

F. SCOTT FITZGERALD: THE GREAT GATSBY

SYMBOLS:

Symbols are objects, characters, figures, or colors used to represent abstract ideas or concepts.

The Green Light

Situated at the end of Daisy's East Egg dock and barely visible from Gatsby's West Egg lawn, the green light represents Gatsby's hopes and dreams for the future. Gatsby associates it with Daisy, and in Chapter I he reaches toward it in the darkness as a guiding light to lead him to his goal. Because Gatsby's quest for Daisy is broadly associated with the American dream, the green light also symbolizes that more generalized ideal. In Chapter IX, Nick compares the green light to how America, rising out of the ocean, must have looked to early settlers of the new nation.

The Valley of Ashes

First introduced in Chapter II, the valley of ashes between West Egg and New York City consists of a long stretch of desolate land created by the dumping of industrial ashes. It represents the moral and social decay that results from the uninhibited pursuit of wealth, as the rich indulge themselves with regard for nothing but their own pleasure. The valley of ashes also symbolizes the plight of the poor, like George Wilson, who live among the dirty ashes and lose their vitality as a result.

The Eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg

The eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg are a pair of fading, bespectacled eyes painted on an old advertising billboard over the valley of ashes. They may represent God staring down upon and judging American society as a moral wasteland, though the novel never makes this point explicitly. Instead, throughout the novel, Fitzgerald suggests that symbols only have meaning because characters instill them with meaning. The connection between the eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg and God exists only in George Wilson's grief-stricken mind. This lack of concrete significance contributes to the unsettling nature of the image. Thus, the eyes also come to represent the essential meaninglessness of the world and the arbitrariness of the mental process by which people invest objects with meaning. Nick explores these ideas in Chapter VIII, when he imagines Gatsby's final thoughts as a depressed consideration of the emptiness of symbols and dreams.

SUMMARY:

Short Summary of *The Great Gatsby*

While *The Great Gatsby* is a highly specific portrait of American society during the Roaring Twenties, its story is also one that has been told hundreds of times, and is perhaps as old as America itself: a man claws his way from rags to riches, only to find that his wealth cannot afford him the privileges enjoyed by those born into the upper class. The central character is Jay Gatsby, a wealthy New Yorker of indeterminate occupation. Gatsby is primarily known for the lavish parties he throws every weekend at his ostentatious Gothic mansion in West Egg. He is suspected of being involved in illegal bootlegging and other underworld activities.

The narrator, Nick Carraway, is Gatsby's neighbor in West Egg. Nick is a young man from a prominent Midwestern family. Educated at Yale, he has come to New York to enter the bond business. In some sense, the novel is Nick's memoir, his unique view of the events of the summer of 1922; as such, his impressions and observations necessarily

color the narrative as a whole. For the most part, he plays only a peripheral role in the events of the novel; he prefers to remain a passive observer.

Upon arriving in New York, Nick visits his cousin, Daisy Buchanan, and her husband, Tom. The Buchanans live in the posh Long Island district of East Egg; Nick, like Gatsby, resides in nearby West Egg, a less fashionable area looked down upon by those who live in East Egg. West Egg is home to the nouveau riche people who lack established social connections, and tend to vulgarly flaunt their wealth. Like Nick, Tom Buchanan graduated from Yale, and comes from a privileged Midwestern family. Tom is a former football player, a brutal bully obsessed with the preservation of class boundaries. Daisy, by contrast, is an almost ghostlike young woman who affects an air of sophisticated boredom. At the Buchanans's, Nick meets Jordan Baker, a beautiful, if boyish, young woman with a cold and cynical manner. The two will later become romantically involved.

Jordan tells Nick that Tom has been having an affair with Myrtle Wilson, a woman who lives in the valley of ashes an industrial wasteland outside of New York City. After visiting Tom and Daisy, Nick goes home to West Egg; there, he sees Gatsby gazing at a mysterious green light across the bay. Gatsby stretches his arms out toward the light, as though to catch and hold it.

Tom Buchanan takes Nick into New York, and on the way they stop at the garage owned by George Wilson the husband of Myrtle, with whom Tom has been having an affair. Tom tells Myrtle to join them later in the city. Nearby, on an enormous billboard, a pair of bespectacled blue eyes stares down at the barren landscape. These eyes called the eyes of Dr. T.J. Eckleburg once served as an advertisement; now, they brood over all that happens in the valley of ashes.

In the city, Tom takes Nick and Myrtle to the apartment in Morningside Heights that he keeps for his affair. There, they have a lurid party with Myrtle's sister, Catherine, and an abrasive couple named McKee. They gossip about Gatsby; Catherine says that he is somehow related to Kaiser Wilhelm, the much-despised ruler of Germany during World War I. The more she drinks, the more aggressive Myrtle becomes; she begins taunting Tom about Daisy, and he reacts by breaking her nose. The party, unsurprisingly, comes to an abrupt end.

Nick Carraway attends a party at Gatsby's mansion, where he runs in to Jordan Baker. At the party, few of the attendees know Gatsby; even fewer were formally invited. Before the party, Nick himself had never met Gatsby: he is a strikingly handsome, slightly dandified young man who affects an English accent. Gatsby asks to speak to Jordan Baker alone; after talking with Gatsby for quite a long time, she tells Nick that she has learned some remarkable news. She cannot yet share it with him, however.

Some time later, Gatsby visits Nick's home and invites him to lunch. At this point in the novel, Gatsby's origins are unclear. He claims to come from a wealthy San Francisco family, and says that he was educated at Oxford after serving in the Great War (during

which he received a number of decorations). However, a certain diffidence in his manner indicates that he may be lying to Nick. At lunch, Gatsby introduces Nick to his business associate, Meyer Wolfsheim. Wolfsheim is a notorious criminal; many believe that he is responsible for fixing the 1919 World Series.

Gatsby mysteriously avoids the Buchanans. Later, Jordan Baker explains the reason for Gatsby's anxiety: he had been in love with Daisy Buchanan when they met in Louisville before the war; Jordan subtly intimates that he is still in love with her, and she with him.

Gatsby has Nick arrange a meeting between him and Daisy. Gatsby has meticulously planned their meeting: he gives Daisy a carefully-rehearsed tour of his mansion, and is desperate to exhibit his wealth and possessions. Gatsby is wooden and mannered during this initial meeting; his dearest dreams have been of this moment, and so the actual reunion was bound to disappoint. Despite this, the love between Gatsby and Daisy is revived, and the two begin an affair.

Eventually, Nick learns the true story of Gatsby's past. He was born James Gatz in North Dakota, but had his name legally changed at the age of seventeen. The gold baron Dan Cody served as Gatsby's mentor until his death. Though Gatsby inherited nothing of Cody's fortune, it was from him that Gatsby was first introduced to world of wealth, power, and privilege.

While out horseback riding, Tom Buchanan happens upon Gatsby's mansion. There he meets both Nick and Gatsby, to whom he takes an immediate dislike. To Tom, Gatsby is part of the "new rich," and thus poses a danger to the old order that Tom holds dear. Despite this, he accompanies Daisy to Gatsby's next party; there, he is exceedingly rude and condescending toward Gatsby. Nick realizes that Gatsby wants Daisy to renounce her husband and her marriage; in this way, they can recover the years they have lost since first they parted. This is Gatsby's great flaw: his great love of Daisy is a kind of worship for him, she is ideal, and this he fails to see her flaws. He believes that he can undo the past, and forgets that Daisy's essentially small-minded and cowardly nature was what initially caused their separation.

After his reunion with Daisy, Gatsby ceases to throw his elaborate parties. The only reason he threw such parties was the chance that Daisy (or someone who knew her) might attend. Daisy invites Gatsby, Nick and Jordan to lunch at her house. In an attempt to make Tom jealous, and to exact revenge for his affair, Daisy is highly indiscreet in her relation to Gatsby. She even tells Gatsby that she loves him while Tom is in earshot.

Though Tom is himself having an affair, he is furious at the thought that his wife could be unfaithful to him. He forces the group to drive into the city: there, in a suite at the Plaza Hotel, Tom and Gatsby have a bitter confrontation. Tom denounces Gatsby for his low birth, and reveals to Daisy that Gatsby's fortune has been made through illegal activities. Daisy's real allegiance is to Tom: when Gatsby begs her to say that she does not love her husband, she refuses him. Tom permits Gatsby to drive Daisy back to East

Egg; in this way, he displays his contempt for Gatsby, as well as his faith in his wife's complete subjection to him, Tom.

