaunty self-assurance. At one point, Nick's neighbour "Gatsby" is mentioned and Daisy catches the name in surprise. Dinner is tense; Jordan reveals that it is Tom's mistress telephoning him, and Daisy appears to know. Returning to West Egg, Nick first sees Gatsby. As Nick is about to call to him, Gatsby stretches out both arms towards the water or the green dock light opposite; Nick is mystified.

Myrtle's party

Commuting across the "valley of ashes" to the city, Tom suddenly pulls Nick from their train to meet his mistress, Myrtle. She is a blowsy, vital woman, the wife of servile garage-owner George Wilson. Myrtle catches the next train with them, and impulsively buys a puppy while she and Tom insist that Nick accompany them to their city apartment. Nick reads discreetly while the couple are in the bedroom. Myrtle decides to throw a party, and the apartment fills with people and social chatter. The puppy blinks in the smoky air, the party gets progressively drunker, and Nick wonders what the scene would look like to an observer outside. Myrtle starts chanting Daisy's name, and Tom brutally breaks her nose: the sound of wailing accompanies Nick as he leaves.

Gatsby's party

Nick describes the lavish parties that nightly transform Gatsby's garden. One afternoon a butler brings Nick a formal invitation, and at the party Nick is relieved to spot Jordan in the swirling crowd. Nick hears many extravagant and contradictory rumors from the guests. He and Jordan come across comical "Owl Eyes," a bespectacled man trying to sober up in the library. Later, an elegant young man invites Nick for a hydroplane excursion next morning, and as Nick confesses he has never met their host, the man reveals himself to be Gatsby. Later still, Jordan is called to speak with Gatsby in the house, and then hints at his amazing story but won't tell more. Leaving the party, Nick

sees a car in a ditch with its wheel off; the drunken culprit cannot understand the car's predicament. Nick interrupts the story here to reflect that he was actually very busy in the weeks between these three parties described, enjoying the adventure of New York. He catches up with Jordan again and learns more of her character: unlike Nick, she is incurably dishonest, and a careless driver.

Lunch in New York

Gatsby drives Nick to lunch in the city and tells him more about his past. Nick is unsure whether to believe it all but decides to trust Gatsby when he produces an authentic-looking medal as proof. Gatsby then hints of a favor he will ask Nick that day. They have lunch with a sinister friend of Gatsby's, Meyer Wolfsheim, who was apparently responsible for fixing the 1919 World Series. When Tom Buchanan appears, Gatsby looks embarrassed and disappears before Nick can introduce the men.

Tea with Jordan

That afternoon, Jordan tells Nick the story and makes Gatsby's request. Jordan met Daisy in 1917 and in the company of a young soldier. For a time after, Jordan heard only rumors of her before Daisy became engaged to Tom. As bridesmaid, Jordan witnessed Daisy's distress the eve of the wedding, as she held a mysterious letter until it dissolved. Yet the couple married and travelled, although Tom got in the papers after a car accident with another girl, and Daisy had a little girl. When "Gatsby" was mentioned at their recent dinner party, Jordan realized that this is Daisy's young soldier. Gatsby bought his house to be opposite Daisy, hoping she would appear at a party. As she hasn't, he now wants Nick to ask Daisy to tea so that he might meet her again. This afternoon, Nick first kisses Jordan, whose real presence contrasts to Gatsby's ghostly devotion to Daisy.

Reunion

Nick invites Daisy to tea and the day arrives, pouring rain. Despite Gatsby's nervousness, Daisy does arrive. The reunion is difficult, but after Nick leaves the couple alone they are "radiant" together on his return. They take Nick over to Gatsby's house so that Gatsby can show it off, and Gatsby is clearly overwrought by the significance of the occasion after such a long wait.

> Almost five years! There must have been moments even that afternoon when Daisy tumbled short of his dreams—not through her own fault, but because of the colossal vitality of his illusion. It had gone beyond her, beyond everything. He had thrown himself into it with a creative passion, adding to it all the time, decking it out with every bright feather that drifted his way. No amount of fire or freshness can challenge what a man will store up in his ghostly heart.

Another party

Nick reflects on Gatsby's "notoriety," and to clear up misconceptions he provides a brief biography of "James Gatz" who, at seventeen, invented and transformed himself into Jay Gatsby. Nick is over at his neighbour's one afternoon as Tom Buchanan drops by with another couple. The three are rude guests, and leave before Gatsby can join them, as he had planned to. The following Saturday, Tom escorts Daisy there, dismissing the extravagance as a "menagerie." Gatsby and Daisy dance, then sit on Nick's porch together as Nick keeps a lookout for Tom. Afterwards, Gatsby says that Daisy doesn't understand. Gatsby obviously expects to repeat the past: when Daisy renounces Tom, she and Gatsby can begin where they left off five years before.

Confrontation

Nick is invited to the Buchanans' with Gatsby and Jordan on a sweltering day at the end of the summer, during which Daisy has spent much time with Gatsby. Daisy's daughter Pammy says hello, then the group casts about for something to do. Daisy suggests the city. When an innocent comment betrays her feelings for Gatsby in front of Tom, the tension worsens. Daisy gets into Tom's car with Gatsby, and Jordan and Nick ride with Tom. Tom stops at Wilson's garage, and is dismayed to hear that Wilson plans to get away with Myrtle. Nick sees Myrtle intent at the window, plainly thinking that Jordan is Daisy. They take a suite at the Plaza Hotel for mint juleps. Finally, Gatsby tells Tom that Daisy doesn't love her husband and they confront one another, as Daisy falters.

> "Oh, you want too much!" she cried to Gatsby. "I love you now—isn't that enough? I can't help what's past." She began to sob helplessly. "I did love him once—but I loved you too."
>
> Gatsby's eyes opened and closed.
>
> "You loved me *too?*" he repeated.

Aftermath

The two men drive their own cars away, and Gatsby and Daisy go on ahead while Nick remembers that it is his thirtieth birthday. The story abruptly mentions a "witness" at the "inquest."

Wilson, acting suspiciously, revealed to the coffee-store proprietor Michaelis that he had locked his wife up. Later, Myrtle runs in front of a car from the city, and is killed. Nick resumes his perspective as Tom's car pulls up to the commotion at the garage. It becomes clear that the "death car" was Gatsby's. Arriving back at the Buchanans', Nick finds Gatsby keeping a watch for Daisy, worried about Tom. Nick gathers that Daisy was driving the car that Myrtle ran in front of because she probably believed that Tom was in it.

Nick warns Gatsby his car will be traced, but he will not leave Daisy, his "grail." Nick describes Gatsby's version of their courtship and Daisy's marriage. Gatsby plans to swim, and Nick leaves with a compliment of friendship and thanks for hospitality. Nick then pieces together the times and events that lead Wilson to find Gatsby in the pool, and shoot him and then himself.

Conclusion

Nick arranges the funeral at which only one former guest, Owl Eyes, appears, and meets with Gatsby's pathetically proud father. Nick reflects that the East is haunted for him, and he decides to go home. Nick has chance meetings with both Jordan and Tom, and is already distant from them. He looks at Gatsby's house before leaving, imagining past wonder at the sight of this new world, relating this with Gatsby's own belief and wonder.

Characters

Jordan Baker

Jordan Baker is an attractive, impulsive, childhood friend of Daisy Buchanan. She is the first person to bring up the subject of Gatsby to Nick Carraway. She also relates the sad story of his relationship with Daisy and Daisy's doomed marriage to the philandering Tom Buchanan. While intrigued by her good looks, Nick recalls that he saw her picture in photos of the sporting life at Asheville, Hot Springs, and Palm Beach in connection with a "critical, unpleasant story." The reader later discovers this concerns a time she cheated in a major golf tournament. Her insincerity with Nick in their love affair is another example of her detached personality. When she first appears in the novel, she is lounging on a sofa with Daisy "as cool as their white dresses and their impersonal eyes in the absence of all desire," like two princesses in an unreal world. Both women use and dispose of people, as Gatsby and Nick experience firsthand. In Fitzgerald's long line of sensual, modern flapper characters, Jordan is one of the most well-known. There is an amoral aura about her, and her world revolves around herself and false material values. Jordan is distinguished from Daisy in her hard, unsentimental view of romance.

