

Student Companion to F. Scott FITZGERALD

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Student Companions to Classic Writers

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The Great Gatsby (1925)

The Great Gatsby is F. Scott Fitzgerald's triumph. It is, in fact, an American masterpiece. The story of a poor boy who in pursuit of a dream transforms himself into the image of success, *The Great Gatsby* captures in a work of conscious artistry all the yearning desire and anguished disappointment of its hopelessly romantic hero. Gatsby's story is, however, more than the story of an individual. It is, in fact, the story of America. Gatsby's dream is the American Dream; his successes and failures are America's successes and failures. And in this correspondence, Fitzgerald creates his own version of national tragedy. The promise of a dream lies at the heart of Fitzgerald's American classic, but it is a dream corrupted by money and betrayed by carelessness. *The Great Gatsby* stands as a haunting elegy to its passing.

Set amid a world of glittering wealth during an era, the Jazz Age, that Fitzgerald had claimed as his own, *The Great Gatsby* chronicles the life of a dreamer whose pursuit of an ideal saves him from corruption. As James Gatz, a poor boy from the Midwest, he had dreamed of attaining the wealth that would ensure his success and had even invented a self to accompany it, Jay Gatsby. At seventeen, he sets off to become that self. His journey leads him to a military training camp near Louisville, Kentucky, where his officer's uniform gives him entry to the world of Daisy Fay, who comes to embody, in her beauty and purity and essential aloofness, his dream. For Gatsby, to possess Daisy is to possess the ideal.

When Daisy breaks their engagement to marry Tom Buchanan, Gatsby devotes all his efforts to reclaiming his "golden girl" (127). Amassing a fortune as a bootlegger and stock-sharper or speculator, he settles in West Egg, Long Island, across the bay from the Buchanan mansion and there, night after night, hosts lavish parties to which he hopes to lure Daisy. Frustrated in his efforts, he enlists the help of Daisy's cousin, Nick Carraway, a tenant on his estate, to arrange a reunion that nearly fulfills his desire, but possessing Daisy is not enough. Gatsby must also reclaim the past, and to do so, Daisy must deny her love for her husband Tom. When Daisy fails Gatsby once again, she destroys his dream and then carelessly sets in motion the events that will lead to his death. Great in conception, Gatsby falls victim to a dream that can never be attained in a reality tainted by gross materialism, cold indifference, and moral corruption.

GENESIS AND CRITICAL RECEPTION

Fitzgerald conceptualized his third novel as early as June 1922 with the conscious awareness that he may have been squandering his talent and the determination to reveal himself as the artist he knew he could be. So concerned was Fitzgerald to announce his new artistic seriousness that he insisted in 1924, even before the novel's completion, that its jacket have no "signed blurbs" that would compare this work to his others. "I'm tired of being the author of *This Side of Paradise*," he asserted to his editor, Maxwell Perkins, "and I want to start over" (*Life in Letters* 84).

Nearly another year would elapse before the novel was complete because Fitzgerald, at least in part at the suggestion of Perkins, revised major portions of the text when it was already in galley proofs. Aspects of plot and characterization -- how to get his characters to New York and thereby create the conditions for the automobile accident that kills Myrtle Wilson, Tom's lover; how to reveal Gatsby's past without destroying his mystery; how, in fact, to make Gatsby as fully realized a character as Tom Buchanan -- prompted Fitzgerald to restructure some portions of the novel and rewrite others (*Life in Letters* 86-89, 91-92, 94-96). Even the novel's title caused Fitzgerald problems. Although he submitted the manuscript with the title *The Great Gatsby*, he considered several others, including "Gold Hatted Gatsby," "The High-Bouncing Lover" (both references to the novel's epigraphs), "Among Ash-Heaps and Millionaires," "On the Road to West Egg," and "Trimalchio in West Egg." When he finally decided on a title, "Under the Red, White, and Blue," and cabled it to Perkins, it was too late to change the plates without delaying publication, so Fitzgerald, in need of money, settled for his original title (*Life in Letters* 85, 95, 98).

During the novel's three-year evolution, Fitzgerald tested some of his material in the short stories that he was writing to support his family. "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz" (1922), "Winter Dreams" (1922), "The Sensible Thing" (1924), and "Dice, Brass Knuckles & Guitar" (1923) bear striking similarities in plot, theme, and characterization to *The Great Gatsby*. So, too, does the story "Absolution" (1924), which "was to have been the prologue of the novel," Fitzgerald informed Perkins, "but it interfered

with the neatness of the plan" (*Life in Letters* 76). This Gatsby cluster of stories, among his most accomplished, reveals Fitzgerald's efforts to come to terms with his material and to extend his scope beyond his previous work.

In "Winter Dreams," for instance, Dexter Green, a poor boy from the Midwest, falls in love with Judy Jones, a beautiful and wealthy young woman who epitomizes the "glittering" (*Short Stories*221) world to which he aspires. Aware of his attraction and the power it gives her, Judy cruelly manipulates Dexter, treating him "with interest, with encouragement, with malice, with indifference, with contempt" (*Short Stories*228). After she rejects him, Dexter becomes engaged to and then abandons another young woman whose only flaw is that she is not Judy Jones. Years later, a disillusioned Dexter learns that Judy is unhappily married and that her beauty, like his dreams of perfection, has faded with time. The knowledge takes from him any vestiges of hope that remain alive: "He had thought that having nothing else to lose he was invulnerable at last but he knew that he had just lost something more. . . . The dream was gone. Something had been taken from him. . . . Even the grief he could have borne was left behind in the country of illusion, of youth, of the richness of life, where his winter dreams had flourished" (*Short Stories* 235-236). A tale of lost hopes and illusory dreams, "Winter Dreams" certainly anticipates the essential themes of *The Great Gatsby*, and so, too, does its emphasis on money and class as insurmountable impediments to the fulfillment of desire.

"The Sensible Thing" reveals a similar working out of Gatsby's themes and subject. In this story, George O'Kelly, armed with an engineering degree, is struggling to achieve success in New York in the insurance business so he can marry the girl of his dreams, Jonquil Cary. When Jonquil grows nervous about his prospects, she breaks off their engagement. It is, after all, the "sensible thing" (*Short Stories* 295) in the circumstances. A year later, when a lean, tanned, and successful George O'Kelly, of Cuzco, Peru, calls on Jonquil on his way to another engineering project in New York, the joy of his reunion and eventual reconciliation with Jonquil registers as a diminished thing: "Yet he knew that that boy of fifteen months before had had something, a trust, a warmth that was gone forever. The sensible thing -- they had done the sensible thing. He had traded his youth for strength and carved success out of despair. But with his youth, life had carried away the freshness of his love" (*Short Stories* 300). He might now marry this "rare" creature for whom he had struggled to make his own, but he knows, even as he embraces her, that "April is over, April is over. There are all kinds of love in the world, but never the same love twice" (*Short Stories*301). Time, "The Sensible Thing" makes clear, takes the freshness from the bloom. The late summer chrysanthemum, George recognizes when he and Jonquil visit a neighbor's garden, has its own beauty, but its difference from that of the jonquil of spring is cause for regret. This sad understanding of the nature of time, with its accompanying sense of loss, echoes another of Gatsby's major themes, and thus the story provides further evidence of the development of Fitzgerald's thinking during the novel's gestational period.