On the trip back to East Egg, Gatsby allows Daisy to drive in order to calm her ragged nerves. Passing Wilson's garage, Daisy swerves to avoid another car and ends up hitting Myrtle; she is killed instantly. Nick advises Gatsby to leave town until the situation calms. Gatsby, however, refuses to leave: he remains in order to ensure that Daisy is safe. George Wilson, driven nearly mad by the death of his wife, is desperate to find her killer; Tom Buchanan tells him that Gatsby was the driver of the fatal car. Wilson who has decided that the driver of the car must also have been Myrtle's lover shoots Gatsby before committing suicide himself.

After the murder, the Buchanans leave town to distance themselves from the violence for which they are responsible. Nick is left to organize Gatsby's funeral, but finds that few people cared for Gatsby. Only Meyer Wolfsheim shows a modicum of grief, and few people attend the funeral. Nick seeks out Gatsby's father, Henry Gatz, and brings him to New York for the funeral. From Henry, Nick learns the full scope of Gatsby's visions of greatness and his dreams of self-improvement.

Thoroughly disgusted with life in New York, Nick decides to return to the Midwest. Before his departure, Nick sees Tom Buchanan once more. Tom tries to elicit Nick's sympathy; he believes that all of his actions were thoroughly justified, and he wants Nick to agree.

Nick muses that Gatsby, alone among the people of his time, strove to transform his dreams into reality; it is this that makes him "great." Nick also believes, however, that the time of such grand aspirations is over: greed and dishonesty have irrevocably corrupted both the American dream and the dreams of individual Americans.

Chapter One

The narrator, Nick Carraway, begins the novel by commenting on himself: he says that he is very tolerant, and has a tendency to reserve judgment. Carraway comes from a prominent Midwestern family and graduated from Yale; therefore, he fears misunderstanding those who haven't enjoyed his advantages. He attempts to understand people on their own terms, rather than holding them up to his personal standards.

Nick fought in World War I; after the war, he suffered a period of restlessness. He eventually decided to go east, to New York City, in order to learn the bond business. At the novel's outset, in the summer of 1922, Carraway has just arrived in New York and is living in a part of Long Island known as West Egg. West Egg is home to the nouveau riche (those who have only recently made their money and lack an established social position), while neighboring East Egg is home to the insular, narrow-minded denizens of the old aristocracy. Nick's house is next door to Gatsby's enormous, vulgar Gothic mansion.

One night, he attends a dinner party in East Egg; the party is given by Tom Buchanan and his wife, Daisy. Daisy is Nick's cousin, while Tom was Nick's classmate at Yale. Tom comes from a wealthy, established family, and was a much-feared football player while at Yale. A friend of Daisy's is also in attendance. This woman, whose name is Jordan Baker, makes her

living as a professional golfer. She has a frigid, boyish beauty and affects an air of extreme boredom.

Tom dominates the conversation at dinner; he wishes to propound ideas he has found in a book entitled "The Rise of the Colored Empires." This book espouses racist and white supremacist ideas, to which Tom wholeheartedly subscribes. When Tom abruptly leaves to take a phone call, Daisy declares that she has become terribly cynical and sophisticated since she and Nick last met. Her claims ring false, however particularly when contrasted with the genuine cynicism of Jordan Baker, who languidly informs Nick that Tom's sudden phone call is from his lover in New York. After his awkward visit with the Buchanans, Carraway goes home to West Egg. There, he sees a handsome young man Jay Gatsby standing on his wide lawn, with his arms stretched out to the sea. He appears to be reaching for a faraway green light, which may mark the end of a dock.

"His speaking voice, a gruff husky tenor, added to the impression of **fractiousness** he conveyed. There was a touch of paternal contempt in it, even toward people he liked and there were men at New Haven who had hated his guts." -Pg. 7

fractious (adj) - unruly, quarrelsome, irritable.

"Something was making him nibble at the edge of stale ideas as if his sturdy physical egotism no longer nourished his **peremptory** heart." - Pg. 20-21

peremptory (adj) - admitting of no contradiction, often characterized by arrogant self-assurance

Analysis

Fitzgerald establishes Nick Carraway as an impartial narrator; he is not, however, a passive one. Though he is inclined to reserve judgment, he is not entirely forgiving. From the novel's opening paragraphs and onward, this will continue to be a tension in Nick's character. Though Gatsby represents all that Nick holds in contempt, Nick cannot help but admire him. The first paragraphs of the book foreshadow the novel's main themes: we realize that Gatsby presented, and still presents, a challenge to the way Nick is accustomed to thinking about the world. We know, from the story's opening moments, that Gatsby will not be what he initially appears: despite the vulgarity of his mansion, Nick describes Gatsby's personality as "gorgeous."

Both the book and its characters are obsessed by class and privilege. Though Nick, like the Buchanans, comes from an elite background, their relationship to their social position is entirely different. Tom Buchanan vulgarly exploits his status: he is a grotesque, completely without any redeeming features. His wife describes him as a "big, hulking physical specimen," and he uses his size only to dominate others. He has a trace of "paternal contempt" that instantly inspires hatred. Tom is, in short, a hypocritical bully: he propounds racist dogma over dinner and takes calls from his mistress while his wife is in the room.

Daisy Buchanan stands in stark contrast to her husband. She is frail and diminutive, and actually labors at being shallow she laughs at practically every opportunity. Daisy is utterly transparent, feebly affecting an air of worldliness and cynicism. Though she breezily remarks that everything is in decline, she does so only in order to be heard agreeing with her husband. She and Jordan are dressed in white when Nick arrives, and she mentions that they spent a "white girl-hood" together; the ostensible purity of Daisy and Jordan stands in ironic contrast to their actual decadence and corruption, as later events will reveal.

The first appearance of Gatsby has a religious solemnity, and Gatsby himself seems almost godlike: Nick speculates that Gatsby has "come out to determine what share of our

local heavens [was his]." He is utterly alone, a solitary figure in a posture of mysterious worship. When first we see Gatsby, he is reaching toward the green light something that, by definition, he cannot grasp. In this scene, Fitzgerald wholly sacrifices realism in favor of drama and symbol: the green light symbolizes the as-yet-nameless object for which Gatsby is hopelessly striving.

Chapter Two

The second chapter begins with a description of the valley of ashes a dismal, barren wasteland halfway between West Egg and New York. A pair of enormous eyes broods over the valley from a large, decaying billboard. These are the eyes of Dr. T.J. Eckleburg, an optometrist whose practice is long since defunct.

Tom Buchanan takes Nick to George Wilson's garage, which lies at the edge of the valley of ashes. Wilson's wife, Myrtle, is the woman with whom Tom has been having an affair. Tom forces both Myrtle and Nick to accompany him to the city. There, in the flat which Tom keeps for his affair, they have a shrill, vulgar party with Myrtle's sister, Catherine, and a repulsive couple named McKee. The group gossips about Jay Gatsby: Catherine claims that he is somehow related to Kaiser Wilhelm, the much-despised ruler of Germany during World War I. The group becomes exceedingly drunk; as a result, Myrtle begins to grow garrulous and harsh. Shortly after Tom gives her a puppy as a gift, Myrtle begins chanting Daisy's name, in an attempt to irritate Tom. Tom tells her that she has no right to say Daisy's name; she continues taunting him, and he responds by breaking Myrtle's nose.

"The **supercilious** assumption was that on Sunday afternoon I had nothing better to do."
supercilious (adj) - arrogant, contemptous

"Wilson's mother which hove blue like an **ectoplasm** on the wall. His wife was shrill, languid, handsome, and horrible. She told me with pride that her husband had photographed her a hundred and twenty-seven times since they had been married. " -Pg. 30

ectoplasm (n) - a gel substance held to produce spirit materialization

"I wanted to get out and walk southward toward the park through the soft twilight, but each time I tried to go I became entangled in some wild, **strident** argument which pulled me back, as if with ropes, into my chair. " - Pg. 36
strident (adj) - commanding attention by a loud or obtrusive quality

Analysis

The road from West Egg to New York City exemplifies decay. It is a "valley of ashes," a place of uninterrupted desolation. The eyes of Doctor T.J. Eckleburg are an indelibly grotesque image: these are eyes unattached to any face or body, gazing out at a hellish wasteland. They, like the valley as a whole, are profoundly unnatural and decaying. Fitzgerald's description of the drawbridge and passing barges makes an allusion to the River Styx the river in Greek mythology which one crosses to enter the realm of the dead. The eyes of Dr. T.J. Eckleburg seem to be a monstrous parody of the eyes of God: they watch, but they do not see; they are heartless, and entirely unknowing. This, Fitzgerald seems to be saying, is what remains of the

idea of God in the post-industrial age. Like the scene in which Gatsby reaches for the green light, high symbolism is given priority over the demands of realism: we are given a completely implausible, but highly affecting, image of two detached eyes looking out over dust and ashes.