Daisy Buchanan

Daisy Buchanan is one of the true "Golden Girls" of Fitzgerald's stories, the wealthy, hard-to-get debutante. In this book, she is the love interest of Jay Gatsby, who builds his mansion for her, and views her East Egg home from the point of its green light. She is the cousin of Nick Carraway, and was brought up in Louisville society. She was the young love of Gatsby when he was a soldier. He does not see her after he is called to battle overseas. During the interim, she meets Tom Buchanan and marries him. At first happy in this marriage, she later discovers that Tom is having affairs. She withdraws into a dream world, yet never loses interest in the illusion of her love with Gatsby. Daisy flirts with him and entertaining his obsessive interest until she commits murder and he takes the rap. Then, she hides behind the protection of her husband, a cruel brute, who uses and abuses people. Moreover, Daisy's voice is the voice of money, as Nick discovers. Her whole careless world revolves around this illusion: that money makes everything beautiful, even if it is not. The danger is, like Gatsby, she carries the "well-forgotten dreams from age to age." Her spiritual lightness parallels her material wealth, and she hides behind Tom when Gatsby is in danger.

Tom Buchanan

Tom Buchanan is the villain of this novel and has Nazi-like theories of race. Nick knew him from Yale and describes him as "one of the most powerful ends that ever played football" there. From an "enormously wealthy" family, he brings a string of polo ponies from Lake Forest, Illinois, to the East. He and Daisy spend a year in France and "drifted here and there unrestfully wherever people played polo and were rich together," before ending up in East Egg. After college, Tom changes and becomes, the writer notes, a blond thirty-year-old with a "rather hard mouth and a supercilious manner." He tells Nick that, based on a book Tom has read and obviously reveres, "The Rise of the Colored Empires," civilization is "going to pieces" and that the white race will be "submerged." Nick observes that Tom and Daisy belonged to a "secret society" that ruined, through their insensitivity and carelessness,

From the film The Great Gatsby, *starring Robert Redford and Mia Farrow, Paramount, 1974.*

other peoples' lives. Tom is demeaning to George Wilson, his mistress's husband, who owns a garage in the wasteland between New York and East Egg. He also mistreats Myrtle herself, whom he violently hits in front of her sister and Nick when she mentions Daisy's name. The overall impression the reader has of this character is his physical power and brute strength. He is a fairly one-dimensional figure in this sense. Tom is indirectly responsible for Gatsby's death because he uses Wilson's hatred and jealousy against Gatsby in making Wilson believe that Myrtle was Gatsby's mistress.

Nick Carraway

The character of Nick Carraway functions prominently in this novel. He is a transplanted Midwesterner who buys a house in West Egg and sells bonds on Wall Street in New York City. Young and attractive, Nick becomes friends with Jordan Baker at a dinner party, where he is reunited with his cousin, Daisy. Nick, who claims to be the only honest person he knows, succumbs to the lavish recklessness of his neighbors and the knowledge of the secret moral entanglements that comprise their essentially hollow lives. While he is physically attracted to Jordan, he recognizes her basic dishonesty and inability to commit to a relationship. He muses on the loss of his innocence and youth when he is with her on his thirtieth birthday and sees himself driving on a road "toward death through the cooling twilight." Lacking the romantic vision of Gatsby, Nick sees life now as it is. Nick deduces that Gatsby is both a racketeer and an incurable romantic, whose ill-gotten wealth has been acquired solely to gain prominence in the sophisticated, moneyed world of Daisy's circle.

Nick is the moral center of the book. From his perspective, we see the characters misbehave or behave admirably. In keeping with Nick's code of conduct, inherited from his father, we learn from the very beginning of the novel that he is "inclined to reserve all judgments" about people because whenever he feels compelled to criticize someone he remembers "that all the people in this world haven't had the advantages that you've had." His father also told him, prophetically, that "a sense of the fundamental decencies is parcelled out unequally at birth." At the novel's end, most readers find that Nick is more akin to Gatsby than to any other character in the book. Insofar as Gatsby represents the simplicity of heart Fitzgerald associated with the Midwest, he is really a great man. His ignorance of his real greatness and misunderstanding of his notoriety endear him to Nick, who tells him he is better than the "whole rotten bunch put together."

Media Adaptations

- *The Great Gatsby* was first adapted as a film by Richard Maibaum as producer and Elliott Nugent as director. It stars Alan Ladd, Betty Field, Macdonald Carey, Barry Sullivan, and Shelley Winters, Paramount, 1949.
- The second film was produced by David Merrick, directed by Jack Clayton, and written for the screen by Francis Ford Coppola. The cast features Robert Redford, Mia Farrow, Bruce Dern, Sam Waterston, and Karen Black, Paramount, 1974; available from Paramount Home Video.
- The novel has been recorded twice, once by The Audio Partners, Listening Library. Three sound cassettes, unabridged, read by Alexander Scourby, 1985.
- The other sound recording is by Recorded books, Audiobooks. Three sound cassettes, unabridged, read by Frank Muller, 1984.

Ewing

See Mr. Klipspringer

Jay Gatsby

One of the most fascinating figures in American literary history, Jay Gatsby is a self-created personage, the embodiment of the American Dream. As Nick discovers, Gatsby's parents were poor farmers, whom he had never accepted as his parents. "The truth was that Gatsby of West Egg, Long Island, sprang from his Platonic conception of himself." He developed out of an idealization of the American Dream, and the Golden Girl who personified that. One day, while attending a small Lutheran college in southern Minnesota and feeling dismayed by having to work as a janitor to put himself through school, Gatsby spots the moored yacht of Dan Cody. In an action that changes the young boy's life, Cody welcomes him aboard his yacht and introduces him to fine living. Gatsby becomes the protege of the wealthy goldminer and lives with him until Cody dies. With some wealth of his own and dreams of more, he goes into the army.

His fate is truly sealed when he meets the most popular girl in the Alabama town near his army post. She becomes the embodiment of the American Dream for him instantly, and from that moment they fall in love and he is determined to have the girl named Daisy. He becomes impressed with her beautiful home and many boyfriends. Perhaps attracted to her material value, she becomes his sole reason for being. When he considers his penniless state, he vows never to lose her in that way again, for while he is called to fight and is away at war, she marries a wealthy Midwesterner named Tom Buchanan. Gatsby commits himself to "the following of a grail" in his pursuit of her and what she represents. This obsession is characteristic of a dreamer like Gatsby, who loses a sense of reality but rather believes in "a promise that the rock of the world was founded securely on a fairy's wing."

Jay Gatsby successfully completes his military obligation and attends Oxford afterwards. He then returns to America and becomes involved in a drug ring. In his criminal affairs, he quickly gains wealth. The next time he sees Daisy, however, she is married to Tom Buchanan and lives on Long Island. To be close to her, Gatsby buys a mansion across the bay and gives extravagant parties in the hopes that Daisy will come to one. He discovers that Nick is a distant cousin of Daisy and gets Nick to take him to see her.

Gatsby's parties are vulgar, in spite of his polite manners, and he lacks a sense of security despite the outward manifestation of his ego. Nevertheless, his loyalty to his dream and idealism mark him as one of the tragic heroes in American literature.

Mr. Klipspringer

Mr. Klipspringer is a hanger-on, who lives off Gatsby by boarding at his mansion. He does liver exercises on the floor when Nick tours with Daisy and Gatsby. A "dishevelled man in pajamas," he gives nothing back to Gatsby. Gatsby compliments Klipspringer, or Ewing, as he calls him, for his piano playing of popular songs. One of these features the lines: "One thing's sure and nothing's surer/The rich get richer and the poor get children/Ain't we got fun?" As most of the characters' names in Fitzgerald's stories, Klipspringer resonates as the name of someone who jumps around and "clips" or robs people of something.