Fitzgerald's apprenticeship with these stories served

him well. So, too, did the advice of his editor, Maxwell Perkins, whose reservations, particularly about the characterization of the title figure, prompted Fitzgerald to flesh out his sketchy portrait (*Life in Letters* 87-88, 91, 125). Fitzgerald's reading during this period, particularly the novels of Joseph Conrad, also had a tremendous influence on his new novel. From such works as *Heart of Darkness* and *Lord Jim* Fitzgerald learned lessons about point of view and narrative structure that helped him gain control of his material. Whereas his previous novels had been loosely constructed and largely autobiographical, *The Great Gatsby* is unified and imaginative; its themes are evocatively conveyed in its symbols and figurative language. Fitzgerald credited the influence for these advancements to Conrad. Whatever the source of his creative growth, Fitzgerald was confident that he had found his vision. "It represents about a year's work and I think it's about ten years better than anything I've done," he wrote to the Irish critic Ernest Boyd in February 1925. He was, however, apprehensive about public reaction to it (*Life in Letters* 105).

When *The Great Gatsby* was published on April 10, 1925, Fitzgerald had, in fact, "done something really my own" (*Life in Letters* 84). Its language, structure, and themes demonstrated the artistic control and seriousness of purpose for which he had been striving, justifying his claim to Harold Ober, his agent, that "Artisticly [sic] its [sic] head and shoulders over everything I've done" (*Life in Letters* 81). The poet T. S. Eliot even praised the work in a letter to Fitzgerald, asserting that it was "the first step that American fiction has taken since Henry James" (*The Crack-Up* 310). Yet neither the critics nor the public knew quite what to make of Fitzgerald's masterpiece, and the novel sold disappointingly, barely recouping his advance (Meyers130).

Typical of the reviews were Edwin Clark's assertion in the *New York Times Book Review* that *The Great Gatsby* was "a curious book, a mystical, glamorous story of today" (Bryer, Reputation200) and Fanny Butcher's judgment in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* that the novel was "bizarre" and "Melodramatic" and even, "at moments, dime novelish" (Bryer, Reputation196-197). Even H. L. Mencken, one of Fitzgerald's previous champions, could muster only qualified praise for the new work. *The Great Gatsby*, Mencken wrote to Fitzgerald, "fills me with pleasant sentiments. I think it is incomparably the best piece of work you have done. Evidences of careful workmanship are on every page. The thing is well managed, and has a fine surface. My one complaint is that the basic story is somewhat trivial -- that it reduces itself, in the end, to a sort of anecdote. But God will forgive you for that" (Fitzgerald, Correspondence158). Isabel Patterson, however, writing in the *New York Times Herald Tribune Books*, noted the novel's "almost perfectly fulfilled intention. There is not one accidental phrase in it," she praised, "nor yet one obvious or blatant line" (Bryer, Reputation 201). It would take another generation to accord Fitzgerald's novel the acclaim it deserved.

PLOT DEVELOPMENT

The self-conscious artistry of *The Great Gatsby* distinguishes its every element, but perhaps nowhere is it

more apparent than in the novel's complex plot or the arrangement of events. *This Side of Paradise* and *The Beautiful and Damned* are linear narratives; they start at the beginning and work in logical sequence to a conclusion, chiefly through a series of discrete episodes in the protagonist's life. The plot of *The Great Gatsby*, in contrast, shifts back and forth in time and place, beginning well after the events that the novel chronicles and ending there as well. For all its narrative shifts, however, the plot is tightly constructed; each chapter is organized around a significant event that strips bare the novel's illusory world and gradually unmask its title character to expose its meaning and significance. Literary critic Milton R. Stern argues that the novel's plot is "organized around a series of parties" (188), while biographer Robert Sklar focuses on the novel's circular motion, including not only Nick Carraway's "voyage from the old center of the world to the new, and a returning homeward," but also "the circle of nature, the life-giving and life-ending cycle of the seasons" (176). Both are correct, for the novel is indeed one of patterns and parallel relationships. All give shape to what is essentially a sensational tale of love and betrayal.

Chapter One focuses on the Buchanan dinner party, where Nick Carraway, the narrator, reestablishes his acquaintance with his cousin Daisy and her husband Tom, a former college mate, and meets the golf champion Jordan Baker. The chapter places the Buchanans within their East Egg world of smugly genteel privilege but reveals as well the cracks in its foundation, the adultery, deceit, and violence that the beautiful facade covers. In immediate contrast, Chapter Two opens with Fitzgerald's symbolic evocation of the modern world, his description of the Valley of Ashes, above which brood the sightless eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg, and then focuses on the antithesis of the Buchanans' party, the drunken affair at Myrtle Wilson's pretentious New York apartment. The affair exposes the pathetic aspirations of the middle class in their crude efforts to participate in the East Egg world. Fitzgerald depicts the zenith of those aspirations in Chapter Three, the party at Gatsby's mansion. There, in West Egg, the *nouveau riche*, a newly rich middle class energized by their success, engage in an ostentatious orgy of consumption as they look longingly toward East Egg respectability. In Chapter Three, Gatsby also makes his first appearance in the novel.

Fitzgerald's strategy in these first three chapters is masterful. He maps the socioeconomic geography of his story, introduces not only his cast of characters but also major symbols and metaphors, and, perhaps most importantly, creates a context in which a character as improbable as Gatsby seems probable. By the time Gatsby makes his appearance, readers are as intrigued by this mysterious figure as his guests. Like Nick Carraway, they know only rumors and innuendo about him, including stories that he had been a spy and that he once murdered a man. He may even have studied at Oxford University. This figure of romantic speculation and vast contradiction seems little more than a figment of the imagination. He could be anybody or nobody. Thus, his first quiet and unassuming appearance in the novel takes Nick -- and the reader -- by

surprise (51-53). In an instant, Fitzgerald makes possible anything and everything about Gatsby.

Once Gatsby enters the drama, Fitzgerald begins to unmask him. Chapter Four centers on a luncheon in New York, where Nick meets one of Gatsby's business associates, Meyer Wolfsheim, and then takes tea with Jordan Baker. Both occasions serve as opportunities to reveal Gatsby's story, but even here, in doing so, Fitzgerald takes care not to expose too much and weaves in enough of the fantastic and contradictory to maintain Gatsby's mystique. On the drive to New York, for instance, Gatsby tells Nick about his Midwest origins, his life as a "young rajah" in Paris, Rome, and Venice "collecting jewels, chiefly rubies, hunting big game, painting a little, things for myself only, and trying to forget something very sad that happened to me long ago" (70), and his military service, for which he was decorated by every Allied government, even "little Montenegro" (70). Even Nick can hardly believe Gatsby's tale (70). Wolfsheim, however, confirms Gatsby's status as an "Oggsford man" (76), and Jordan, who picks up Gatsby's narrative later in the day, relates the "something very sad" in Gatsby's life -- his blighted love for Daisy (79-83). Suddenly, Gatsby "[comes] alive" for Nick (83), as he does for the reader. Chapter Five, the reunion of Gatsby and Daisy at the tea party in Nick's bungalow, is the novel's emotional and structural center. Here, Fitzgerald brings the past into the present in an almost timeless moment that suggests the possibility that Gatsby's dream may come true. In the broken clock, the healing rain, and Gatsby's dazzling display of success, the cascade of multicolored shirts, Fitzgerald creates the symbols that give meaning to the scene. Here as well, Fitzgerald powerfully evokes one of the novel's central themes -- time's mutability, the fact of change and death -- and in so doing foreshadows the tragic consequences of this reunion, which are the focus of the novel's remaining chapters.

Chapter Six parallels Chapter Three in all but one key aspect: point of view, or the perspective from which readers see the events. In Chapter Six, Gatsby hosts another of his famous parties, and Daisy finally comes. Now, what had been merely dramatized in Chapter Three is judged, and from Daisy's point of view, the vulgarity of Gatsby's party is offensive and appalling (113-114). This crucial judgment, which reiterates the point of an earlier scene in the chapter, Gatsby's snub by Tom and his riding companions, makes clear the East Egg perspective on their West Egg "wannabes" and suggests the impossibility of Gatsby's dream.