The novel's only impoverished characters live in the valley of ashes; it is the grim underside to the hedonism of the Eggs, and of New York. George Wilson, Myrtle's dejected husband, seems almost made of ashes; "ashen dust" coats his clothes and his hair. This, Fitzgerald seems to be saying, is what poverty looks like: it lies beneath wealth (as represented by the Eggs and New York), and is used by the wealthy as a mere dumping ground. It is what the wealthy wish not to see.

In comparison to Daisy Buchanan, Myrtle Wilson is sensuous and vital. While Daisy wears pale white, Myrtle is dressed in saturated colors; her mouth is a deep red. While Daisy is affected and insubstantial, Myrtle Wilson is straightforward, fleshy, almost coarse. Fitzgerald presents her fleshiness—her large breasts and hips—as a sign of her robust femininity.

At Tom's party, the characters engage in vulgar, boorish behavior: Myrtle Wilson reads tabloids; she and her sister gossip viciously about Gatsby and each other; Mr. McKee does not say that he is an artist, but instead claims to be in the "artistic game."

Clothing plays an important role in the development of character, and is reflective of both a character's mood and his personality. This device emphasizes the characters' superficiality: you are truly shallow, Fitzgerald seems to be saying, when you *are* what you wear. When Myrtle changes into a cream-colored dress, she loses some of her vitality. Like Daisy, she becomes more artificial; her laughter, gestures and speech become violently affected.

This chapter explores a world that has collapsed into decadence: Fitzgerald's society is a society in decay. The only rationale that Myrtle gives for her affair with Tom is, "You can't live forever." Nick Carraway remains both "within and without" this world: though he is repulsed by the party's vulgarity, he is too fascinated to compel himself to leave. It becomes patently clear in this chapter that Tom is both a bully and a hypocrite: he carries on a highly public affair, but feels compelled to beat his mistress in order to keep her in her place. The fact that Tom feels no guilt about his violence toward Myrtle—indeed, he seems incapable of feeling guilt at all—will become pivotal in later chapters.

Chapter Three

This chapter begins with Nick's description of Gatsby's Saturday night parties: they have become legendary in New York for their opulence and hedonism. These parties are almost obscenely lavish: everyone marvels at Gatsby's Rolls-Royce, his enormous swimming pool, the live musicians he engages weekly, the sumptuous food he provides for hundreds, and—perhaps most importantly—the unlimited liquor he generously supplies. Nick is eventually invited to one of these parties, though not by Gatsby himself; instead, Gatsby's chauffeur brings an invitation to Nick's door.

Gatsby's mansion is packed with revelers—very few of them seem to be invited guests, and even fewer have met Gatsby face to face. It is a very mixed crowd indeed: East Eggers hobnob with West Eggers; people from New York high society brush elbows with those from "the wrong side of the tracks." Nick runs in to Jordan Baker, who is even more casually bitter than usual, since she has recently lost a golf tournament. All around them, people are gossiping about their mysterious host: they say that Jay Gatsby once killed a man in cold blood; Jay Gatsby was a spy for Germany during World War I.

Jordan and Nick go looking for Gatsby in his mansion; instead, they find a grotesque little man in enormous eyeglasses (Nick calls him Owl Eyes, and we never learn his real name) skimming through the books in Gatsby's library. Both Owl Eyes and Jordan initially think that the books are false, designed only to give the appearance of a library; both are surprised to find that the books are quite real.

Outside, in the garden, Nick strikes up a conversation with a handsome, youthful man who looks familiar to him; it turns out that they served in the same division during the war. This man is the mysterious Gatsby. Gatsby has an affected English accent and a highly formal way of speaking. He stands aloof from his guests, watching the party rather than taking part in it. Gatsby leaves to take a phone call; later, he sends his butler to ask Jordan Baker if he may speak with her privately. When she finishes talking to Gatsby, she tells Nick that she has heard some "remarkable" news.

At about two in the morning, Nick decides to walk home; on the way, he sees Owl Eyes, who has crashed his car into a ditch. Owl Eyes loudly proclaims that he is finished with the whole business; it is not clear (neither to Nick nor to the reader) what, if anything, he means by this.

Nick informs us that he did not only attend parties during the summer of 1922; he was also working in New York, a city which he simultaneously loves and hates. At Tom and Daisy's urging, he becomes romantically involved with Jordan Baker. Though he finds her essential dishonesty somewhat off-putting, he is attracted to her despite himself.

"Laughter is easier minute by minute, spilled with **prodigality**, tipped out at a cheerful word." - Pg. 40

prodigality (n) - reckless extravagance, lavishness, luxuriance

"A celebrated tenor had sung in Italian, and a notorious contralto had sung in jazz, and between the numbers people were doing "stunts" all over the garden, while happy, **vacuous** bursts of laughter rose toward the summer sky." -Pg. 47

vacuous (adj) - marked by lack of ideas or intelligence; devoid of serious occupation

"I had expected that Mr. Gatsby would be a florid and **corpulent** person in his middle years." -Pg. 49

corpulent (adj) - having a large bulky body

"But young men didn't - at least in my **provincial** inexperience I believed they didn't - drift coolly out of nowhere and buy a palace on Long Island Sound." -Pg. 49

provincial (adj) - limited in outlook, narrow; unsophisticated

"In spite of the wives' agreement that such **malevolence** was beyond cblueibility, the dispute ended in a short struggle, and both wives were lifted, kicking, into the night." -Pg. 53

malevolence (adj) - intense often vicious ill will, spite, or hatblue

Analysis

Though we have finally been introduced to Jay Gatsby, he remains fundamentally a mystery. Few of the partygoers have so much as met their host, and Gatsby stands aloof from his own celebration. He does not drink, he does not dance he remains only an observer. The man himself stands in stark contrast to the sinister gossip Nick has heard about him: Gatsby is young and handsome, with a beautiful smile that seems to radiate hope and optimism. Nick falls instantly in love with Gatsby's smile, remarking that it has "a quality of eternal reassurance in it." Gatsby's innate hopefulness is contagious.

Though Nick implies throughout the novel that wealth and ostentation tend to mask immorality and decay, Gatsby's wealth seems to serve another purpose one that is not yet clear. We already know that not everything about Gatsby is mere display: his books are real, for example; his smile is real. At the same time, however, he has a queer quasi-English accent that is clearly false. Gatsby, at this point in the novel, remains an enigma, a creature of contradictions.

Fitzgerald gives great attention to the details of contemporary society: Gatsby's party is both a description and parody of Jazz Age decadence. It exemplifies the spirit of conspicuous consumption, and is a queer mix of the lewd and the respectable. Though catered to by butlers and serenaded by professionally trained singers, the guests are drunk, crude, and boisterous. The orchestra plays a work by Tostoff called *The Jazz History of the World*; though it has had a fantastic reception at Carnegie Hall, the piece is the antithesis of classical respectability. Fitzgerald's Jazz Age is clearly in the gutter, but struggling to look up at the stars.

At the time of this book's publication, cars were still novelty items; in the novel, they are imbued with a sense of luxurious danger. A car accident disturbs the end of the party, when a drunken Owl Eyes crashes his car into a ditch. Nick admonishes Jordan for being an unspeakably awful driver, and her near-accident serves as a metaphor for the behavior of her contemporaries: Jordan is a careless driver because she considers caution the responsibility of others. It is up to them to keep out of her way.

The chapter also reinforces Nick's position as an objective and reliable narrator: it ends with his claim that he is one of the few honest people he has ever known. Jordan Baker, by contrast, is compulsively dishonest; the fact that she cheated to win her first golf tournament is entirely unsurprising. She assumes that everyone else is as dishonest as she: she automatically concludes that Gatsby's books, like the better part of her own personality, exist merely for the sake of appearance.