Michaelis

A coffee-store owner who lives next to the Wilsons. He is the chief witness at the inquest about Myrtle's death.

Owl Eyes

This minor character illuminates the character of Jay Gatsby. He finds that the books in Gatsby's library are real, even though the pages are uncut. Like the books, Gatsby is the real thing, but unformed, unlettered, and for all his financial cunning, ignorant.

Furthermore, the ocular imagery in the book is enhanced by this character's role since various acquaintances of the mysterious Gatsby lend their truth to his real story.

George Wilson

George Wilson feels henpecked by his wife Myrtle. A victim of circumstance, he has a poor life and can only work to make a living and must ask the man who is having an affair with his wife, Tom Buchanan, for a car with which to move away. Full of anger and frustration about his wife's disloyalty, Wilson acts on his impulses and kills someone who is just as much a victim of the Buchanans as he. According to Nick, "he was a blonde, spiritless man, anemic, and faintly handsome. When he saw us ... hope sprang into his light blue eyes." He is a true product of the wasteland between the suburban world of wealth and New York City.

Myrtle Wilson

Myrtle Wilson is the mistress of Tom Buchanan and wife of George Wilson, men representing distinctly separate classes on the social spectrum. Myrtle clearly aspires to a life of wealth with Tom, who humors her with gifts: a puppy, clothes, and various personal items. Nick describes her as a stout woman in her mid-30s, who carries "her surplus flesh sensuously as some women can." She has a vitality and ignores her husband "as if he were a ghost" when Tom appears. She is another one of Tom's victims since he physically hits her in the face at her mention of Daisy's name, and is murdered by a speeding car she thinks belongs to Tom, as she rushes out to greet it.

Meyer Wolfsheim

Meyer Wolfsheim is one of Jay Gatsby's underworld contacts in bootlegging and racketeering. Fitzgerald based this character on a real gangster who fixed the 1919 World Series, Arnold Rothstein. We see Wolfsheim at the Metropole and in dark settings. One of Wolfsheim's notable characteristics is his wearing of cufflinks made of human molars. He is so selfish and insecure that he refuses to attend Gatsby's funeral. Nick sees the gangster part of Gatsby's life as one of the ways he made his money, but he separates Gatsby's character from true insensitive, subhuman criminals like Wolfsheim. Gatsby stands by Daisy when she commits a crime, but Wolfsheim will not honor his relationships.

Themes

Culture Clash

By juxtaposing characters from the West and East in America in *The Great Gatsby,* Fitzgerald was making some moral observations about the people who live there. Those in the Midwest—the newly arrived Nick Carraway—were fair, relatively innocent, unsophisticated, while those who lived in the East for some time—Tom and Daisy Buchanan—were unfair, corrupt, and materialistic. The Westerners who moved East, furthermore, brought the violence of the Old West days to their new lives. Fitzgerald romanticizes the Midwest, since it is where the idealistic Jay Gatz was born and to where the morally enlightened Nick returns. It serves metaphorically as a condition of the heart, of going home to a moral existence rooted in basic, conservative values. Further, the houses of East Egg and West Egg represent similar moral differences. The East is where Daisy and Tom live, and the West is where Gatsby and Nick live. Fitzgerald refers to the West as the green breast of a new world, a reflection of a man's dream, an America subsumed in this image. The materialism of the East creates the tragedy of destruction, dishonesty, and fear. No values exist in such an environment.

American Dream

Gatsby represents the American dream of self-made wealth and happiness, the spirit of youth and resourcefulness, and the ability to make something of one's self despite one's origins. He achieved more than his parents had and felt he was pursuing a perfect dream, Daisy, who for him embodied the elements of success. Gatsby's mentor, Dan Cody, was the ultimate self-made man who influenced Gatsby in his tender, impressionable youth. When Gatsby found he could not win Daisy's love, he pursued the American Dream in the guise of Cody. Inherent in this dream, however, was the possibil-

Topics For Further Study

- Read three of Fitzgerald's short stories dealing with the Jazz Age and compare and contrast these to *The Great Gatsby.* Suggested stories are: "The Rich Boy," "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz," and "Absolution." Investigate the role of religion and material well being in Fitzgerald's fiction, based on his life.
- It is said that Fitzgerald's life mirrored the life of America during the decades of the 1920s and 1930s. Chart the decline and growth of America's economy during this time and draw parallels between them and Fitzgerald's life during those particular periods.
- Much has been written of the American expatriate writers in Paris. Read a book by or about these authors, such as *A Charmed Circle* or *The Sun Also Rises* and define the characteristics of these expatriates, their attitudes to events in the U.S. and Europe, and their choice of lifestyle. Include Fitzgerald's trips to Paris and the Riviera in your observations.
- Conservative v. liberal elements in society create specific legislation designed to protect the interests of all citizens. Prohibition was one example of the U.S. goverment's attempts to appease those who opposed the overabundance of liquor in the society. What are other examples of this in the field of education in the 1920s? Demonstrate how the conservative/liberal elements operated in other countries at that time.
- Examine the Dadaist art movement in Europe—as demonstrated in the works of Marcel Duchamps—and compare its tenets and manifestations to the New York adaptation of this popular art form. Note the philosophy behind this movement and relate it to the Wasteland motif in *The Great Gatsby.*
- Relate the tales of Bonnie and Clyde's shooting spree, Al Capone's underworld activities, and other major scandals of the times. Examine why gangsterism and crime were romanticized in the Twenties, and why they are romanticized today as well.

ity of giving in to temptation and to corrupt get-rich-quick schemes like bootlegging and gambling. Fitzgerald's book mirrors the headiness, ambition, despair, and disillusionment of America in the 1920s: its ideals lost behind the trappings of class and material success.

Examples of the American Dream gone awry are plentiful in *The Great Gatsby:* Meyer Wolfsheim's enterprising ways to make money are criminal; Jordan Baker's attempts at sporting fame lead her to cheating; and the Buchanans' thirst for the good life victimizes others to the point of murder. Only Gatsby, who was relatively unselfish in his life, and whose primary flaw was a naive idealism, could be construed as fulfilling the author's vision of the American Dream. Throughout the novel are many references to his tendency to dream, but in fact, his world rests insecurely on a fairy's wing. On the flip side of the American Dream, then, is a naivete and a susceptibility to evil and poor-intentioned people.

Appearances and Reality

Since there is no real love between Gatsby and Daisy, in *The Great Gatsby,* there is no real truth to Gatsby's vision. Hand in hand with this idea is the appearances and reality theme. Fitzgerald displays what critics have termed an ability to see the face behind the mask. Thus, behind the expensive parties, Gatsby is a lonely man. Though hundreds had come to his mansion, hardly anyone came to his funeral. Owl Eyes, Mr. Klipspringer, and the long list of partygoers simply use Gatsby for their pleasures. Gatsby himself is a put-on, with his "Oggsford" accent, fine clothes, and "old boy" routine; behind this facade is a man who is involved in rack-

eteering. Gatsby's greatness lies in his capacity for illusion. Had he seen Daisy for what she was, he could not have loved her with such singleminded devotion. He tries to recapture Daisy, and for a time it looks as though he will succeed. But he must fail, because of his inability to separate the ideal from the real. The famous verbal exchange between Nick and Gatsby typifies this: concerning his behavior with Daisy, Nick tells him he can't repeat the past. "Can't repeat the past," Gatsby replies, "Why of course you can!"

Moral Corruption

The wealthy class is morally corrupt in *The Great Gatsby,* and the objective correlative (a term coined by poet and critic T. S. Eliot that refers to an object that takes on greater significance and comes to symbolize the mood and world of a literary work) in this case is the eyes of Dr. Eckleburg, which preside over the valley of ashheaps near Wilson's garage. There are no spiritual values in a place where money reigns: the traditional ideas of God and Religion are dead here, and the American dream is direly corrupted. This is no place for Nick, who is honest. He is the kind of person who says he is one of the few honest people he's ever met, and one who is let down by the world of excess and indulgence. His mark of sanity is to leave the wasteland environment to return home in the West. In a similar manner, T. S. Eliot's renowned poem "The Wasteland" describes the decline of Western civilization and its lack of spirituality through the objective correlative (defining image) of the wasteland.