In Chapter Seven, the novel's climax, Fitzgerald weaves together the many threads of his narrative, but especially his themes and symbols. In the enervating heat of late summer, Daisy, Gatsby, Tom, Nick, and Jordan motor to the Plaza Hotel, where a devastating confrontation strips Gatsby of his dream. Then, in the Valley of Ashes, the violence and horror that have resided beneath the pleasing facades of the Eggs come appropriately to the surface as Daisy, at the wheel of Gatsby's car, strikes and kills Myrtle Wilson, Tom's lover, and leaves others to clean up her mess. Chapter Eight, which ends in Gatsby's murder, and Chapter Nine, which focuses on his funeral and ends with Nick's

retreat to the Midwest of his origins, allow Fitzgerald to fill in the gaps of Gatsby's life and, through Nick's lyrical evocation of the American Dream, to connect his fate to the history of a country and thereby tie the knot that holds together the threads of his thought.

While the plot of *The Great Gatsby*, in its barest outline, may be, as Mencken observed, "somewhat trivial," Fitzgerald's handling of its various threads is masterful and, as literary critic Henry Dan Piper demonstrates in his analysis of the manuscript's multiple drafts (137-154), the result of painstaking revision. Parallel scenes serve to emphasize contrasts; repeated patterns of symbols and imagery evoke meaning. Fitzgerald's decision to distribute Gatsby's monologue throughout the narrative controls his readers' perception of the title character, and so, too, does his decision to frame his story with the judgments of Nick Carraway, the novel's narrator. In fact, Fitzgerald's decision to make Nick the narrator may have been his most crucial. Not only does it allow him to use Nick's growing friendship with Gatsby to link together the novel's various episodes, but it also allows him to maintain necessary distance from his material through control of the point of view.

POINT OF VIEW

In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald's manipulation of the point of view, or the perspective from which readers view the events, gives further evidence of his artistic maturation. In his previous novels, Fitzgerald had used the third-person omniscient point of view. The narrator, in other words, possessed the ability to relate the thoughts and feelings of any of the novel's characters and knowledge of both past and present, thereby giving readers a privileged position from which to observe and evaluate the action. In Fitzgerald's early novels, those third-person narrators became his voice, and that voice was the voice of his central characters, with whom he clearly identified. Amory Blaine and Anthony Patch were Fitzgerald; he had, to some extent, lived their lives. Consequently, it was difficult for him to distance himself from their experiences and thereby evaluate them objectively.

In *The Great Gatsby*, however, Fitzgerald steps back from his central character by creating a first-person narrator. As the "I" of the story, Nick Carraway is both a participant in and an observer of Gatsby's fate, but he does not possess the privileges that result from a third-person point of view. Nick must struggle to understand Gatsby. Moreover, as a character in the novel and not just a voice, Nick must have a distinct identity separate from Gatsby's. He may be sympathetic to Gatsby and may even harbor in his own heart Gatsby's desires and emotions, but he must be true to himself. Nick may ultimately give voice to Fitzgerald's ideas (and indeed he does), but unlike Amory or Anthony, he speaks with the authority of his own experience as well. As a result, his judgments carry added credibility.

One other aspect of Nick's narratorial stance, its retrospective nature, helps Fitzgerald maintain distance from his material. Nick is clearly narrating events that occurred more than two years prior to the novel's present moment, so

he has had the benefit of time to reflect on and evaluate the experience. That fact gives added weight to his judgments and, by implication, to Fitzgerald's. It also makes probable Nick's lyrical elegy at the novel's conclusion. The leap from Gatsby's dream to the American Dream could have seemed unearned had Fitzgerald allowed Nick to make it at the time of the events. The immediacy of his emotions would have colored his vision and clouded his judgment. In hindsight, however, as the result of conscious intellectual effort, Nick's mythologizing of Gatsby's experience is earned and therefore believable.

CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

Nick's credibility as a narrator is not at issue in *The Great Gatsby*, as it sometimes is with first-person narrators, because Fitzgerald endows him with a number of admirable character traits and virtues, especially honesty, as Nick confesses to the reader (64). While Nick's disarming assertion may smack of boasting and thereby undermine his credibility, his actions throughout the novel certainly justify his self-assessment. Before Nick returns to the Midwest, for instance, he insists upon seeing Jordan Baker to end their relationship honorably. While it would have been easy for him to avoid the "awkward, unpleasant" (185) encounter (and most people would have done so), Nick must be honest with her and explain his reasons for his actions. Nick may be willing to excuse dishonesty in others, as he does with Jordan's deceptions (63), but he will not tolerate it in himself. In fact, when Jordan accuses him of dishonesty at their final meeting, his reply cuts all their ties: "I'm thirty. . . I'm five years too old to lie to myself and call it honor" (186). Clearly, Nick's honesty encompasses self-assessment, making him an anomaly among the novel's self-deceived cast of characters.

Two other virtues shape Nick's perception of the novel's events: his tolerance and his sense of responsibility. Nick is aware that his has been a life of privilege and that economic security has made it possible for him to scorn the false and pretentious. Yet he is also aware, as his father had cautioned him, that his class brings with it certain expectations of decency. This awareness, as he himself admits, may be snobbish (6), but it also makes him tolerant of others' behavior. After all, they may not have benefited from similar advantages (5). Nick's inclination "to reserve all judgements" (5) does not, however, prevent him from judging. In fact, he insists on judgment based on very clear standards of duty, honor, and responsibility that are the "fundamental decencies" (6) associated with his father's world.

Unlike the other guests at Gatsby's parties, Nick, who has actually been invited to attend (45), feels compelled by good breeding and manners to seek out his host and extend him the courtesy of formal greeting and appreciation (46, 49, 57). He is also dismayed by Tom's infidelity and Daisy's seemingly casual acceptance of it (19-22) and is shocked to realize that greed could compel Meyer Wolfsheim to fix the World Series. (As if fearful of being corrupted by his contact with Wolfsheim, Nick demanded to pay the bill at

this luncheon.) And it is, of course, Nick who assumes responsibility for Gatsby's funeral. All around him are "careless" (63) people who use and abuse others, who are both irresponsible and insensitive, without "care" in every sense, but Nick will not allow himself to be careless. Eventually, he will not forgive the quality in others either. Invested with "fundamental decencies" (6), Nick thus becomes the moral center of *The Great Gatsby*.

As one of the novel's careless people, Tom Buchanan stands in sharp contrast to his former Yale classmate Nick. A crude, arrogant man who cares nothing for ideas, Tom is not above using the brute force of his physical strength to intimidate and even subdue others. With one biting retort he can silence his wife; with one sharp blow he can break the nose of his lover (41). Five years before the novel's events, he had taken possession of Daisy Fay; he had purchased her, as it were, for the cost of an expensive string of pearls (80). Now, bored and complacent, his aggressive physicality straining against the proprieties, he strikes Nick as a man who "would drift on forever seeking a little wistfully for the dramatic turbulence of some irrecoverable football game" (10).

Tom's physical strength serves as a metaphor for what Robert Sklar aptly notes is his "real strength, his imperishable strength, . . . the power of his social standing" (190). He may, within months of his marriage, be responsible for an automobile accident that leaves his companion, a chambermaid, with a broken arm (82), he may be supporting a mistress in New York, and he may even conceal one murderer and assist another, but he does so with the certainty that his money, which has conferred respectability on him, insulates him from the consequences of his actions. Indeed, the arrogance with which Tom proclaims the superiority of the Nordic race makes clear all that he takes for granted (18).

With the security that comes from possession of an East Egg mansion, Tom can, in all seriousness, rail against the "Coloured Empires" (17) and defend "family life and family institutions" (137) without ever seeing the hypocrisy of his adultery or the hatefulness of his prejudice. In a modern world where the traditional values and the accepted social order appear to be turning upside down, Tom sees "himself standing alone on the last barrier of civilization" (137), fulfilling his duty to uphold the systems that uphold him, and never once does he question his fitness for the job. He is a denizen of East Egg; social standing alone has conferred on him the right.