Chapter Four

At a Sunday morning party at Gatsby's, Nick hears further gossip about Gatsby from a group of foolish young women: he's a bootlegger, they say, who killed a man who discovered that he was nephew to von Hindenburg and second cousin to the devil. One morning, Gatsby invites Nick to lunch in the city. He proudly displays his Rolls-Royce, then abruptly asks Nick what he thinks of him. Nick is understandably evasive. Gatsby responds to his reticence by giving Nick an account of his past. His story, however, is highly improbable. Though he claims to be the scion of a prominent Midwestern family, when Nick asks him which Midwestern city he comes from, Gatsby hesitates, then says "San Francisco." He rattles off an absurdly long list of accomplishments: he claims to have studied at Oxford and lived in all the capitals of Europe; then he enlisted in the war effort, where he was rapidly promoted to major and decorated by every Allied government, including Montenegro. He pulls out a photograph of himself in Oxford cricket whites, as well as a medal awarded by the government of Montenegro, in order to corroborate his story. They speed through the valley of ashes; when Gatsby is stopped for speeding, he flashes a white card at the policeman. The policeman apologizes profusely and does not give Gatsby a ticket.

At lunch, Gatsby introduces Carraway to Meyer Wolfsheim, a rather disreputable character who proudly calls their attention to his cufflinks, which are made from human molars. Wolfsheim is an infamous gambler, and claims responsibility for fixing the 1919 World Series. Nick begins to suspect Gatsby of underworld dealings, due to his association with the sinister Wolfsheim.

They happen to run into Tom Buchanan, and Nick introduces him to Gatsby. Gatsby appears highly uncomfortable in Tom's presence and quickly absents himself, without giving an explanation.

At Nick's next encounter with Jordan Baker, she finally tells him her remarkable news: Gatsby is in love with Daisy Buchanan. Back in 1917, when Daisy was eighteen and Jordan sixteen, the two had been volunteers with the Red Cross. Though all the officers at the military base had courted Daisy, she fell passionately in love with a young lieutenant named Jay Gatsby. Though she had promised to wait for Gatsby's return, she accepted Tom Buchanan's proposal of marriage while Gatsby was still away at war. The night before her wedding, Daisy suddenly realized the enormity of her mistake; she became hysterical and drank herself into a stupor.

According to Jordan, Gatsby bought his house in West Egg just in order to be close to Daisy. It is at this moment that Nick realizes that the green light, toward which he saw Gatsby so plaintively yearning, is the same light that marks the end of the Buchanans' dock. Jordan informs Nick that Gatsby wants him to arrange a reunion between himself and Daisy.

"This quality was continually breaking through his **punctilious** manner in the shape of restlessness. -Pg. 64

punctilious (adj) - concerned about precise exact accordance with details of codes or conventions

"He's quite a character around New York - a **denizen** of Broadway." -Pg. 74

denizen (n) - inhabitant; one that frequents a place

Analysis

This chapter is primarily concerned with the mystery of Gatsby's background, and of the source of his wealth. Though Nick was first taken with Gatsby's seeming purity and optimism, Gatsby remains enigmatic and not entirely trustworthy. Gatsby's own account of his illustrious past seems comically exaggerated. His readiness to provide evidence to corroborate his story is itself suspect; an honest man, one imagines, would be insulted by Nick's skepticism.

The introduction of Meyer Wolfsheim serves to increase Nick's and the reader's doubts concerning Gatsby's virtue. Nick begins to suspect that the rumors of Gatsby's involvement with organized crime and bootlegging may not be entirely false.

Jordan's story of Gatsby, by contrast, portrays him as a yearning romantic, forced to worship his lover from afar. Though Jordan implies that there was something in Gatsby's background that caused Daisy's parents to oppose their marriage, it is clear that the young Jay Gatsby was a man of unimpeachable virtue. Fitzgerald draws upon a few centuries of romantic cliché to present Gatsby as the ideal lover: he is a soldier going off to war, brave and handsome, young and pure. Nick's ambivalence toward Gatsby, in which he finds himself constantly oscillating between admiration and distaste (recall that Nick found the excesses of Gatsby's party repellent), is emphasized here. The contradiction inherent in Gatsby's character between his guileless optimism and putative moral corruption is also reinforced.

It is important to note that Wolfsheim, the novel's symbolic representative of the "criminal element," is obviously Jewish: Fitzgerald gives the character a number of the "Jewish" physical features (a large nose, a diminutive stature) that were a staple of racist caricature in the 1920s. During this period, anti-Semitism in America was at an all-time high: Jews, as a result of their "characteristic greed," were held responsible for the corruption of the nation as a whole. Fitzgerald seems to be uncritically drawing on this racist ideology in his presentation of Wolfsheim; the character is nothing more than a grotesque stereotype.

This chapter also reveals the object of Gatsby's yearning: it was Daisy, and his love for Daisy, that caused him to reach out toward the mysterious green light in Chapter I. The green light serves as a symbol for a number of things: among them are Gatsby's dauntless romantic optimism, Daisy herself, and the American dream as a whole.

Even Gatsby's infamous parties are thrown for the sole purpose of attracting Daisy's attention; she is his animating force. Everything Gatsby does and has done has been out of love for her: he has reinvented himself as a cultured millionaire solely to court her love and approval. In this way, Daisy too seems to serve as a symbol of the American Dream (at least in its 1920s manifestation); her corruption and emptiness will reveal the corruption that has befallen the great dream itself.

Chapter Five

One night, Gatsby waylays Nick and nervously asks him if he would like to take a swim in his pool; when Nick demurs, he offers him a trip to Coney Island. Nick, initially baffled by Gatsby's solicitousness, realizes that he is anxiously waiting for Nick to arrange his meeting with Daisy. Nick agrees to do so. Gatsby, almost wild with joy, responds by offering him a job, a "confidential sort of thing," and assures Nick that he will not have to work with Meyer Wolfsheim. Nick is somewhat insulted that Gatsby wishes to reimburse him for his help, and so declines Gatsby's offer.

It rains on the day that Gatsby and Daisy are to meet, and Gatsby becomes extremely apprehensive. The meeting takes place at Nick's house and, initially, their conversation is stilted and awkward. They are all inexplicably embarrassed; when Gatsby clumsily knocks over a clock, Nick tells him that he's behaving like a little boy. Nick leaves the couple alone for a few minutes; when he returns, they seem luminously happy, as though they have just concluded an embrace. There are tears of happiness on Daisy's cheeks.

They make their way over to Gatsby's mansion, of which Gatsby proceeds to give them a carefully rehearsed tour. Gatsby shows Daisy newspaper clippings detailing his exploits. She is overwhelmed by them, and by the opulence of his possessions; when he shows her his vast collection of imported shirts, she begins to weep tears of joy. Nick wonders whether Gatsby is disappointed with Daisy; it seems that he has made of her a goddess, and though Daisy herself is alluring she cannot possibly live up to so grandiose an ideal.

Gatsby has Ewing Klipspringer, a mysterious man who seems to live at his mansion, play "Ain't We Got Fun" (a popular song of the time) for himself and Daisy:

In the morning, in the evening
Ain't we got fun!
Got no money, but oh, honey
Ain't we got fun!

As Klipspringer plays, Gatsby and Daisy draw closer and closer together; Nick, realizing that his presence has become superfluous, quietly leaves.

Analysis

The exchange between Nick and Gatsby that opens this chapter highlights the uncertainty at the heart of their relationship: is Gatsby's friendship with Nick merely expedient—that is, is he merely using him to draw closer to Daisy—or is he genuinely fond of him?

The question cannot be absolutely decided: while it becomes clear that Gatsby has great affection for Nick, it is also true that he uses his money and power as leverage in all of his personal relationships. Gatsby, in his extreme insecurity about class, cannot believe that anyone would befriend him if he did not possess a mansion and several million dollars a year. Fitzgerald seems to bitterly affirm this insecurity, given the fact that Gatsby was abandoned by Daisy because of his poverty, and remains ostracized by the East Eggers even after his success. In the world of the novel, only Nick does not make friendships based upon class.

The gross materialism of the East and West Egg milieus explains the obsessive care that Gatsby takes in his reunion with Daisy. The afternoon is given over to an ostentatious display of wealth: he shows Daisy his extensive collection of British antiques and takes her on a tour of his wardrobe; Gatsby himself is dressed in gold and silver. His Gothic mansion is described as looking like the citadel of a feudal lord. Nearly everything in the house is imported from England (the scene in which Gatsby shows Daisy his piles of English shirts is one of the most famous scenes in American literature). Fitzgerald implies that Gatsby is attempting to live the life of a European aristocrat in the New World of America. This, Fitzgerald suggests, is a misguided anachronism: America committed itself to progress and equality in abandoning the old aristocracy. To go back to such rigidly defined class distinctions would be retrograde and barbaric—as is implied by the fact that the major proponent of such ideas is Tom Buchanan, who is clearly a cretin and a brute.