Style

Point of View

The Great Gatsby is told from the point of view of Nick Carraway, one of the main characters. The technique is similar to that used by British novelist Joseph Conrad, one of Fitzgerald's literary influences, and shows how Nick feels about the characters. Superbly chosen by the author, Nick is a romantic, moralist, and judge who gives the reader retrospective flashbacks that fill us in on the life of Gatsby and then flash forward to foreshadow his tragedy. Nick must be the kind of person whom others trust. Nick undergoes a transformation himself because of his observations about experiences surrounding the mysterious figure of Jay Gatsby. Through this first-person ("I") narrative technique, we also gain insight into the author's perspective. Nick is voicing much of Fitzgerald's own sentiments about life. One is quite simply that "you can never judge a book by its cover" and often times a person's worth is difficult to find at first. Out of the various impressions we have of these characters, we can agree with Nick's final estimation that Gatsby is worth the whole "rotten bunch of them put together."

Setting

As in all of Fitzgerald's stories, the setting is a crucial part of *The Great Gatsby.* West and East are two opposing poles of values: one is pure and idealistic, and the other is corrupt and materialistic. The Western states, including the Midwest, represent decency and the basic ethical principles of honesty, while the East is full of deceit. The difference between East and West Egg is a similar contrast in cultures. The way the characters line up morally correlates with their geographical choice of lifestyle. The Buchanans began life in the West but gravitated to the East and stayed there. Gatsby did as well, though only to follow Daisy and to watch her house across the bay. His utter simplicity and naivete indicates an idealism that has not been lost. Nick remains the moral center of the book and returns home to the Midwest. To him, the land is "not the wheat or the prairies or the lost Swede towns, but the thrilling returning trains of my youth, and the street lamps and sleigh bells in the frosty dark and the shadows of holly wreaths thrown by lighted windows on the snow. I am part of that." He finds that he is unadaptable to life in the East. The memory of the East haunts him once he returns home. Another setting of importance is the wasteland of ash heaps, between New York City and Long Island, where the mechanization of modern life destroys all the past values. Nick's view of the modern world is that God is dead, and man makes a valley of ashes; he corrupts ecology, corrupts the American Dream and desecrates it. The only Godlike image in this deathlike existence are the eyes of Dr. J. L. Eckleburg on a billboard advertising glasses.

Satire

Fitzgerald wrote *The Great Gatsby* in the form of a satire, a criticism of society's foibles through humor. The elements of satire in the book include the depiction of the *nouveau riche* ("newly rich"), the sense of vulgarity of the people, the parties intended to draw Daisy over, the grotesque quality of the name "Great" Gatsby in the title. Satire orig-

inated in the Roman times, and similarly criticized the rich thugs with no values, tapped into cultural pessimism, and gave readers a glimpse into chaos. *The Great Gatsby* is the tale of the irresponsible rich. Originally, the title of the book was "Trimalchio," based on an ancient satire of a man called Trimalchio who dresses up to be rich.

Light/Dark Imagery

In *The Great Gatsby,* the author uses light imagery to point out idealism and illusion. The green light that shines off Daisy's dock is one example. Gatsby sees it as his dream, away from his humble beginnings, towards a successful future with the girl of his desire. Daisy and Jordan are in an aura of whiteness like angels—which they are not, of course, yet everything in Gatsby's vision that is associated with Daisy is bright. Her chatter with Jordan is described as "cool as their white dresses and their impersonal eyes" by Nick. The lamp light in the house is "bright on [Tom's] boots and dull on the autumn-leaf yellow of her hair." Gatsby comments to Daisy and Nick how the light catches the front of his house and makes it look splendid, and Nick notes how Daisy's brass buttons on her dress "gleamed in the sunlight." Between the frequent mention of moonlight, twilight, and the women's white gowns, Fitzgerald alludes to the dreamlike qualities of Gatsby's world, and indirectly, to Nick's romantic vision. On the other hand, Meyer Wolfsheim, the gambler, is seen in a restaurant hidden in a dark cellar when Gatsby first introduces him to Nick. "Blinking away the brightness of the street, my eyes picked him out obscurely in the anteroom," says Nick.

Historical Context

The Jazz Age and the Roaring Twenties

The Jazz Age began soon after World War I and ended with the 1929 stock market crash. Victorious, America experienced an economic boom and expansion. Politically, the country made major advances in the area of women's independence. During the war, women had enjoyed economic independence by taking over jobs for the men who fought overseas. After the war, they pursued financial independence and a freer lifestyle. This was the time of the "flappers," young women who dressed up in jewelry and feather boas, wore bobbed hairdos, and danced the Charleston. Zelda Fitzgerald and her cronies, including Sara Murphy, exemplified the ultimate flapper look. In *The Great Gatsby,* Jordan Baker is an athletic, independent woman, who maintains a hardened, amoral view of life. Her character represents the new breed of woman in America with a sense of power during this time.

As a reaction against the fads and liberalism that emerged in the big cities after the war, the U.S. Government and conservative elements in the country advocated and imposed legislation restricting the manufacture and distribution of liquor. Its organizers, the Women's Christian Temperance Movement, National Prohibition Party, and others, viewed alcohol as a dangerous drug that disrupted lives and families. They felt it the duty of the government to relieve the temptation of alcohol by banning it altogether. In January, 1919, the U.S. Congress ratified the 18th Amendment to the Constitution that outlawed the "manufacture, sale, or transportation of intoxicating liquors" on a national level. Nine months later, the Volstead Act passed, proving the enforcement means for such measures. Prohibition, however, had little effect on the hedonism of the liquor-loving public, and speakeasies, a type of illegal bar, cropped up everywhere. One Fitzgerald critic, Andre Le Vot, wrote: "The bootlegger entered American folklore with as much public complicity as the outlaws of the Old West had enjoyed."

New York City and the Urban Corruption

Prohibition fostered a large underworld industry in many big cities, including Chicago and New York. For years, New York was under the control of the Irish politicians of Tammany Hall, which assured that corruption persisted. Bootlegging, prostitution, and gambling thrived, while police took money from shady operators engaged in these activities and overlooked the illegalities. A key player in the era of Tammany Hall was Arnold Rothstein (Meyer Wolfsheim in the novel). Through his campaign contributions to the politicians, he was entitled to a monopoly of prostitution and gambling in New York until he was murdered in 1928.

A close friend of Rothstein, Herman "Rosy" Rosenthal, is alluded to in Fitzgerald's book when Gatsby and Nick meet for lunch. Wolfsheim says that "The old Metropole.... I can't forget so long as I live the night they shot Rosy Rosenthal there." This mobster also made campaign contributions, or paid off, his political boss. When the head of police, Charles Becker, tried to receive some of Rosenthal's payouts, Rosenthal complained to a reporter. This act exposed the entire corruption of

Compare & Contrast

- **1920s:** The Ku Klux Klan stages a parade in Washington D.C. with 40,000 marchers in white hoods.

  Today: The neo-Nazi and white "skinhead" supremist movements have taken hold in parts of the U.S. A bombing suspect in the Oklahoma City federal building explosion, which killed over 160 people, expresses his anger at the FBI's mishandling of a standoff with a separatist group at Waco, Texas, in which the compound burned and many people were killed.

- **1920s:** Prohibition is passed, prohibiting the manufacture and sale of liquor. Al Capone takes over as boss of Chicago bootlegging from racketeer Johnny Torrio, who retires after sustaining gunshot wounds.

  Today: The use and abuse of alcohol grows in the U.S., as does participation in the twelve-step program called Alcoholics Anonymous, drug rehabilitation centers, and other support mechanisms designed to stem the fallout from drug abuse. Though still powerful in the drug and prostitution business, several Mafia dons, including John Gotti, are imprisoned for life.

- **1920s:** Political machines like New York's Tammany Hall openly and directly influence the outcome of elections by paying lawmakers and police to make or enforce policies in their favor.