Daisy Buchanan, the object of Gatsby's desire, is equally certain of "her membership in [the same] rather distinguished secret society" (22), and the knowledge has made her little more than a passive spectator on life. Her first appearance in the novel emphasizes this aspect of her character. When Nick enters the Buchanan drawing room on a warm, windy summer evening, she and her female companion are lounging on "an enormous couch. . . . Their [white] dresses were rippling and fluttering as if they had just been blown back in after a short flight around the house" (12). While the passage's verbs and images give the impression of movement, the two living beings in the scene,

Daisy and Jordan Baker, in their white dresses, are eerily lacking any vitality. Lounging on the couch, they could be wax figures or marble statues; they seem so cool and lifeless. Only Daisy makes an attempt to rouse herself at Nick's entrance, but she abandons the half-hearted effort, offering instead her hand and her smile as if this should be a quite sufficient greeting.

Fitzgerald extends this initial impression of Daisy's passivity in subsequent scenes and flashbacks. As this scene develops, for instance, Daisy rather "help lessly" appeals to Nick when Jordan suggests that they do something to mark the summer solstice. "What'll we plan?" she asks. "What do people plan?" (16), she wonders, her questions making clear Daisy's lack of imagination and implying a willingness to follow rather than to lead. Those qualities account as well for her marriage to Tom. Under the influence of alcohol, she can muster the courage to toss in the waste bin the pearl necklace that had been his wedding gift to her and to call off the ceremony, but a half hour later, cold sober, the pearls around her neck, she is the radiant guest of honor at her bridal dinner. However much she loves Gatsby, she cannot bear to wait for him. A pearl necklace is hers now (80-81). Given the essential nature of her character, Daisy's willingness to abandon Gatsby and follow Tom once again in the aftermath of the hit-and-run accident ultimately comes as no surprise. The comfort and security of her money and position ensure all that she wants from life. Gatsby unmasked is too frightening a reality for Daisy.

Paired with Daisy in her whiteness, Jordan, too, draws strength from her wealth and social standing. Yet there is an aggressive edge to Jordan that makes her different from Daisy. Her "hard jaunty body" (63) is the sign of a ruthlessness that manifests itself in basic dishonesty. When Jordan lies about leaving the borrowed car, Nick remembers a rumor that she had cheated in her first big golf tournament and realizes that this woman is incapable of playing fair. Jordan develops a "universal skepticism" (84) that excuses her behavior and then depends upon her social standing to protect her from exposure. She is quite willing to enjoy the Buchanan hospitality so long as it demands nothing of her, but when things go wrong, she does not want to be bothered. Lending support is too dangerous a reality for Jordan. It might, after all, involve her in some scandal.

It is Jordan who clarifies for Nick the essential amorality of the representatives of East Egg when she defends her reckless driving. When Jordan drives dangerously close to some workmen, Nick admonishes her to be careful. In the exchange that follows, Jordan dismisses Nick's warning, indicating that other drivers should stay out of her way. Tom, Daisy, and Jordan are indeed careless, and they can afford to be. They have learned to expect somebody else to take care, to clean up after them and to feel for them. Rarely can they muster any emotion beyond indignation; remorse is a foreign concept to them because to know such a feeling is to acknowledge responsibility. At Myrtle's death, for instance, Tom feels little more than a twinge of self-pity (187), and he feels positively justified by Gatsby's murder (187), when, in fact, he bears some responsibility for both. Decency and morality, as Jordan implies, are for other

people, those who cannot afford not to care. Against their hard aggressiveness, calm indifference, and cool insolence, the Myrtle Wilsons and Jay Gatsbys of the world do not stand a chance.

On the surface at least, Myrtle Wilson, Tom's lover, might seem to possess the qualities that could help her to escape the impoverishment of life in the Valley of Ashes. As coarse and aggressive as her lover, Myrtle is Daisy's antithesis in every way but one: she, too, would like to inhabit the Buchanan mansion. Daisy's passivity, for instance, which is born of possession, is countered by Myrtle's animal vitality, which is born of dispossession. A fleshy woman in her mid-thirties, Myrtle lacks physical beauty, and yet her sensuous vitality attracts Tom and even emboldens her to make eye contact with her lover in the presence of her husband (30). A woman such as Myrtle should survive and indeed prosper by the sheer force of her physical presence, yet her own intense yearning for the Buchanan world makes her its pathetic victim.

Wherever she goes, Myrtle seems to have only one refrain, "I want." On the day that Tom, Myrtle, and Nick go to her New York love nest, the first thing she does on alighting from the train is to buy magazines and personal toiletries. Not yet content with her purchases, she "wants" and buys a dog, a mongrel breed like herself (31-32), and at the apartment, she announces the "list" of cheap and tawdry items with which she intends to indulge herself. The sheer breathlessness of her acquisitiveness is astounding, and so, too, is the triviality of her desires. Myrtle's vision is so limited that if she had Daisy's money, she would spend it on garish items like a mechanical ashtray (41) or a vulgar automobile like the taxi in which she deliberately chooses to ride (31). Myrtle is as tasteless and pretentious as her New York apartment. Yet Fitzgerald leaves her some measure of our sympathy, which he denies Tom and Daisy, and thereby subtly connects her to Gatsby. A victim of her own pathetic yearning, Myrtle has aspired to the Buchanan world and, given her limited imagination, sought to achieve it through material possessions. In itself, her yearning for something more in her life is both human and understandable; thus, we can forgive her vulgarity. Yet Myrtle is also the victim of the very world to which she aspires, and the Buchanans' irresponsible use and abuse of her are reprehensible. When she lies dead in the road, her chest torn open to expose her heart, Myrtle touches the sympathetic chords in our own hearts, for we all know her longing. Certainly Gatsby did.

If Nick Carraway is the moral center of *The Great Gatsby*, then Gatsby is its symbolic center. A self-made man -- indeed, a self-invented man -- Gatsby epitomizes the American Dream. His story, as Fitzgerald gradually unfolds it, is a tale of desire, a dream of possibility, a quest for an eternal moment of perfection conducted by a hero whose energy and imagination and unfailing belief nearly empower him to succeed. As great as his conception of himself and his willingness to commit to his aspirations, Gatsby is, nevertheless, a fraud, a man whose identity shifts with the sands in order to be what he must. He is "Mr. Nobody from Nowhere," as Tom calls him (137). It is this complexity and these contradictions that make Gatsby far more than a

romantic dreamer, far more than a simple bootlegger.

Gatsby emerges from the rumors and innuendo and his own conflicting stories of self to embody possibilities that ultimately save him from contempt. As James Gatz, a poor boy growing up in the Midwest, Gatsby had already begun to plot his course to success. At his son's funeral, Mr. Gatz shares with Nick a tattered copy of "Hopalong Cassidy"; on the back cover Gatsby had printed his daily schedule and a list of resolves for his improvement. That list gives evidence of both the deliberateness of that young boy's quest and his conception of how to conduct it. In addition to exercise, work, and sports, he was also committed to self-improvement through reading. Like Ragged Dick, the rags-to-riches hero of Horatio Alger stories, or the original American self-made man, Benjamin Franklin, whose *Autobiography* advocated just such a course of self-improvements, young James Gatz intended to achieve his success by hard work and self-reliance. He also was ready to seize any opportunity and to take advantage of luck. He recognized the importance of creating an image. If he were to be a success, he must look successful.