This chapter presents Gatsby as a man who cannot help but live in the past: he longs to stop time, as though he and Daisy had never been separated—as though she had never left him to marry Tom. During their meeting Nick remarks that he is acting like "a little boy": in Daisy's presence, Gatsby loses his usual debonair manner and behaves like any awkward young man in love. Gatsby himself is regressing, moving back in time, as though he were still a shy young soldier in love with a privileged debutante.

Nick describes the restless Gatsby as "running down like an over-wound clock." It is significant that Gatsby, in his nervousness about whether Daisy's feelings toward him have changed, knocks over Nick's clock: this signifies both Gatsby's consuming desire to stop time and his inability to do so.

Daisy, too, ceases to play the part of a world-weary sophisticate upon her reunion with Gatsby. She weeps when he shows her his collection of sumptuous English shirts, and seems genuinely overjoyed at his success. In short, Gatsby transforms her; she becomes almost human. Daisy is more sympathetic here than she is at any other point in the novel.

The song "Ain't We Got Fun" is significant for a number of reasons. The opening lyrics ("In the morning/ In the evening/ Ain't we got fun") imply a carefree spontaneity that stands in stark contrast to the tightly-controlled quality of the lovers' reunion. This contrast is further sharpened by the words of the next verse, which run: "Got no money/ But oh, honey/ Ain't we got fun!" It is bitterly ironic that Gatsby and Daisy should reunite to the strains of this song, given the fact that she first rejected him for his poverty.

Chapter Six

A reporter, inspired by the feverish gossip about Gatsby then circulating in New York, comes to West Egg in the hopes of obtaining the true story of his past from him. Though Gatsby himself turns the man away, Nick interrupts the narrative to relate Gatsby's past—the truth of which he only learned much later—to the reader.

His real name is James Gatz, and he was born to an impoverished farmer in North Dakota rather than into wealth in San Francisco, as he claimed. He had his name legally changed to Jay Gatsby at the age of seventeen. Though he did attend St Olaf's a small college in Minnesota he dropped out after two weeks, as he could not bear working as a janitor in order to pay his tuition. Gatsby's dreams of self-improvement are only intensified by his relationship with Dan Cody, a man whom he met while working as a fisherman on Lake Superior. Cody was then fifty, a self-made millionaire who had made his fortune during the Yukon gold rush. Cody took Gatsby in and made the young man his personal assistant. On their subsequent voyages to the West Indies and the Barbary Coast, Gatsby became even more passionately covetous of wealth and privilege. When Cody died, Gatsby inherited \$25,000; he was unable to claim it, however, due to the malicious intervention of Cody's mistress, Ella Kaye. Afterward, Gatsby vowed to become a success in his own right.

Several weeks pass without Nick's seeing Gatsby. Upon visiting Gatsby at his mansion, Nick is shocked to find Tom Buchanan there. Tom has unexpectedly stopped for a drink at Gatsby's after an afternoon of horseback riding; he is accompanied by Mr. and Mrs. Sloane, an insufferable East Egg couple who exemplify everything that is repellent about the "old rich." Gatsby invites the group to supper, but Mrs. Sloane hastily refuses; perhaps ashamed at her own rudeness, she then half-heartedly offers Gatsby and Nick an invitation to dine at her home. Nick, recognizing the insincerity of her offer, declines; Gatsby accepts, though it is unclear whether his gesture is truly oblivious or defiant.

Tom pointedly complains about the crazy people that Daisy meets, presumably referring to Gatsby. Throughout the awkward afternoon, he is contemptuous of Gatsby particularly of his acceptance of Mrs. Sloane's disingenuous invitation.

The following Saturday, Tom and Daisy attend one of Gatsby's parties. Tom, predictably, is unpleasant and rude throughout the evening. After the Buchanans leave, Gatsby is crestfallen at the thought that Daisy did not have a good time; he does not yet know that Tom badly upset her by telling her that Gatsby made his fortune in bootlegging.

Nick realizes that Gatsby wants Daisy to tell Tom that she has never loved him. Nick gently informs Gatsby that he can't ask too much of Daisy, and says, "You can't repeat the past." Gatsby spiritedly replies: "Of course you can!"

"He was a son of God - a phrase which, if it means anything, means just that - and he must be about His Father's business, the service of a vast, vulgar, and **meretricious** beauty."

meretricious (adj) - tawdrily and falsely attractive, pretentious, gaudy

"The none too savory ramifications by which Ella Kaye, the newspaper woman, played Madame de Maintenon to his weakness and sent him to sea in a yacht, were common knowledge to the **turgid** sub-journalism of 1902." - Pg. 102

turgid (adj) - swollen; excessively embellished in style or language, bombastic, pompous

"She was appalled by West Egg, this unprecedented "place." that Broadway had begotten upon a Long Island fishing village - appalled by its raw vigor that chafed under the old **euphemisms** and by the too obtrusive fate that herded its inhabitants along a short-cut from nothing to nothing."

euphemism (n) - substitution of an agreeable or inoffensive expression for one that may offend or suggest something unpleasant

Analysis

Nick begins the story of Gatsby's past by saying that Gatsby "sprang from his Platonic conception of himself." In order to understand this statement, the reader must remember that the "Platonic conception" of a person or thing refers to that thing's ideal form. That is, the Platonic form of an object is the *perfect* form of that object. Therefore, Nick is suggesting that Gatsby has modeled himself on an idealized version of "Jay Gatsby": he is striving to be the man he envisions in his fondest dreams of himself. Gatsby is thus the novel's representative of the American Dream, and the story of his youth borrows on one of that dream's oldest myths: that of the self-made man. In changing his name from James Gatz to Jay Gatsby, he attempts to remake himself on his own terms; Gatsby wishes to be reborn as the aristocrat he feels himself to be.

It is significant that Gatsby leaves college because he finds his work as a janitor degrading. This seems a perverse decision, given the fact that a university education would dramatically improve his social standing. His decision to leave reveals Gatsby's extreme sensitivity to class, and to the fact of his own poverty; from his childhood onward, he longs for wealth and perhaps more importantly for the sophistication and elegance which he imagines that wealth will lend him. His work as a janitor is a gross humiliation because it is at odds with his *ideal* of himself; to protect that ideal, he is willing to damage his actual circumstances.

Fitzgerald uses the character of Dan Cody to subtly suggest that the America of the 1920s is no longer a place where self-made men can thrive. Cody, like Gatsby, transcended early hardship to become a millionaire; also like Gatsby, he is remarkably generous to his friends and subordinates. Cody takes to drinking because, despite his wealth, he remains unable to carve out a place for himself in the world of 1920s America. It is important to note that Cody's death is brought about, at least in part, through the treachery of the woman he loves; this foreshadows the circumstances of Gatsby's death in Chapter VIII.

The painfully awkward luncheon party at Gatsby's mansion underlines the hostility of the American 1920s toward the figure of the self-made man. Both the Sloanes and Tom Buchanan treat Gatsby with contempt and condescension, because he is not of the long-standing American upper class. Though Gatsby is fabulously wealthy perhaps wealthier than Tom himself he is still regarded as socially inferior. For Fitzgerald, nothing could be more inimical to the original ideals of America. The first Americans fought to escape the tyrannies of the European nobility; Tom Buchanan longs to reproduce them.

This chapter makes it clear that Daisy, too, is a part of the same narrow-minded aristocracy that produced her husband. For Gatsby, she became the symbol of everything that he wanted to possess: she is the epitome of wealth and sophistication. Though Gatsby loves this quality in Daisy, it is precisely *because* she is an aristocrat that she cannot possibly fulfill his dreams: she would never sacrifice her own class status in order to be with him. Her love for him pales in comparison to her love of privilege.

Chapter Seven

Now, when curiosity about Gatsby has reached a fever pitch, he ceases to throw his Saturday night parties. The only purpose of the parties was to solicit Daisy's attention; now that they are reunited, the parties have lost their meaning.

Nick, surprised that the revelry has stopped, goes over to make certain that Gatsby is all right. He learns that Gatsby has fired all of his former servants and replaced them with a number of disreputable characters who were formerly employed by Meyer Wolfsheim. Daisy has begun

visiting him in the afternoons, and Gatsby wants to make certain that she will not be exposed to any of the lurid gossip about his life and his past.

On the hottest day of the summer, Daisy invites Gatsby, Nick and Jordan to lunch. Daisy has the nanny exhibit her infant daughter, who is dressed in white, to the assembled guests. Gatsby seems almost bewildered by the child he has been, until this moment, entirely unable to conceive of Daisy as a mother. Tom is full of his usual bluster, remarking that he read that the sun is growing hotter; soon, the earth will fall into it, and that will be the end of the world.