  Today: While direct bribery of politicians and police is neither open nor widespread, there are still political scandals regarding funding of political campaigns. Members of both Democratic and Republican parties have been accused of taking illegal contributions, and campaign finance reform is a hot political issue.

Tammany Hall and the New York police force. Two days later, Becker's men murdered Rosenthal on the steps of the Metropole. Becker and four of his men went to the electric chair for their part in the crime.

The Black Sox Fix of 1919

The 1919 World Series was the focus of a scandal that sent shock waves around the sports world. The Chicago White Sox were heavily favored to win the World Series against the Cincinnati Reds. Due to low game attendance during World War I, players' salaries were cut back. In defiance, the White Sox threatened to strike against their owner, Charles Comiskey, who had refused to pay them a higher salary. The team's first baseman, Arnold "Chick" Gandil, approached a bookmaker and gambler, Joseph Sullivan, with an offer to intentionally lose the series. Eight players, including left fielder Shoeless Joe Jackson, participated in the scam. With the help of Arnold Rothstein, Sullivan raised the money to pay the players, and began placing bets that the White Sox would lose. The Sox proceeded to suffer one of the greatest sports upsets in history, and lost three games to five. When the scandal was exposed, due to a number of civil cases involving financial losses on the part of those who betted for the Sox, the eight players were banned from baseball for life and branded the "Black Sox." In the novel, Gatsby tells Nick that Wolfsheim was "the man who fixed the World Series back in 1919." Shocked, Nick thinks to himself, "It never occurred to me that one man could start to play with the faith of fifty million people—with the single-mindedness of a burglar blowing a safe." Gatsby himself is tied to possibly shady dealings throughout the course of the book. He takes mysterious phone calls and steps aside for private, undisclosed conversations. It was said that "one time he killed a man who found out that he was nephew to von Hindenburg and second cousin to the devil."

The Cover Artwork

Fitzgerald's editor, Maxwell Perkins, commissioned a full-color, illustrated jacket design from

A speakeasy, where people could illegally purchase alcohol during Prohibition in the 1920s.

the Spanish artist Francis Cugat. Cugat had worked previously on movie poster and sets and was employed as a designer in Hollywood. The Art Deco piece that he produced for the novel shows the outlined eyes of a woman looking out of a midnight blue sky above the carnival lights of Coney Island in Manhattan. The piece was completed seven months before the novel, and Fitzgerald may have used it to inspire his own imagery. He calls Daisy the "girl whose disembodied face floated along the ark cornices and blinding signs" of New York.

Critical Overview

Just before *The Great Gatsby* was to appear—with a publication date of April 10, 1925—the Fitzgeralds were in the south of France. Fitzgerald was waiting for news from Max Perkins, his publisher, and cabled him to request "Any News." The 29-year-old author had won critical acclaim for his first novel, *This Side of Paradise* but had faltered with the less-than-perfect *The Beautiful and the Damned.* He was earnest about being considered one of the top American writers of his time, and needed the boost that his third novel might give him to achieve that status.

During his lifetime, Fitzgerald was generally praised for *The Great Gatsby;* it is usually considered to be his finest accomplishment and the one most analyzed by literary critics. The established opinion, according to biographer Arthur Mizener in *The Far Side of Paradise,* is best represented by renowned critic Lionel Trilling: "Except once, Fitzgerald did not fully realize his powers.... But [his] quality was a great one and on one occasion, in *The Great Gatsby,* it was as finely crystallized in art as it deserved to be." *Saturday Review* critic William Rose Benét said that the book "revealed matured craftsmanship." Even harsh critics like Ernest Hemingway and H. L. Mencken praised the writer, as quoted by Mizener. Said the notoriously abrasive Mencken in a letter to the author: "I think it is incomparably the best piece of work you have done." Nevertheless, he qualified this compliment with a complaint that the basic story was "somewhat trivial, that it reduces itself, in the end, to a sort of anecdote." Ring Lardner liked it "enormously" but his praise was too thin, for Fitzgerald's tastes: "The plot held my interest ... and I found no tedious moments. Altogether I think it's the best thing you've done since *Paradise.*" Some of the initial reviews in newspapers called the book unsubstantial, since Fitzgerald dealt with unattractive characters in a superficially glittery setting. His friend, Edmund Wilson, called it "the best thing you have done—the best planned, the best sustained, the best written." All reviews, good and bad, affected Fitzgerald deeply.

From an artistic perspective, Fitzgerald's third novel was as close to a triumph as he would ever get. Financially, however, the book was a failure since he was over $6200 in debt to Scribners, his publisher, and sales of the book did not cover this by October of 1925. By February, a few more books were sold and then sales leveled out. The summer of 1925 for Fitzgerald was one of "1000 parties and no work." His drinking continued to affect his work. For the rest of his life, nothing he wrote quite measured up to *Gatsby.* In fact, when he walked into a book shop in Los Angeles and requested one of his books, he discovered they were out of print.

In the early 1950s, Fitzgerald's works began to enjoy a revival; in addition to *Gatsby, Tender Is the Night,* with its psychological bent, appealed to readers. Critics found similarities between Fitzgerald and English poet John Keats and novelist Joseph Conrad. Joseph N. Riddel and James Tuttleton analyzed American-born novelist Henry James's impact on Fitzgerald, since both men wrote

about the manners of a particular culture. *Gatsby* was compared to T. S. Eliot's poem "The Waste Land" and to Ernest Hemingway's novel *The Sun Also Rises.* The mythic elements of the novel have been studied by Douglas Taylor, Robert Stallman, and briefly by Richard Chase in *The American Novel and Its Tradition*

Symbolism in *Gatsby* focuses on Dr. T. J. Eckleburg's eyes, the Wasteland motif, and the color symbolism. Gatsby has ironically been likened to Christ, and Nick Carraway, the storyteller, to Nicodemus, in a Christian interpretation of the novel. Relatively speaking, most of Fitzgerald's short stories have been sorely neglected by critics, though a steady stream of critical comment appears every year. It has been difficult for critics to detach Fitzgerald the writer from Fitzgerald the legend. Sociological, historical, and biographical approaches to teaching literature have predominated in past decades. Now, more attention is being given to a close reading of *Gatsby* for its artistry.

Criticism

Casie E. Hermanson

In the following essay, Hermanson, a doctoral candidate at the University of Toronto, examines the roles of the major characters in The Great Gatsby *and how the novel both depicts its own time and deals with timeless issues of ambiguity and tragedy.*

Published in 1925, *The Great Gatsby* became an immediate classic and propelled its young author to a fame he never again equalled. The novel captured the spirit of the "Jazz Age," a post-World War I era in upper-class America that Fitzgerald himself gave this name to, and the flamboyance of the author and his wife Zelda as they moved about Europe with other American expatriate writers (such as Ernest Hemingway). However, *Gatsby* expresses more than the exuberance of the times. It depicts the restlessness of what Gertrude Stein (another expatriate modernist writer) called a "lost generation." Recalling T. S. Eliot's landmark poem "The Wasteland" (1922), then, *Gatsby* also has its own "valley of ashes" or wasteland where men move about obscurely in the dust, and this imagery of decay, death, and corruption pervades the novel and "infects" the story and its hero too. Because the novel is not just about one man, James Gatz or Jay Gatsby, but about aspects of the human condition of an era, and themes that transcend time altogether, it is the stuff of myth. Gatsby's attempts to attain an ideal of himself and then to put this ideal to the service of another ideal, romantic love, are attempts to rise above corruption in all its forms. It is this quality in him that Nick Carraway, the novel's narrator, attempts to portray, and in so doing the novel, like its hero, attains a form of enduring greatness.