When his opportunities come, James Gatz is indeed ready for them. On the day that the yacht of the self-made millionaire Dan Cody drops anchor in Lake Superior's Little Girl Bay, for instance, Jay Gatsby is born. Several years later, world war and a military uniform gain him admittance to the world of Daisy Fay, and when, later still, Meyer Wolfsheim offers to make use of this "Oggsford man," Gatsby is willingly made (179). Opportunism is ingrained in Gatsby's character, and it supersedes any moral quibbles about means to the end. Dan Cody, after all, had served as his model of success, and Ella Kaye, the woman who legally cheated him of Cody's inheritance, had rounded out his education (107). The path to bootlegging and stock-sharpping had been paved by others before him, so Gatsby, too, takes what he wants, including Daisy.

With his wealth, Gatsby purchases everything but respectability. He acquires a mansion in West Egg, an outlandish automobile (68), a library of fine books (49-50), and a wardrobe of multicolored shirts (97-98). As the host of a perpetual round of parties, Gatsby is indeed the "Sheik of Araby" (83). What saves him from being another Myrtle Wilson, however, is his dream. Gatsby's purpose is not merely to amass a fortune with which to purchase things, but to amass a fortune with which to purchase things that will prove him worthy of attaining Daisy. Like Amory Blaine and Anthony Patch, Gatsby, too, has "wed" his dreams to a beautiful woman who embodies for him all that life could ever offer (117). Gatsby is, then, more than a crass materialist. He is a romantic idealist.

Gatsby's idealism elevates him above every character in the novel except Nick, but it also, rather ironically, makes him vulnerable to the vicious barbarity of his world, a barbarity to which he contributes. From the moment that Daisy recklessly strikes Myrtle with his car, Gatsby has no intention of allowing her to pay for her actions. While he may conceal the evidence (169), he makes no attempt to run from the crime, as do Tom and Daisy. In fact, there is a certain inevitability about his actions following the accident

that clearly suggests Gatsby's willingness to die. His solitary vigil outside the Buchanan mansion on the night of the accident, for instance, is a wasted effort to protect Daisy from the only man who really can protect her, and the day after the accident, he lounges in his swimming pool for the first and only time that summer as if waiting for the thing he knows is going to happen. In a world of careless disregard for others, Gatsby ultimately proves himself a man of principle by sacrificing himself to his ideal.

Yet Gatsby's sacrifice is wasted on the careless Buchanans of the world. Gatsby simply does what they would have expected. It is wasted as well because his ideal is ultimately so much less than it could be. In choosing Daisy, Gatsby accepts the limitations of the Buchanan world and settles for wealth and social standing. This choice destroys him.

In some ways, Jay Gatsby remains the seventeen-year-old boy with the energy and purity of a dream that is from its conception limited by immaturity and inexperience. Against the brute force of Tom Buchanan, Gatsby simply collapses. When, in the hotel room at the Plaza, Tom attacks Gatsby's self and exposes it as a facade, he leaves Gatsby and Daisy with nothing but the truth about himself.

THEMATIC ISSUES

Because Gatsby serves as the novel's symbolic center, his fate reveals the thematic issues that resonate through *The Great Gatsby*, and because Nick serves as the novel's moral center, his judgments provide the perspective from which readers understand them. Given this connection, the relationship between the characters bears some consideration. While Nick forthrightly admits that he disapproves of Gatsby (6), who represents everything he scorns, he asserts, just after he has recounted his final words to Gatsby, "They're a rotten crowd . . . you're worth the whole damn bunch put together" (162). These contradictions indicate the complexity of the relationship between Nick and Gatsby. Nick can never excuse Gatsby's corruption; he can never forget that he earns his money from illegal activities and is in his own way as amoral as Jordan and the Buchanans. Yet Nick's growing sympathy for Gatsby takes root in the deep recesses of his own heart, where he harbors some of Gatsby's own desires and emotions. Nick, too, has a capacity for "infinite hope" (6). He wants to believe in Gatsby's quest, in the purity of a dream that can lead to greatness. When Tom, for instance, during the confrontation at the Plaza, accuses Gatsby of lying about his Oxford connection, Nick is genuinely elated that Gatsby's answer proves him wrong (136). For just a moment during this confrontation, Gatsby gets the better of Tom, and Nick takes hope that a dream, however fragile, can withstand reality, however brutal. Nick, therefore, from their common chord of hope, will forgive Gatsby his corruption. He, too, is a Midwesterner, and he can relate to this "story of the West" (184), a story, in effect, of misplaced longing, as Gatsby's fate so clearly proves.

As a "story of the West," *The Great Gatsby* completes

the critique of American society that Fitzgerald had been conducting, but without its equivalent depth and maturity of vision, since the publication of his first novel. Nick, Gatsby, Daisy, Tom, and Jordan are all in their own ways reverse pioneers. Instead of making their way west to the land of opportunity and promise, the traditional American journey, these Midwesterners go east, seduced by its constant motion that suggests possibility. By 1925, the year of *The Great Gatsby's* publication, the West is settled, and the Midwest seems, to Nick, a place of dull conformity, respectable towns, and repressed emotion, a place that had been chronicled by Sinclair Lewis in *Babbitt* (1922) and *Main Street* (1920) and Sherwood Anderson in *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919).

For a Midwesterner, the East, epitomized by New York City, seems a land of enchantment, mystery, and beauty. As Nick and Gatsby cross the Queensboro Bridge into Manhattan on the day of their luncheon with Wolfsheim, Nick thinks anything could happen, "even Gatsby" (73). A place of mobility, the East is now the new West. It promises the opportunity to make quick and easy money in the stock market and, with the price of admission, to purchase social standing.

Fitzgerald uses this shift in both physical and psychic geography to explore the nature of the American Dream itself, and what he finds is its corruption by money. As an ideal, the American Dream had once been a dream of self. The freedom and openness of the vast American landscape had promised the opportunity to be. Unfettered by rigid boundaries, unchained from the past, American pioneers could, like Gatsby, create themselves. In time, however, that dream of self became a dream of success. The opportunity to be became the opportunity to be rich, and the goal of life became not self-fulfillment, but the acquisition of the trappings of economic success. Daisy's "voice is full of money," Gatsby tells Nick (127), and its seductive power corrupts his dream just as surely as the sirens' song of money and power that issues forth from the financial centers of the East corrupts the dreams of countless Americans. Money, it seems, can buy anything in this world, from a dog leash of leather and braided silver to an easy life and a new identity. For the right price, and with the right currency, even Daisy is for sale. Money, then, has changed the nature of the American Dream; it has destroyed its finest conception. The result is *The Great Gatsby* world of diminished things, and that world reflects Fitzgerald's tragic awareness of loss, given what it has become.

Fitzgerald heightens Nick's sense of the dark underside of this reality by juxtaposing to it images of death and the grotesque. Nick notices, for instance, on his journey into New York with Gatsby, a hearse, the sight of which evokes the transient nature of this reality. The Valley of Ashes and the billboard eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg also serve as constant reminders of this dark reality, and West Egg, as Nick finally comes to see it, reminds him of a surrealistic painting of death by El Greco (185). The adjectives in his description of this painting -- "sullen," "cold," "lustreless," "grotesque" -- emphasize the "quality of distortion" (185) that Nick associates with the East, and the anonymity of the

human figures in the painting and the landscape itself suggest the very namelessness and placelessness that also characterize the East. Nobody seems to have a name at Gatsby's parties; everybody seems identified instead by appearance or by occupation or, more tellingly, by automobile, the very symbol of rootlessness and mobility. What emerges from these images is a world with a glittering veneer that conceals the rotteness beneath.