During the luncheon, Tom realizes that Gatsby and his wife are romantically involved. Gatsby stares at Daisy with undisguised passion, and Daisy recklessly remarks, within earshot of Tom, that she loves Gatsby.

Tom, unsettled, goes inside to get a drink, and in his absence Nick remarks that Daisy has an indiscreet voice. When Nick goes on to say that Daisy's voice also has an indescribably seductive quality, Gatsby blurts that her voice is "full of money."

Tom, desperate to pick a fight with Gatsby, forces the entire party to drive into New York. Gatsby and Daisy drive in Tom's car, while Nick, Jordan, and Tom drive in Gatsby's. On the way, Tom furiously tells Nick that Gatsby is no Oxford man. They stop for gas at Wilson's garage. Wilson tells them that he's decided to move his wife out west, since he recently learned that she's been having an affair; he does not yet, however, know who her lover is. Upon leaving the garage, they see Myrtle peering down at the car from her window. She stares at Jordan with an expression of jealous terror, since she has assumed that Jordan is Tom's wife.

Feeling that both his wife and mistress are slipping away from him, Tom grows panicked and impatient. To escape from the summer heat, the group takes a suite at the Plaza Hotel. There, Tom finally confronts Gatsby, mocking his use of the phrase "old sport." Tom accuses Gatsby of never having been at Oxford; Gatsby replies that he did, in fact, study there for five months after the end of the war. Tom regards Daisy's affair with the lower-class Gatsby as one of the harbingers of the decline of civilization: soon, Tom hisses, there will even be intermarriage between the races. Gatsby tells Tom that Daisy doesn't love him, and has never loved him; he informs him that he's "not going to take care of Daisy anymore." Tom calls Gatsby a "common swindler" and reveals that he has made his fortune in bootlegging. Daisy, in her shallowness and snobbery, sides with Tom, and refuses Gatsby when he pleads with her to say that she has never loved her husband. As the confrontation draws to a close, Nick realizes that today is his thirtieth birthday.

In the valley of ashes, Nick, Jordan and Tom find that someone has been struck and killed by an automobile. The young Greek, Michaelis, who runs the coffee house next to Wilson's garage, tells them that the victim was Myrtle Wilson. She ran out into the road during a fight with her husband; there, she was struck by an opulent yellow car. Nick realizes that the fatal car must have been Gatsby's Rolls-Royce. Tom presumes that Gatsby was the driver.

""Is Mr. Gatsby sick?." "Nope.." After a pause he added "sir." in a **dilatory**, grudging way." -Pg. 113

dilatory (adj) - intending to cause delay; procrastinating

"Before me stretched the **portentous**, menacing road of a new decade." - Pg. 136

portentous (adj) - eliciting amazement or wonder, prodigious; self-consciously weighty, pompous.

"Only the negro and I were near enough to hear what he said, but the policeman caught something in the tone and looked over with **truculent** eyes." -Pg. 141

truculent (adj) - cruel, savage; deadly, destructive; vitriolic; belligerent

Analysis

The reunion of Gatsby and Daisy is the novel's pivotal event; it sets all the subsequent events into inevitable motion. In Chapter VII, the story of their romance reaches its climax and its tragic conclusion.

Gatsby is profoundly changed by his reunion with Daisy: he ceases to throw his lavish parties and, for the first time, shows concern for his public reputation. In the past, Gatsby has simply ignored the vicious rumors circulating about him; for Daisy's sake, however, he must now exercise some discretion.

Daisy, by contrast, is extremely indiscreet with regard to her romance with Gatsby. Inviting Gatsby to lunch with her husband would be a bold, foolish move under any circumstances; when one takes Tom's snobbery and intense suspiciousness into account, Daisy's decision seems to border on madness. Tom is profoundly insecure, obsessed with both his own inevitable downfall and the downfall of civilization itself. It is important to recognize that, for Tom, they are the same thing: he believes that he, as a wealthy white male aristocrat, is Western civilization's greatest achievement. This odious mindset is borne out by his choice of reading material, which views the end of the world and interracial marriage as being equally catastrophic.

The confrontation between Gatsby and Tom serves to reveal the major flaws and motivations of both characters. For Tom, the affair between Gatsby and Daisy is evidence of the decline of civilization; he seems less disturbed by his wife's infidelity than by the fact that she is involved with a man of an inferior social class. Tom's gross misogyny and hypocrisy assert themselves here: he obviously does not regard his affair with the lower-class Myrtle Wilson in the same apocalyptic light. As Nick remarks, Tom moves "from libertine to prig" when it suits his needs.

Tom uses the fact of Gatsby's criminal activity to humiliate him before Daisy. Tom, for all his crudeness, possesses a subtle knowledge of his wife: he realizes that Daisy's innate snobbery is ultimately identical with his own. She would never desert her aristocratic husband for "a common bootlegger" regardless of the love she felt for the bootlegger in question. Daisy refuses to submit to Gatsby's pleas, and will not say that she has never loved Tom. Gatsby is ultimately unable to recapture his idyllic past; the past, the future, and Daisy herself ultimately belong to Tom.

The distinction between "old" and "new" money is crucial here: while Gatsby earned his fortune, Daisy is an aristocrat, a woman for whom wealth and privilege come effortlessly. As Gatsby himself remarks, even her voice is "full of money." This is what he loves in Daisy's voice, and in Daisy herself: for Gatsby, Daisy represents the wealth and elegance for which he has yearned all his life. Gatsby thus loses Daisy for the same reason that he adores her: her patrician arrogance.

The introduction of Daisy's daughter provides incontestable proof of Gatsby's inability to annul the passage of time. He does not believe in the child's existence until actually confronted with her; even then, he regards her with shock and bewilderment. Daisy, for her part, seems scarcely to regard the girl as real: she coos over her as though she were a doll, and seems to leave her almost entirely in the care of a nanny. The selfish and immature Daisy is essentially a child herself, and is in no position to be a mother.

Daisy remains characteristically passive throughout Chapter VII; she is only a spectator to the argument between Gatsby and Tom. Her weakness is particularly important here: Tom and Gatsby fight over who can possess Daisy and provide for her. Gatsby, tellingly, does not say

that Daisy is leaving Tom, but that Tom is "not going to take care of her anymore"; both men regard her as being incapable of independent action.

Daisy's carelessness and stupidity eventually lead to the death of Myrtle Wilson, and Gatsby is forced to leave the scene of the accident and to hide the fatal car simply to protect Daisy's fragile nerves. His decision to take responsibility for Myrtle's death reveals that his love for Daisy is unassailable; her cruelty has changed and will change nothing. Gatsby, despite his criminal activities, remains essentially noble: he is willing to sacrifice himself for the woman he loves.

Chapter Eight

That night, Nick finds himself unable to sleep, since the terrible events of the day have greatly unsettled him. Wracked by anxiety, he hurries to Gatsby's mansion shortly before dawn. He advises Gatsby to leave Long Island until the scandal of Myrtle's death has quieted down. Gatsby refuses, as he cannot bring himself to leave Daisy: he tells Nick that he spent the entire night in front of the Buchanans' mansion, just to ensure that Daisy was safe. He tells Nick that Tom did not try to harm her, and that Daisy did not come out to meet him, though he was standing on her lawn in full moonlight.

Gatsby, in his misery, tells Nick the story of his first meeting with Daisy. He does so even though it patently gives the lie to his earlier account of his past. Gatsby and Daisy first met in Louisville in 1917; Gatsby was instantly smitten with her wealth, her beauty, and her youthful innocence. Realizing that Daisy would spurn him if she knew of his poverty, Gatsby determined to lie to her about his past and his circumstances. Before he left for the war, Daisy promised to wait for him; the two then slept together, as though to seal their pact. Of course, Daisy did not wait; she married Tom, who was her social equal and the choice of her parents.

Realizing that it has grown late, Nick says goodbye to Gatsby. As he is walking away, he turns back and shouts that Gatsby is "worth the whole damn bunch [of the Buchanans and their East Egg friends] put together."

The scene shifts from West Egg to the valley of ashes, where George Wilson has sought refuge with Michaelis. It is from this latter that Nick later learns what happened in the aftermath of Myrtle's death. George Wilson tells Michaelis that he confronted Myrtle with the evidence of her affair and told her that, though she could conceal her sin from her husband, she could not hide it from the eyes of God. As the sun rises over the valley of ashes, Wilson is suddenly transfixed by the eyes of Dr. T.J. Eckleburg; he mistakes them for the eyes of God. Wilson assumes that the driver of the fatal car was Myrtle's lover, and decides to punish this man for his sins.