The novel is narrated in retrospect; Nick is writing the account two years after the events of the summer he describes, and this introduces a critical distance and perspective which is conveyed through occasional comments about the story he is telling and how it must appear to a reader. The time scheme of the novel is further complicated as "the history of that summer" of 1922 contains within it the story of another summer, five years before this one, when Gatsby and Daisy first courted. This is the story that Jordan tells Nick. As that earlier summer ended with Gatsby's departure for the war in the fall, so the summer of Nick's experience of the East ends with the crisis on the last hot day (the day of mint juleps in the hotel and Myrtle Wilson's death) and is followed by Gatsby's murder by George Wilson on the first day of fall. This seasonal calendar is more than just a parallel, however. It is a metaphor for the blooming and blasting of love and of hope, like the flowers so often mentioned. Similarly, the novel's elaborate use of light and dark imagery (light, darkness, sunshine, and shadow, and the in-between changes of twilight) symbolizes emotional states as well.

In-between time (like the popular song Klipspringer plays on Gatsby's piano: *In the meantime / In between time / Ain't we got fun?*) is described by Nick as the time of profound human change. While this can describe Daisy's change between her affair with Gatsby and the couples' reunion, it may also characterize the general sense of restlessness and profound changes happening in these first years after World War One. Daisy (the dayseye, or the sun) is dressed in white and is associated with light and sunshine throughout the novel, and she is very much a seasonal creature. It is impossible, then, for Gatsby to catch this light and fix it in one place or one time. Daisy's constant quality is like the light in the novel, she is always changing. Gatsby's own devotion to her has a permanence that Daisy cannot live up to, yet Gatsby seems committed to an idea of Daisy that he has created rather than to the real woman she is. Daisy's changeability is not at fault in Gatsby's failure. Although she is careless in the way that people like Tom are careless in their wealth and treatment of

What Do I Read Next?

- *The Twenties* by Edmund Wilson, one of Fitzgerald's friends at Princeton University and his entire life, is an interesting introduction to the decade and to the many cultural figures in America at that time. Another book by Wilson that chronicles the Twenties and Thirties is *The Shores of Light,* 1952. Personal impressions, sketches, letters, satires, and pieces on the classics of American literature are included in this book.
- *Heart of Darkness* (1899) by Joseph Conrad, was a literary favorite of Fitzgerald, who used the Polish author's narrative technique in *The Great Gatsby.* The short novel is the story of the civilized Mr. Kurtz, who travels to the savage heart of Africa, only to find his evil soul.
- *Citizen Kane*, Orson Welles's legendary 1941 film, is about a mogul who acquires tremendous financial success but finds that the true source of his happiness is a childhood memory of "Rosebud." Once again, the true values of gains and losses are examined in this well-known classic.
- *Six Tales of the Jazz Age and Other Stories,* F. Scott Fitzgerald, 1922. This is the author's second collection of short stories, the most notable of which is "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz." The recurrent theme of fantasy and winning the top girl and financial success is central to this and other stories.
- *Great Expectations* (1861) by Charles Dickens tells of a grim childhood and an orphan's encounter with wealth and lost love in England during the Victorian era. In its realistic mode, one can find a number of differences between this story and Fitzgerald's, yet striking similarities as well, in regard to dreams and human relationships.

other people, Daisy is naturally not able to renounce time itself in the way Gatsby does in order to meet him again in the past.

Gatsby is gorgeous and creates a sense of wonder in Nick for the daring nature of his impossible but incorruptible dream. It is the attempt itself and the firm belief that he can achieve the impossible that makes Gatsby more than the sum of his (somewhat shabby) reality. As a seventeen-year-old he transformed himself from plain James Gatz, to Jay Gatsby for whom anything is possible. As he rowed out to Dan Cody's sumptuous yacht off the shore of Lake Superior, he was crossing towards opportunity, and a Platonic conception of himself (based on the Greek philosopher Platos' theory of perfect forms, which interprets everything on earth as a better or worse copy of these forms, as well as the conception of a new self-identity). Gatsby conforms to an ideal of himself that transforms reality into possibility. This audacity and disregard for ties binding him to his own past is his apprenticeship for loving Daisy. In defiance of the class difference separating them, he aspires high to this girl in a golden tower, the "king's" daughter, whose voice is full of money. Gatsby does not seem to realize that his idea of Daisy, whom he weds with a kiss one summer night has as little bearing on reality as Jay Gatsby does.

Gatsby is a romantic, but he is also made up of romantic stories by other people who speculate and rumor about his unknown past. Nick takes it upon himself to tell the story and thus to tell Gatsby's story as he pieced it together from different sources, and Nick characterizes himself as someone who understands Gatsby better, who wants to set the record straight, and who sides with Gatsby against the world that made him up and then deserted him. It is Nick alone who arranges Gatsby's funeral and meets with his father, and the bitterness of the lesson about humanity that Nick learns from this experience affects the way he tells the story. Certainly, Nick is also romanticizing

Gatsby. He contrasts the wondrous hope which Gatsby embodied against the corruptness of his bootlegging business (Gatsby's fortune in fact came from illegal alcohol sales) and against the more corrupt society which preyed on Gatsby. Against the background of the times and of upper-class society like that represented at his parties, Gatsby's extraordinary gift for hope and his romantic readiness stand out as transcendent.

Nick's own role in the novel shares much of the nature of paradox and ambiguity which characterizes the whole. The novel is as much about Nick as it is about Gatsby and his colossal dream of Daisy. Nick is an involved outsider, privileged or burdened with the role of witness and recorder of events. While he protests often of his unwillingness to participate in other's embroilments and is frequently irritated or exasperated by them, he participates nevertheless. He is implicated in Tom's relationship with Myrtle by virtue of his presence with them (and the uncomfortable period he spends in the living room of the lovers' apartment while they are in the bedroom together implicates him further as a passive accomplice) while he retains his sense of distance through moral superiority. Similarly, Nick performs the service of go-between (or pander) for Gatsby and Daisy; the couple reunite in his house, and he invites Daisy there for this purpose. At Gatsby's party he acts as lookout, keeping a watchful eye for Tom while the couple slip over to sit on Nick's own porch. This ambivalence in his character undermines his statements about himself as being one of the few honest people that he has ever known, and has led to many critics considering him a kind of smug voyeur. However, Nick's own sense of being both enchanted and repelled by his experiences is at the source of the novel's larger depiction of a meretricious society both enchanting and repelling, and it is this quality which enables Nick to find Gatsby both the representative of everything for which he has an unaffected scorn, and at the same time the embodiment of gorgeous hope. In this way, a story often marked by sordid dealings and dismissed by Nick in one breath (writing two years later) as the abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men can also be a holocaust or fully developed tragedy.

In considering the novel as tragedy, the role of fate (or fortune in its other sense) figures large. The novel is conspicuous in its lack of a religious belief system; God is absent from the skies over East and West Egg. Part of the restlessness of a postwar generation may describe the quest for a belief that can fill the void created by this loss, or the results of a hedonistic lifestyle that will distract people from it altogether. Nick clings to his declared preference for honesty and being a careful driver in a world of metaphorically careless drivers. Daisy is one who lives for the moment, and for whom glimpses of tomorrow and the day after that and the day after that are terrifying lapses of a willful blindness to such matters (and blindness is one of the novel's themes). Gatsby has his own willful blindness in the form of his enduring ideals and the dreams these ideals have created. In classical mythology, which the novel draws on heavily, the goddess Fortune is also blind in that she favors no one (she is often figured with one eye open and one eye closed, winking like Daisy herself) as she turns her wheel about, thereby deciding the fates of human beings. One question of the novel, then, is who (or what) is at the wheel? The blind eyes that watch over the world of the novel are those of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg on an old billboard in the valley of ashes. After Myrtle's death, her husband George is looking at these when he says God sees everything. Nothing seems able to intervene in Gatsby's own inexorable fate, as Wilson tracks him down to murder him in the mistaken belief that Gatsby was driving the death car that killed Myrtle. This sense of predetermined destiny contributes to the novel as tragedy.