The novel's symbolic geography also makes clear that the distinctions between East and West are largely matters of appearance rather than substance, and Fitzgerald emphasizes the point in his use of the Long Island setting. Despite their physical similarities, the "wingless" souls who inhabit the Eggs draw vast distinctions between them (9). West Egg, like the Midwest, is the less fashionable promontory. It glitters with the spoils of new money and dances with the raw energy of desire. There Gatsby lives in his spacious, hotel-like mansion, a place as temporary as its occupant. East Egg, in contrast, is stately and dignified, clearly reflecting its sense of itself. There the residents are rooted to the past and linked to history. The Buchanans, for instance, live in a Georgian Colonial mansion that seems an extension of its immaculate lawn, so covered is it in ivy (11). Yet Nick's experience and Gatsby's fate demonstrate that the Eggs' "wingless" residents, who lack the ability to soar above their own limited perceptions, have mistaken appearance for substance. East Egg is the center of old money and genteel respectabilities, the place that the nouveau riche of West Egg, energized by their desire, seek to emulate. As Fitzgerald makes clear, however, the only real difference between them is that one group has what the other wants, and what both want is not worth having. It brings nobody any real satisfaction because it is not what is truly wanted.

Fitzgerald drives home this point through the development of a second major theme, time, with its accompanying attendants, mutability and loss. Gatsby's dream of Daisy involves more than simply reclaiming her. He wants as well to redeem the five years that have separated them. He wants, in fact, to erase the past. Nick is astounded by this aspect of Gatsby's quest and simply cannot believe that his friend is serious about it. Gatsby insists, however, that he can "repeat the past" (116). Gatsby expects Daisy to tell Tom that she never loved him (116). He, in turn, is going to restore everything to its former state; only by redeeming the past can he find his ideal. This is the nature of Gatsby's true quest, and it is doomed to fail from the beginning.

What Gatsby seeks to recover is a timeless moment of perfection, and the closest he comes to it is his reunion with Daisy in Nick's bungalow. Preparations for that reunion begin in a moment of disjointed time when Nick returns to West Egg at two in the morning following his meeting with Jordan. An agitated Gatsby is clearly waiting for his arrival, killing time, as it were, until he learns whether Nick will help him achieve his dream. Their ensuing conversation centers on issues of time: when the meeting shall take place, how long it will take to have Nick's grass cut. On the day of the reunion, time again preoccupies Gatsby. He arrives at

Nick's bungalow hours before the scheduled event and then, two minutes before the appointed hour, announces that he is returning home. Finally, at the moment of their meeting, Gatsby and Daisy do indeed seem to slip out of time because a broken mantle clock, on which Gatsby rests his head, presides over the occasion, no longer ticking off the minutes and hours as they inevitably pass (91). Like the lyrics of the song that Klipspringer plays for them on the piano, their reunion seems to take place "In the meantime, / In between time" (101). Yet, throughout it all, Gatsby is indeed aware of time's passing. He knows, for instance, exactly the number of years that have separated them (92), as well as the number it has taken to make possible this reunion (95). Nick even senses that Gatsby, in his intense anticipation, is overwound like a clock (97). At the novel's emotional center, the fact of time underscores every aspect of the occasion. References to time dominate *The Great Gatsby*, making clear its reality and its inevitability, much as Gatsby might like to believe otherwise. Perhaps one of time's most poignant manifestations is Pammy, Daisy's daughter. When Gatsby actually meets her, he stares at the child in disbelief (123), unable to comprehend her reality. Daisy's child, however, is a fact of time, a fact that no amount of "fixing things" can change, and her existence foreshadows Gatsby's inevitable disillusionment when Daisy fails to redeem time for him during the confrontation at the Plaza (137-140).

Even if Daisy had denied those years, she would not have been able to give Gatsby what he desired because it (if it ever existed) was already gone. Gatsby wants the dream, the illusion, but it is wedded to a human reality that is bound by the process of time to change and mutability. As much as Gatsby seeks to deny that process and its effects, he cannot. In fact, even his dream has changed over time, embellished by his own desire to the point that it could never exist. Eventually, Gatsby's loss of his illusion destroys him.

Nick, however, is saved from Gatsby's fate by both his undertaking and his acceptance of time's inevitabilities. Throughout the novel, Fitzgerald has associated images of death and decay with Nick, suggesting his awareness of time's reality. He emphasizes the point, however, when he imposes on him his thirtieth birthday on the day that Gatsby's world collapses at the Plaza. At thirty, his youth gone, Nick anticipates with some trepidation the adult realities that he must face: "Thirty -- the promise of a decade of loneliness, a thinning list of single men to know, a thinning brief-case of enthusiasm, thinning hair" (143). The repetition of the word "thinning" makes dear that diminished possibilities are the reality of adulthood, but with Jordan leaning on his shoulder, Nick finds temporary reassurance that they can wait. That reassurance, however, vanishes in the aftermath of the hit-and-run accident and Gatsby's murder. On his thirtieth birthday, Nick must accept change or, like Gatsby, be destroyed.

In the aftermath of Gatsby's death, Nick retreats from the East and all that it embodies, returning to the Midwest of his birth because it represents moral certainty and connects him to a sense of place. He is drawn there, perhaps by memories of other homecomings from prep school and college when, in Chicago's Union Station, he and his old

acquaintances, who were making similar journeys, would match invitations with the easy familiarity and pleasing comfort that comes of shared histories and experiences. Then, as the train bore him ever closer to the heart of home, he would feel in the air a vivid sense of place and identity with the Midwest (184). For Nick, the Midwest is a certainty epitomized by the Carraway house, still called by its family name, and he draws strength and satisfaction from that certainty. The Midwest may be staid, respectable, and even a little complacent, but Nick has come to see that there may be nothing wrong with these qualities. At the very least, they ensure decent behavior, and behind such behavior may actually lie true human feelings.

Nick's return to the Midwest makes dear Fitzgerald's judgment of *The Great Gatsby* world of careless cruelty and counterfeit realities. It also ties together the novel's major themes. In its final elegiac paragraphs, a chastened Nick reflects on the larger meaning of his experience and makes clear the connection between Gatsby's story and the national myth of the American Dream. Behind *The Great Gatsby* world lie the traces of the new world that had "flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes" (189). Like Gatsby, those sailors had gazed on possibility and been awed by it. For Gatsby and those sailors, the enormity of the challenge -- to dream a dream, to imagine a world equal to its promise -- was beyond the capability of any human being, so even at the moment of discovery, that bright new promise had already disappeared. Bound by time to mutability and loss, each generation struggles, nevertheless, to dream a world of perfection into existence again. That effort, that dream, is both the hope and the tragedy of the human experience and the American myth.

SYMBOLISM AND FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

In his most fully realized artistic achievement, Fitzgerald creates a rich pattern of evocative language and some equally provocative symbols to carry the weight and meaning of his ideas. Some, such as the novel's symbolic geography and the many references to time and death, have been discussed in the Theme section; another, the metaphor of carelessness, has been analyzed in the section on Character Development. Other equally important poetic devices resonate with meaning in *The Great Gatsby* and provide further evidence of the degree to which Fitzgerald crafted his novel to achieve his purpose.

In East Egg and West Egg, Fitzgerald creates a symbolic geography that clearly evokes the novel's mythic landscapes, and he uses houses to reveal the lives and values of the people who inhabit each territory. Linking the Eggs with New York City is an equally important geographic feature, the Valley of Ashes. A symbol of the modern wasteland that T. S. Eliot had so powerfully dissected in his 1922 poem *The Wasteland*, the Valley of Ashes is a place of poverty and desolation, a vast nothingness that mocks the efforts of the people who inhabit and traverse it daily (27). Here, in a gray, insubstantial landscape that looks as if it were a thriving reality, live the George and Myrtle Wilsons

of the world. Poor and seemingly disenfranchised, they long to escape to the Eggs or the city, but their poverty denies them that possibility. George, the proprietor of a garage and thereby the purveyor of mobility, ironically cannot even afford the price of the automobile that would make possible his escape to the West (130).