He seeks out Tom Buchanan, in the hope that Tom will know the driver's identity. Tom tells him that Gatsby was the driver. Wilson drives to Gatsby's mansion; there, he finds Gatsby floating in his pool, staring contemplatively at the sky. Wilson shoots Gatsby, and then turns the gun on himself.

It is Nick who finds Gatsby's body. He reflects that Gatsby died utterly disillusioned, having lost, in rapid succession, his lover and his dreams.

"For Daisy was young and her artificial world was **redolent** of orchids and pleasant, cheerful snobbery and orchestras which set the rhythm of the year, summing up the sadness and suggestiveness of life in new tunes." -Pg. 148

redolent (adj) - exuding fragrance, aromatic; scented; evocative, suggestive

"I suppose there'd be a curious crowd around there all day with little boys searching for dark spots in the dust, and some **garrulous** man telling over and over what had happened, until it became less and less real even to him and he could tell it no longer, and Myrtle Wilson's tragic achievement was forgotten." -Pg. 156

garrulous (adj) - pointlessly or annoyingly talkative

"A new world, material without being real, where poor ghosts, breathing dreams like air, drifted fortuitously about . . . like that ashen, fantastic figure gliding toward him through the amorphous trees." -Pg. 162

fortuitously (adv) - occurring by chance; fortunate, lucky

Analysis

Nick gives the novel's final appraisal of Gatsby when he asserts that Gatsby is "worth the whole damn bunch of them." Despite the ambivalence he feels toward Gatsby's criminal past and nouveau riche affectations, Nick cannot help but admire him for his essential nobility. Though he disapproved of Gatsby "from beginning to end," Nick is still able to recognize him as a visionary, a man capable of grand passion and great dreams. He represents an ideal that has grown exceedingly rare in the 1920s, which Nick (along with Fitzgerald) regards as an age of cynicism, decadence, and cruelty.

Nick, in his reflections on Gatsby's life, suggests that Gatsby's great mistake was in loving Daisy: he thus chose an inferior object upon which to focus his almost mystical capacity for dreaming. Just as the American Dream itself has degenerated into the crass pursuit of material wealth, Gatsby, too, strives only for wealth once he has fallen in love with Daisy, whose trivial, limited imagination can conceive of nothing greater. It is significant that Gatsby is not murdered for his criminal connections, but rather for his unswerving devotion to Daisy; it blinds him to all else even to his own safety. As Nick writes, Gatsby thus "[pays] a high price for living too long with a single dream."

Up to the moment of his death, Gatsby cannot accept that this dream is over: he continues to insist that Daisy may still come to him, though it is clear to everyone including the reader that she is bound indissolubly to Tom. Gatsby's death thus seems almost inevitable, given that a dreamer cannot exist without his dreams; through Daisy's betrayal, he effectively loses his reason for living.

Wilson seems to be Gatsby's grim double in Chapter VIII, and represents the more menacing aspects of a capacity for visionary dreaming. Like Gatsby, he fundamentally alters the course of his life by attaching symbolic significance to something that is, in and of itself, meaningless; for Gatsby, it is Daisy and her green light, for Wilson, it is the eyes of Dr. T.J. Eckleburg. Both men are destroyed by their love for women who love the brutal Tom Buchanan; both are consumed with longing for something greater than themselves. While Gatsby is a "successful" American dreamer (at least insofar as he has realized his dreams of wealth), Wilson exemplifies the fate of the failed dreamer, whose poverty has deprived him of even his ability to hope.

Gatsby's death takes place on the first day of autumn, when a chill has begun to creep into the air. His decision to use his pool is in defiance of the change of seasons, and represents yet another instance of Gatsby's unwillingness to accept the passage of time. The summer is, for him, equivalent to his reunion with Daisy; the end of the summer heralds the end of their romance.

Chapter Nine

Like insects, reporters and gossipmongers swarm around Gatsby's mansion after his death. They immediately busy themselves with spreading grotesquely exaggerated stories about his murder, his life, and his relationships. Nick tries to give Gatsby a funeral as grand as his parties, but finds that Gatsby's enormous circle of acquaintances has suddenly evaporated. Many like Tom and Daisy Buchanan have simply skipped town, while others including Meyer Wolfsheimer and Kilpspringer flatly refuse to attend the funeral.

Nick tracks down Gatsby's father, Henry C. Gatz, a solemn old man left helpless and distraught by the death of his son. Gatz shows Nick a book in which the young Gatsby kept a self-improvement schedule; nearly every minute of his day was meticulously planned. The only other attendee at Gatsby's funeral is Owl Eyes, the melancholy drunk who was so astonished by Gatsby's library.

Nick meets with Jordan Baker, who recalls their conversation about how bad drivers are only dangerous when two of them meet. She tells Nick that she and he are both "bad drivers," and are therefore a treacherous combination. When Nick ends their affair, she suddenly claims to be engaged to another man.

Months later, Nick runs into Tom Buchanan on New York's Fifth Avenue. Tom admits that it was he who sent Wilson to Gatsby's; he shows no remorse, however, and says that Gatsby deserved to die. Nick reflects that Tom and Daisy are capable only of cruelty and destruction; they are kept safe from the consequences of their actions by their fortress of wealth and privilege.

Nick, repulsed by the shallow and brutal East, determines to return to the Midwest. He reflects that he, the Buchanans, Gatsby, and Jordan are all Westerners who came east; perhaps they all possess some deficiency which makes them unsuitable to Eastern life. After Gatsby's death, the East is haunted, grotesque; the Midwest, by contrast, now seems as idyllic as a scene on a Christmas card.

Staring at the moon on his last night in West Egg, Nick imagines a primeval America an America made for dreamers like Gatsby. The green light at the end of Daisy's dock is like the green continent of America, beckoning its legions of dreamers. Gatsby, for all his greatness, failed to realize that the American Dream was already dead when he began to dream it: his goals, the pursuit of wealth and status, had long since become empty and meaningless. Nick muses that contemporary Americans are "boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past"; any attempt to progress, to move forward, is ultimately futile.

Analysis

The final line of *The Great Gatsby* is one of the most famous in American literature, and serves as a sort of epitaph for both Gatsby and the novel as a whole.

So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.

Here, Nick reveals Gatsby's lifelong quest to transcend his past as ultimately futile. In comparing this backward-driving force to the current of a river, Fitzgerald presents it as both inexorable and, in some sense, naturally determined: it is the inescapable lot of humanity to move backward. Therefore, any attempt at progress is only a conceit, the result of hubris and outsize ambition.

Nick, in reflecting on America as a whole, links its fate to Gatsby's. America, according to Fitzgerald, was founded on the ideals of progress and equality. The America envisioned by its founders was a land made for men like Gatsby: it was intended as a place where visionary dreamers could thrive. Instead, people like Tom and Daisy Buchanan have recreated the grotesqueries and excesses of the European aristocracy in the New World. Gatsby, for all his wealth and greatness, could not become a part of their world; his noble attempt to engineer his own destiny was sabotaged by their cruelty and by the stunted quality of their imaginations. Fitzgerald's America is emphatically not a place where anything is possible: just as America has failed to transcend its European origins, Gatsby, too, cannot overcome the circumstances of his upbringing.

Though Nick worships Gatsby's courage and capacity for self-reinvention, he cannot approve of his dishonesty and his criminal dealings. Gatsby, both while he is alive and after his death, poses an insoluble challenge to Nick's customary ways of thinking about the world. Nick firmly believes that the past determines who we are: he suggests that he, and all the novel's characters, are fundamentally Westerners, and thus intrinsically unsuited to life in the East. The West, though it was once emblematic of the American desire for progress, is presented in the novel's final pages as the seat of traditional morality—an idyllic heartland, in stark contrast to the greed and depravity of the East.

It is important to note that the Buchanans lived in *East Egg*, and Gatsby in *West Egg*; therefore, in gazing at the green light on Daisy's dock, Gatsby was looking East. The green light, like the green land of America itself, was once a symbol of hope; now, the original ideals of the American dream have deteriorated into the crass pursuit of wealth. In committing his extraordinary capacity for dreaming to his love for Daisy, Gatsby, too, devoted himself to nothing more than material gain. In Fitzgerald's grim version of the Roaring Twenties, Gatsby's ruin both mirrors and prefigures the ruin of America itself.