For all characters, the relationship between the past and the future is at issue, as well as personal responsibility for the choices they make in navigating the present between these. Nick appears to believe that being careful will keep him out of harm, but he is more of a careless driver than he realizes, as Jordan comments to him after Gatsby's death and after their affair is over. Gatsby himself recalls another careless driver. In Greek mythology Phaeton tried to harness his chariot to the sun and suffered for his presumption. Similarly, Gatsby tries with his yellow car (and all that it symbolizes) to catch Daisy, and fails just as surely. The many echoes of classical mythology recall to the novel a much more distant past (and a mythical kind of narrative) in order to make sense of the New World of America. The novel ends by uniting Gatsby's dream born from his past with the American dream from another past, a dream that is as incorruptible and unreal, indicating the way in which the future of this story may be found in the past: So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.

Source: Casie E. Hermanson, in an essay for *Novels for Students,* Gale, 1997.

Charles Thomas Samuels

In the following excerpt, Samuels describes Fitzgerald's two great achievements in The Great Gatsby: *the "triumph of language" and his creation of the book's narrator, Nick Carraway.*

[*The Great Gatsby's*] fundamental achievement is a triumph of language.

I do not speak merely of the "flowers," the famous passages: Nick's description of Gatsby yearning toward the green light on Daisy's dock, Gatsby's remark that the Buchanans' love is "only personal," the book's last page. Throughout, *The Great Gatsby* has the precision and splendor of a lyric poem, yet well-wrought prose is merely one of its triumphs. Fitzgerald's distinction in this novel is to have made language celebrate itself. Among other things, *The Great Gatsby* is about the power of art.

This celebration of literary art is inseparable from the novel's second great achievement—its management of point of view, the creation of Nick. With his persona, Fitzgerald obtained more than objectivity and concentration of effect. Nick describes more than the experience which he witnesses; he describes the act and consequences of telling about it. The persona is—as critics have been seeing—a character, but he is more than that: he is a character engaged in a significant action.

Nick is writing a book. He is recording Gatsby's experience; in the act of recording Gatsby's experience he discovers himself.

Though his prose has all along been creating for us Gatsby's "romantic readiness," almost until the very end Nick insists that he deplores Gatsby's "appalling sentimentality." This is not a reasoned judgment. Nick disapproves because he cannot yet affirm. He is a Jamesian spectator, a fastidious intelligence ill-suited to profound engagement of life. But writing does profoundly engage life. In writing about Gatsby, Nick alters his attitude toward his subject and ultimately toward his own life. As his book nears completion his identification with Gatsby grows. His final affirmation is his sympathetic understanding of Gatsby and the book which gives his sympathy form: both are a celebration of life; each is a gift of language. This refinement on James's use of the persona might be the cause of Eliot's assertion that *The Great Gatsby* represented the first advance which the American novel had made since James.

In Nick's opening words we find an uncompleted personality. There are contradictions and perplexities which (when we first read the passage) are easily ignored, because of the characteristic suavity of his prose. He begins the chronicle, whose purpose is an act of judgment and whose title is an evaluation, by declaring an inclination "to reserve all judgments." The words are scarcely digested when we find him judging:

> The abnormal mind is quick to detect and attach itself to this quality [tolerance] when it appears in a normal person, and so it came about that in college I was unjustly accused of being a politician, because I was privy to the secret griefs of wild, unknown men.

The tone is unmistakable—a combination of moral censure, self-protectiveness, and final saving sympathy that marks Nick as an outsider who is nonetheless drawn to the life he is afraid to enter. So when he tells us a little later in the passage that "Reserving judgments is a matter of infinite hope," we know that this and not the *noblesse oblige* he earlier advanced explains his fear of judging. Nick cannot help judging, but he fears a world in which he is constantly beset by objects worthy of rejection. He is "a little afraid of missing something"; that is why he hears the promise in Daisy's voice, half-heartedly entertains the idea of loving Jordan Baker, and becomes involved with the infinite hope of Jay Gatsby—"Gatsby, who represented everything for which [Nick had] an unaffected scorn."

When Nick begins the book he feels the same ambivalence toward Gatsby that characterizes his attitude toward life: a simultaneous enchantment and revulsion which places him "within and without." When he has finished, he has become united with Gatsby, and he judges Gatsby great. Finally he has something to admire; contemplating Gatsby redeems him from the "foul dust [which had] temporarily closed out [his] interest in the abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men."

The economy with which Fitzgerald presents those sorrows and short-winded elations is another of the book's major achievements. In *The Great Gatsby* Fitzgerald contrived to develop a story by means of symbols while at the same time investing those symbols with vivid actuality. Everything in the book is symbolic, from Gatsby's ersatz mansion to the wild and aimless parties which he gives there, yet everything seems so "true to life" that some critics continue to see that novel primarily as a recreation of the 20's. *The Great Gatsby* is about the 20's only in the sense that *Moby Dick* is about whaling or that *The Scarlet Letter* is about Puritan Boston. Comparing the liveliness of Fitzgerald's book with Melville's or, better still, with Hawthorne's (which resembles its tight dramatic

structure and concentration), you have a good indication of the peculiar distinction in Fitzgerald's work.

Of the novel's symbols, only the setting exists without regard to verisimilitude, purely to project meaning. *The Great Gatsby* has four locales: East Egg, home of the rich Buchanans and their ultra-traditional Georgian Colonial mansion; West Egg where the once-rich and the parvenus live and where Gatsby apes the splendor of the Old World; the wasteland of the average man; and New York, where Nick labors, ironically, at the "Probity Trust." East and West Egg are "crushed flat at the contact end"; they represent the collision of dream and dreamer which is dramatized when Gatsby tries to establish his "universe of ineffable gaudiness" through the crass materials of the real world. The wasteland is a valley of ashes in which George Wilson dispenses gasoline to the irresponsible drivers from East and West Egg, eventually yielding his wife to their casual lust and cowardly violence.

Fitzgerald's world represents iconographically a sterile, immoral society. Over this world brood the blind eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg: the sign for an oculist's business which was never opened, the symbol of a blindness which can never be corrected. Like other objects in the book to which value might be attached, the eyes of Dr. Eckleburg are a cheat. They are not a sign of God, as Wilson thinks, but only an advertisement—like the false promise of Daisy's moneyed voice, or the green light on her dock, which is invisible in the mist.

These monstrous eyes are the novel's major symbol. The book's chief characters are blind, and they behave blindly. Gatsby does not see Daisy's vicious emptiness, and Daisy, deluded, thinks she will reward her gold-hatted lover until he tries to force from her an affirmation she is too weak to make. Tom is blind to his hypocrisy; with "a short deft movement" he breaks Myrtle's nose for daring to mention the name of the wife she is helping him to deceive. Before her death, Myrtle mistakes Jordan for Daisy. Just as she had always mistaken Tom for salvation from the ash-heap, she blindly rushes for his car in her need to escape her lately informed husband, and is struck down. Moreover, Daisy is driving the car; and the man with her is Gatsby, not Tom. The final act of blindness is specifically associated with Dr. Eckleburg's eyes. Wilson sees them as a sign of righteous judgment and righteously proceeds to work God's judgment on earth. He kills Gatsby, but Gatsby is the wrong man. In the whole novel, only Nick sees. And his vision comes slowly, in the act of writing the book.

The act of writing the book is, as I have said, an act of judgment. Nick wants to know why Gatsby "turned out all right in the end," despite all the phoniness and crime which fill his story, and why Gatsby was the only one who turned out all right. For, in writing about the others, Nick discovers the near ubiquity of folly and despair.

The novel's people are exemplary types of the debasement of life which is Fitzgerald's subject. Daisy, Tom, and Jordan lack the inner resources to enjoy what their wealth can give them. They show the peculiar folly of the American dream. At the pinnacle, life palls. Daisy is almost unreal. When Nick first sees her she seems to be floating in midair. Her famous protestation of grief ("I'm sophisticated. God, I'm sophisticated") is accompanied by an "absolute smirk." Her extravagant love for Gatsby is a sham, less real than the unhappy but fleshly bond with Tom which finally turns them into "conspirators." Her beauty is a snare. Like Tom's physical prowess, it neither pleases her nor insures her pleasure in others. Tom forsakes Daisy for Myrtle and both for "stale ideas." Jordan's balancing act is a trick; like her sporting reputation, a precarious lie. They are all rich and beautiful—and unhappy.