Brooding over this barrenness are the eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg, which in *The Great Gatsby's* materialistic world are the rather appropriate remnants of an advertising billboard for an oculist. To a world of the blind, those eyes promise new vision, but now dim, they mock the very notion of clear-sightedness. In their suspension in space, from which they stare inscrutably down on the comings and goings that constitute life in the Valley of Ashes, they also represent the God of this world. When George, for instance, accuses Myrtle of adultery, he forces her to look out the window at the eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg, insisting they know and see everything: "You may fool me but you can't fool God! . . . God sees everything" (167). His neighbor, Michaelis, cautions him that it is only an advertisement, not a god, so George should not expect answers from him. In fact, those who inhabit this contemporary wasteland should expect no answers because they have lost the very idea of God if they confuse a billboard for a deity, the material for the spiritual.

Fitzgerald elaborates on the nature of *The Great Gatsby* world and its inhabitants by making the automobile a major symbol in the novel. It functions in two ways. It is first a status symbol, revealing the social identity of its owner. The Buchanans, for instance, secure in their status, drive a tasteful blue coupe that George Wilson, too poor to own any car, would like to purchase for resale (130). To him, it represents the promise of mobility and offers a chance to escape his no-status existence. Gatsby's auto, which Tom likens to a "circus wagon" (128), is as gaudy and ostentatious as his mansion and his parties (68). Gatsby takes pride in his automobile, as he does in all his possessions because it signifies the wealth that he believes legitimizes his claim to Daisy. Yet its sheer audacity, as Tom's comment makes clear, will prevent him from moving to East Egg. He may have wheels, but they transport the wrong sort of chassis.

The automobile also emphasizes the restlessness of those who inhabit *The Great Gatsby* world. These characters are in constant motion, moving back and forth across the landscape on journeys that seem to have no real purpose other than to relieve boredom. Their perpetual motion rather ironically leads them to no destination, no satisfaction. Instead, it increases their opportunities for lethal carelessness. The automobile accident following one of Gatsby's parties (58-60) clearly foreshadows Daisy's hit-and-run encounter with Myrtle. Both drivers are equally oblivious to the potential power of their motion. They must simply move.

Restless and careless, the inhabitants of *The Great Gatsby* world are also brutally animalistic, even cannibalistic, and Fitzgerald dehumanizes them by linking them to other living creatures and plant life with their names. Meyer Wolfsheimer, Gatsby's business associate, is

certainly the most important character developed in this way; his name, of course, signifies his predatory nature. This gambler, however, preys unabashedly on humans. In fact, he wears cufflinks made of human molars. The owl-eyed man who admires Gatsby's books because he sees through the appearances to the magnitude of his attempt also bears an appropriate name (49-50). Nick's list of guests who attended Gatsby's parties, however, offers the most telling evidence of the pervasiveness of such people in *The Great Gatsby* world: the Leeches, the Hammerheads, the Catlips, James B. ("Rot-gut") Ferret, Clarence Endive, and S. B. Whitebait. The guests at Gatsby's parties seem hardly human, and by including on the list guests whose names evoke America's past, for instance, Stonewall Jackson Abrams and Mrs. Ulysses Swett, Fitzgerald effectively diminishes the greatness of their historical associations (65-68).

As this whole cluster of symbols and metaphors clearly suggests, *The Great Gatsby* world is a barren wasteland in which nothing of value can thrive. Its inhabitants are cruelly callous creatures who rapaciously devour themselves and others. In such a world, Gatsby's dream and his life have about them the unreality of the carnival, yet another of the novel's metaphorical patterns. His salons and verandas "gaudy with primary colors" (44), and his raucous parties likened to amusement parks (45), Gatsby is for a time a modern Trimalchio (119), an allusion to the vulgar parvenu of the Roman satire *The Satyricon*, by Petronius.

By the end of the novel, however, "the whole caravansary," as Nick realizes, "had fallen in like a cardhouse at the disapproval in [Daisy's] eyes" (120). "A universe of ineffable gaudiness," Gatsby's dream, and hence his world, is "founded securely on a fairy's wing" (105), and neither stands a chance of survival in the modern wasteland.

The Great Gatsby is rich with color symbolism and light and dark imagery as well. The green light at the end of Daisy's pier, for instance, beckons Gatsby forward to her white and gold world of belonging. Moonlight and starlight illuminate this world and thereby suggest its dreamlike quality, which the sun's searing heat destroys. Gatsby's dream, for instance, shrivels to nothing on summer's hottest day. Flowers also figure prominently among the novel's metaphorical patterns. Both Myrtle and Daisy, for instance, have floral names suggestive of their natures. Daisy's name combines with the novel's color symbolism to evoke the white and gold colors of wealth. In his analysis of *The Great Gatsby*, Milton R. Stem examines fully the evocative details and language patterns that contribute so much to the novel's central issues and aptly concludes that "Fitzgerald's methods of organization revolved around a series of associations between details and the idea of betrayal, repeated until the idea takes on the life of its own style" (*Moment* 267). Daisy never blossoms for Gatsby, and the green light, which had once seemed so close, loses its enchantment and becomes again merely "a green light on a dock" (98). Beneath appearances and surface details there does indeed lie another reality, one that does, in fact, betray Gatsby and his dream. Fitzgerald's complex pattern of symbol and figurative language ultimately forms a poetry of loss that reveals these truths.

A MYTHOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION

Just prior to his murder, Jay Gatsby confides the remainder of his history to Nick Carraway, who realizes then the significance of his friend's grail-like quest. Like the knights of old, Gatsby had sought something greater than the thing itself, an ideal that would restore order and meaning to his life. Nick's metaphor suggests an alternate critical approach to *The Great Gatsby*, one that focuses on the mythological aspects of Gatsby's tale. Closely connected to the psychological approach to literature outlined in Chapter 6, mythological criticism seeks to explain the motives underlying human behavior. Unlike psychological criticism, however, it finds its answers not in the biological sciences, but in religion, anthropology, and cultural history. To arrive at their conclusions, myth critics thus examine the archetypes and archetypal patterns -- the shared images, formulas, and types -- upon which writers draw to give order and a frame of meaning to their personal perceptions and visions.

Myths, according to scholars of religion and anthropology, make concrete and particular a special perception of human beings or a worldview; they are a symbolic language through which primitive people express themselves and interpret natural events. Found at the beginnings of every culture, myths are part of every literature. They differ from legends because they rely less on historical background and more on the supernatural; they differ from fables because they are less concerned with teaching a moral lesson and because they are the product of a society rather than the creation of an individual. Collective and communal by nature, myths bind a tribe or a nation together in that people's common psychological and spiritual activities.

A dynamic creation, myth transcends both time and place; it unites the past, or traditional modes of belief, to the present's current values and reaches toward the future in its expression of spiritual and cultural aspirations. Furthermore, although every culture has its own distinctive mythology that may be reflected in its legends, folklore, and ideologies, myth is, in the general sense, universal. In fact, the mythology of all groups, as scholars such as Sir James Frazer, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Joseph Campbell have demonstrated, centers on certain common motifs or themes: They attempt to explain creation, divinity, and religion; to probe the meaning of existence and death; to account for natural events; and to chronicle the exploits of cultural heroes. They also share certain images, called archetypes, that tend to elicit comparable psychological responses and to serve cultural functions. Water, for instance, is universally associated with the mystery of creation; fertility and growth; the cycle of birth, death, and resurrection; and purification and redemption.

Writers, the myth critic believes, draw consciously or unconsciously upon these archetypes to express their own unique responses to the world and simultaneously to connect their visions to some universal response that resonates in the minds of readers. The myth critic seeks to discover the universal understanding through analysis of the work's archetypes. As dramatic or narrative embodiments of a

people's perception of the deepest truths, myths thus serve as a useful lens through which to examine literature, and mythological critics, who believe that literature is informed by these preliterary constructs, or understandings, find in it traces of primordial ritual and ceremony, collective memory, unconsciously held value systems, and general beliefs.