Yearning toward them are Myrtle and Gatsby. Like Gatsby, Myrtle desires "the youth and mystery that wealth imprisons and preserves ... gleaming ... above the hot struggles of the poor." Unlike him, her "panting vitality" is wholly physical, merely pathetic; whereas Gatsby's quest is spiritual and tragic. Myrtle is maimed and victimized by Daisy's selfish fear of injury (Daisy could have crashed into another car but, at the last minute, loses heart and runs Myrtle down); Gatsby's death is but the final stage of disillusionment, and he suffers voluntarily.

Gatsby is, of course, one of the major achievements I have been noting. Although we see little of him and scarcely ever hear him speak, his presence is continually with us; and he exists, as characters in fiction seldom do, as a life force. He recalls the everlasting yea of Carlyle, as well as the metaphysical rebellion of Camus. His "heightened sensitivity to the promise of life" is but one half of his energy; the other being a passionate denial of life's limitations. Gatsby's devotion to Daisy is an implicit assault on the human condition. His passion would defy time and decay to make the glorious first moment of wonder, which is past, eternally

present. His passion is supra-sexual, even super-personal. In his famous remark to Nick about Daisy's love for Tom, he is making two assertions: that the "things between Daisy and Tom [which Tom insists] he'll never know" are merely mundane and that the Daisy which he loves is not the Daisy which Tom had carried down from the Punch Bowl but the Daisy who "blossomed for him like a flower," incarnating his dream, the moment he kissed her. Gatsby's love for life is finally an indictment of the life he loves. Life does not reward such devotion, nor, for that reason, does it deserve it. Gatsby is great for having paid life the compliment of believing its promise.

When Hamlet dies amidst the carnage of his bloody quest for justice, he takes with him the promise that seeming will coincide with being and the hope that man can strike a blow for truth and save a remnant of the universe. When Ahab dies a victim to his own harpoon, he kills the promise that man may know his life and the hope that knowledge will absolve him. When Gatsby dies, more innocently than they (since, though a "criminal," he lacks utterly their taste for destruction), he kills a promise more poignant and perhaps more precious, certainly more inclusive than theirs: Gatsby kills the promise that desire can ever be gratified.

Source: Charles Thomas Samuels, "The Greatness of 'Gatsby,'" in *The Massachusetts Review,* Vol. VII, No. 4, Autumn, 1966, pp. 783–94.

David F. Trask

In the following excerpt, Trask asserts that The Great Gatsby *is Fitzgerald's critique of the American dream and the outmoded values of traditional America.*

Source: David F. Trask, "A Note on Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby,*" in *University Review,* Vol. XXXIII, No. 3, March, 1967, pp. 197–202.

Sources

William Rose Benét, "An Admirable Novel," in *Saturday Review of Literature* May 9, 1925.

Scott Donaldson, "F. Scott Fitzgerald," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography,* Volume 9: American Novelists, 1910–1945, edited by James J. Martine, Gale, 1981, pp. 3–18.

Arthur Mizener, *The Far Side of Paradise* (biography; includes several letters to Fitzgerald), Avon, 1965.

Andre Le Vot, *F. Scott Fitzgerald: A Biography,* translation by William Byron, Doubleday, 1983.

Edmund Wilson, in a letter to F. Scott Fitzgerald on April 11, 1925, in his *Letters on Literature and Politics: 1912–1972,* edited by Elena Wilson, Farrar, Straus, 1977, pp. 121–22.

For Further Study

Harold Bloom, editor, *F. Scott Fitzgerald's 'The Great Gatsby': Modern Critical Interpretations,* Chelsea House, 1986.

This book contains eight articles with an introduction, on the novel's structure, *Gatsby* as an "American" novel, and the wasteland, and includes the article by David Parker, "Two Versions of the Hero."

Harold Bloom, editor, *Gatsby,* Major Literary Characters Series, Chelsea House, 1991.

This comprehensive collection of articles focusing on the novel's "hero," Gatsby, begins with 25 critical extracts on the character and the author from letters, reviews, and articles. Of particular interest is the article by Arnold Weinstein, "Fiction as Greatness: The Case of Gatsby" (1985) which reads the novel as being about making meaning, or creating belief. This includes both Gatsby's fiction of himself and Nick's story of this. The collection also includes an important early article on the time theme by R. W. Stallman, "Gatsby and the Hole in Time" (1955).

M. J. Bruce, editor, *New Essays on 'The Great Gatsby',* Cambridge University Press, 1985.

This shorter work (five articles with an introduction) also includes an interesting overview of the novel's impact on fiction and criticism over the decades: "*Gatsby*'s Long Shadow: Influence and Endurance," by Richard Anderson.

Colin S. Cass, "'Pandered in Whispers': Narrative Reliability in *The Great Gatsby,*" in *College Literature,* Vol. 7, 1980, pp. 113-24.

Investigates the role of narrator Nick Carraway in the novel and his reliability as the narrator of events.

A. T. Crosland, *A Concordance to F. Scott Fitzgerald's 'The Great Gatsby',* Gale, 1975.

The concordance provides cross-referenced lists of every word in the novel, assisting in consideration of the use and frequency of certain words or word-groups (such as "eye," "blind," "see," "blink," "wink," and the famous accidental use of "irises," for example).

Scott Donaldson, editor, *Critical Essays on F. Scott Fitzgerald's 'The Great Gatsby',* G. K. Hall, 1984.

This balanced survey of critical issues (21 essays with an introduction, and excerpts from letters to and from Fitzgerald about the novel) contains some of the now-classic articles or chapters from other books. It features treatments of sources for the novel, the novel's complicated revisions in its composition, and the historical aspect of the work.

F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby,* edited by Matthew J. Bruccoli, Cambridge University Press, 1991.

Bruccoli's critical edition of the novel contains the useful "apparatus" (notes keyed to page numbers in the novel) which had been published separately in 1974, when the novel was still under copyright protection. This edition now explains many of the novel's more obscure references, and points to some of its infamous inconsistencies (the age of Daisy Fay's daughter, for instance). Bruccoli himself is perhaps the most prolific of Fitzgerald's biographers and critics, and has also edited numerous editions of Fitzgerald's correspondence, manuscript facsimiles, notebooks, and even accounts ledgers.

Fitzgerald-Hemingway Annual, various years.

This yearly periodical devotes itself to the works of F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway.

Alfred Kazin, *F. Scott Fitzgerald: The Man and His Work,* Twayne, 1951.

This collection of essays on the author's literature is considered to be one of the best single volumes of criticism on Fitzgerald. Arranged chronologically,

the material ranges from early reviews of the first novel through other critical reactions to Fitzgerald.

Ernest Lockridge, editor, *Twentieth-Century Interpretations of 'The Great Gatsby': A Collection of Critical Essays,* Prentice Hall, 1968.

An earlier collection of seven articles and nine brief "View Points" on the novel, briefly encapsulating a range of different approaches to the novel.

Irving Malin, "'Absolution': Absolving Lies," in*The Short Stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald: New Approaches in Criticism,* edited by Jackson Bryer, University of Wisconsin Press, 1982.

This article links the ideas of the short story with the *The Great Gatsby.* The author demonstrates how Fitzgerald is, to some extent, a religious writer.

James R. Mellow, *Invented Lives,* Houghton Mifflin, 1984.

This is a full portrait of Fitzgerald, his hunger for fame, his destructive marriage, and a backward look to an era that continues to dazzle us with its variety and intrigue.

James E. Miller, Jr., *The Fictional Technique of F. Scott Fitzgerald,* New York University, 1964.

This book discusses the literary influences on Fitzgerald's career, most significantly, Edmund Wilson, H. L. Mencken, Ring Lardner, and Ernest Hemingway.

James Tuttleton, *The Novel of Manners,* Norton, 1972.

The book offers a revealing perspective on Fitzgerald's ability to identify social and cultural manners in the 1920s American society. Reference is made to Henry James and other writers' works.