One of the most pervasive myths centers on the hero and functions as an archetype of transformation and redemption. In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell explains that the myth of the hero typically follows a three-part pattern of separation, initiation, and return. In the first part of the myth, the hero must venture forth from his ordinary existence to undertake a quest; its successful completion will result in the salvation of his kingdom and perhaps marriage to the princess. Complicating his journey is a series of tests. Myths, according to scholars of religion and anthropology, make concrete and particular a special perception of human beings or a worldview; they are a symbolic language through which primitive people express themselves and interpret natural events. Found at the beginnings of every culture, myths are part of every literature. They differ from legends because they rely less on historical background and more on the supernatural; they differ from fables because they are less concerned with teaching a moral lesson and because they are the product of a society rather than the creation of an individual. Collective and communal by nature, myths bind a tribe or a nation together in that people's common psychological and spiritual activities.

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When Fitzgerald says of Gatsby that he had "committed himself to the following of a grail" (156), he evokes one of the most famous adventures of Arthurian myth -- the quest of the Holy Grail. According to legend, the Grail was a vessel used by Christ at the Last Supper, and thus it was linked with the sacrament of communion and "endowed," notes historian Geoffrey Ashe, "with supernatural properties of the Christian kind. It was a source of healing and inspiration and visions, and its finding, or 'achievement,' was a transcendent mystical experience" (173).

Following the death of King Arthur, several of his knights-errant seek to discover and to retrieve the Grail. Without its king, Britain had fallen into a dark and sterile period, and Arthur's knights sought the Grail to restore life to their land and people. Gawain is one of the first knights to venture forth in search of the Grail, and Galahad, Lancelot's son, achieves it fully. Perceval, the Great or Noble Fool, however, is the principal Grail-seeking knight, and his representation as the Great Fool serves in many ways as a prefiguration of Gatsby's.

The Great or Noble Fool is, like Gatsby, a man of humble birth and rude country ways who meets, wins the favor of, and spends a romantic night with a beautiful aristocratic woman. Arriving at court, the hero is subjected to cruel mockery by the king's entourage and forced to assume a menial position in the royal household, where he suffers ridicule for his unpolished habits. When the lovely lady of his dreams comes under threat, however, the Great Fool seizes the opportunity to prove himself worthy by serving as her champion when everyone else runs in fear of the evil being who has her in thrall. His reward for destroying the evil threat is the lady's hand in marriage.

In one of the myth's most popular versions, the legend of Sir Parzival, a rendition of the Perceval tale by the German poet Wolfram von Eshenbach, the hero ultimately renounces worldly fame and fortune as well as sexual love

to dedicate himself to the quest of the Holy Grail. Although it is an unattainable goal in the material world, Parzival, who has been purified by long years of self-denial and simple life, is eventually rewarded with a vision of the Grail as he dies and ascends to heaven.

In his pursuit of Daisy, who represents the good, the true, and the beautiful to him and to whom he has "forever wed his unutterable dreams" (117), Gatsby, too, resembles a medieval knight-errant in quest of the Grail. If he can reclaim Daisy, he will in some way redeem time. He will make real an ideal that his "extraordinary gift for hope" (6) has sustained in the face of both material and spiritual privation. That dream of Daisy, Gatsby's grail, has fueled his every action since she was lost to him: For Daisy, Gatsby He must be worthy of his grail.

The Great Gatsby world, however, is far different from the medieval world. Material success rather than high ideals and sacrificial gestures is the measure of *The Great Gatsby* hero. The whim of a Daisy, who will marry any Tom for the price of a pearl necklace, is insubstantial in comparison to the deep and abiding love of a Guinevere for her Lancelot, however adulterous the passion. The Great Gatsby world is built on a foundation of bootleg gin, penny stocks, and cufflinks crafted from human molars, and its nightmare landscapes—the sterile Valley of Ashes, the chaotic distortions of New York, the riotous debaucheries at Gatsby's mansion -- are the truest images of its reality. Rather than lead the ascetic life of a Parzival, Gatsby revels in his rainbow cascade of shirts and his monstrous Rolls Royce. When he finds his grail, it brings death rather than life, despair and disillusionment rather than faith and hope. Fitzgerald's evocation of the Grail myth, whether conscious or unconscious, thus serves as an ironic counterpoint to modern realities. It underscores the superficial values and the inhumane nature of twentieth-century America, a world that its Puritan forebears had once invested with all the bright hopes of a New Eden.

Those hopes, which Fitzgerald also evokes, most significantly in the novel's final paragraphs, offer the myth critic yet another avenue for exploration because the myth of the American Dream is one of the informing beliefs related to the uniqueness of American culture. The central facet of this myth is the belief in Edenic possibilities, the hope that Paradise could be re-created not in the next world and not out of time, but in the here and now of a new continent, a New World. Europeans from the time of its first settlement saw America as a land of hope and opportunity, a place where men and women could escape centuries of poverty, misery, and corruption and start anew in a land undefiled. Here, in this New World, human beings could satisfy their mythic yearnings for a New Eden. They could re-create a paradise on earth.

In such a New World, a New Adam would also be possible. Cut free from the corrupting influences of European society, this New Adam (for it is chiefly an Adam

who figures in the myth, an Adam free from the moral compromise of an Eve), is, as R.W. B. Lewis describes him in his study *The American Adam*, "a radically new personality, the hero of the new adventure: an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources" (5). James Fenimore Cooper's Natty Bumppo in his series of *Leatherstocking* novels is the frontier version of such a hero. His civilized counterpart is the Self-Made Man, the hero of a corollary myth of the American Dream -- the Dream of Success. Such a hero is a direct descendent of Benjamin Franklin, who entered Philadelphia with little more than wit, ingenuity, and the will to succeed and through pluck, luck, and the cultivation of some key virtues rose from rags to riches. Horatio Alger's nineteenth-century hero Ragged Dick also represents him, and so, too, does Fitzgerald's Jay Gatsby.

Guided by his "Schedule" and list of "General Resolves" recorded on the fly-leaf of his ragged copy of "Hopalong Cassidy" (181), James Gatz transforms himself into Jay Gatsby, following the footsteps of that mythic American hero who achieves the American Dream of Success. That achievement demonstrates the continued vitality of the myth in American cultural life more than two hundred years after the first versions appeared. Yet in many ways, Gatsby's success is only an illusion. His mansion, for instance, sits in the less fashionable West Egg but is out of place in either of the Eggs, a fact that suggests its owner's uncertain status in the world. Similarly, Gatsby's possession of Daisy, in whom he has invested all his hopes and dreams, is never more than temporary. He may have the money to purchase the trappings of success, but clearly it is the wrong currency with which to purchase the thing itself. Gatsby's death thus suggests the bankruptcy of the American Dream of Success, for a dream based on material wealth, which is, after all, both transient and mutable, ultimately offers no firm foundation and is bound to collapse of its own lack of substance.

The mythic dimensions of *The Great Gatsby* clearly confirm the novel's thematic issues and perspectives. Gatsby is at once a knight-errant intent on rescuing the flower of chivalry from the brutal ogre who possesses her and a self-made man who believes in the power of his vast fortune. He is at once the romantic idealist whose quest of his grail will redeem the past and transform the future and the crass materialist for whom possessions signify success. Both of these myths lie behind the strivings of Jay Gatsby, yet in the end, neither can sustain him. Contemporary America has moved too far away from its foundational hopes and beliefs, and Gatsby, caught between two conflicting ideologies, is simply no match for the casual carelessness of people oblivious to any.