CHARACTERS

Jay Gatsby (James Gatz): Gatsby is, of course, both the novel's title character and its protagonist. When first we meet him, Gatsby is a mysterious, fantastically wealthy young man. Every Saturday, his garish Gothic mansion in *West Egg* serves as the site of extravagant parties. Later in the novel, we learn that his real name is James Gatz; he was born in North Dakota, to an impoverished farming family. While serving in the Army in World War I, Gatsby met Daisy Fay (now Daisy Buchanan) and fell passionately in love with her. He worked briefly for a millionaire, and there became acquainted with the people and customs of high society. This, coupled with his love of Daisy, inspired Gatsby to devote his life to the acquisition of wealth. His fortune has been made through illegal activities: he has sacrificed all claims to propriety in the hopes of growing wealthy and thereby winning Daisy's love.

Jay Gatsby

The title character of *The Great Gatsby* is a young man, around thirty years old, who rose from an impoverished childhood in rural North Dakota to become fabulously wealthy. However, he achieved this lofty goal by participating in organized crime, including distributing illegal alcohol and trading in stolen securities. From his early youth, [Gatsby](#) despised poverty and longed for wealth and sophistication—he dropped out of St. Olaf's College after only two weeks because he could not bear the janitorial job with which he was paying his tuition. Though Gatsby has always wanted to be rich, his main motivation in acquiring his fortune was his love for [Daisy Buchanan](#), whom he met as a young military officer in Louisville before leaving to fight in World War I in 1917. Gatsby immediately fell in love with Daisy's aura of luxury, grace, and charm, and lied to her about his own background in order to convince her that he was good enough for her.

Daisy promised to wait for him when he left for the war, but married [Tom Buchanan](#) in 1919, while Gatsby was studying at Oxford after the war in an attempt to gain an education. From that moment on, Gatsby dedicated himself to winning Daisy back, and his acquisition of millions of dollars, his purchase of a gaudy mansion on West Egg, and his lavish weekly parties are all merely means to that end.

Fitzgerald delays the introduction of most of this information until fairly late in the novel. Gatsby's reputation precedes him—Gatsby himself does not appear in a speaking role until Chapter III. Fitzgerald initially presents Gatsby as the aloof, enigmatic host of the unbelievably opulent parties thrown every week at his mansion. He appears surrounded by spectacular luxury, courted by powerful men and beautiful women. He is the subject of a whirlwind of gossip throughout New York and is already a kind of legendary celebrity before he is ever introduced to the reader. Fitzgerald propels the novel forward through the early chapters by shrouding Gatsby's background and the source of his wealth in mystery (the reader learns about Gatsby's childhood in Chapter VI and receives definitive proof of his criminal dealings in Chapter VII). As a result, the reader's first, distant impressions of Gatsby strike quite a different note from that of the lovesick, naive young man who emerges during the later part of the novel.

Fitzgerald uses this technique of delayed character revelation to emphasize the theatrical quality of Gatsby's approach to life, which is an important part of his personality. Gatsby has literally created his own character, even changing his name from James Gatz to Jay Gatsby to represent his reinvention of himself. As his relentless quest for Daisy demonstrates, Gatsby has an extraordinary ability to transform his hopes and dreams into reality; at the beginning of the novel, he appears to the reader just as he desires to appear to the world. This talent for self-invention is what gives Gatsby his quality of "greatness": indeed, the title "*The Great Gatsby*" is reminiscent of billings for such vaudeville magicians as "The Great Houdini" and "The Great Blackstone," suggesting that the persona of Jay Gatsby is a masterful illusion.

Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. (See [Important Quotations Explained](#))

As the novel progresses and Fitzgerald deconstructs Gatsby's self-presentation, Gatsby reveals himself to be an innocent, hopeful young man who stakes everything on his dreams, not realizing that his dreams are unworthy of him. Gatsby invests Daisy with an idealistic perfection that she cannot possibly attain in reality and pursues her with a passionate zeal that blinds him to her limitations. His dream of her disintegrates, revealing the corruption that wealth causes and the unworthiness of the goal, much in the way Fitzgerald sees the American dream crumbling in the 1920s, as America's powerful optimism, vitality, and individualism become subordinated to the amoral pursuit of wealth.

Gatsby is contrasted most consistently with [Nick](#). Critics point out that the former, passionate and active, and the latter, sober and reflective, seem to represent two sides of Fitzgerald's personality. Additionally, whereas Tom is a cold-hearted, aristocratic bully, Gatsby is a loyal and good-hearted man. Though his lifestyle and attitude differ greatly from those of [George Wilson](#), Gatsby and [Wilson](#) share the fact that they both lose their love interest to Tom.

Jay Gatsby -

The title character and protagonist of the novel, [Gatsby](#) is a fabulously wealthy young man living in a Gothic mansion in West Egg. He is famous for the lavish parties he throws every Saturday night, but no one knows where he comes from, what he does, or how he made his fortune. As the novel progresses, [Nick](#) learns that Gatsby was born

James Gatz on a farm in North Dakota; working for a millionaire made him dedicate his life to the achievement of wealth. When he met [Daisy](#) while training to be an officer in Louisville, he fell in love with her. Nick also learns that Gatsby made his fortune through criminal activity, as he was willing to do anything to gain the social position he thought necessary to win Daisy. Nick views Gatsby as a deeply flawed man, dishonest and vulgar, whose extraordinary optimism and power to transform his dreams into reality make him “great” nonetheless.

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Nick Carraway: The novel's narrator, Nick Carraway comes from a well-to-do Minnesota family. He travels to New York to learn the bond business; there, he becomes involved with both Gatsby and the Buchanans. Though he is honest, responsible, and fair-minded, Nick nevertheless shares some of the flaws of the East Egg milieu. He, too, frequently neglects to take the emotions of others into account. Of all the novel's characters, he is the only one to truly recognize Gatsby's "greatness" thereby revealing himself as a young man of unusual sensitivity.

Nick Carraway

If Gatsby represents one part of Fitzgerald's personality, the flashy celebrity who pursued and glorified wealth in order to impress the woman he loved, then Nick represents another part: the quiet, reflective Midwesterner adrift in the lurid East. A young man (he turns thirty during the course of the novel) from Minnesota, Nick travels to New York in 1922 to learn the bond business. He lives in the West Egg district of Long Island, next door to Gatsby. Nick is also Daisy's cousin, which enables him to observe and assist the resurgent love affair between Daisy and Gatsby. As a result of his relationship to these two characters, Nick is the perfect choice to narrate the novel, which functions as a personal memoir of his experiences with Gatsby in the summer of 1922.

Nick is also well suited to narrating *The Great Gatsby* because of his temperament. As he tells the reader in Chapter I, he is tolerant, open-minded, quiet, and a good listener, and, as a result, others tend to talk to him and tell him their secrets. Gatsby, in particular, comes to trust him and treat him as a confidant. Nick generally assumes a secondary role throughout the novel, preferring to describe and comment on events rather than dominate the action. Often, however, he functions as Fitzgerald's voice, as in his extended meditation on time and the American dream at the end of Chapter IX.

Insofar as Nick plays a role inside the narrative, he evidences a strongly mixed reaction to life on the East Coast, one that creates a powerful internal conflict that he does not resolve until the end of the book. On the one hand, Nick is attracted to the fast-paced, fun-driven lifestyle of New York. On the other hand, he finds that lifestyle grotesque and damaging. This inner conflict is symbolized throughout the book by Nick's romantic affair with [Jordan Baker](#). He is attracted to her vivacity and her sophistication just as he is repelled by her dishonesty and her lack of consideration for other people.

Nick states that there is a "quality of distortion" to life in New York, and this lifestyle makes him lose his equilibrium, especially early in the novel, as when he gets drunk at Gatsby's party in Chapter II. After witnessing the unraveling of Gatsby's dream and presiding over the appalling spectacle of Gatsby's funeral, Nick realizes that the fast life

of revelry on the East Coast is a cover for the terrifying moral emptiness that [the valley of ashes](#) symbolizes. Having gained the maturity that this insight demonstrates, he returns to Minnesota in search of a quieter life structured by more traditional moral values.

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Tom Buchanan: A brutal, hulking man, Tom Buchanan is a former Yale football player who, like Daisy, comes from an immensely wealthy Midwestern family. His racism and sexism are symptomatic of his deep insecurity about his own elevated social position. Tom is a vicious bully, physically menacing both his wife and his mistress. He is a thoroughgoing hypocrite as well: though he condemns his wife and Gatsby for their infidelity, he has no qualms about carrying on his own affair.

Tom Buchanan -

[Daisy](#)'s immensely wealthy husband, once a member of [Nick](#)'s social club at Yale. Powerfully built and hailing from a socially solid old family, [Tom](#) is an arrogant, hypocritical bully. His social attitudes are laced with racism and sexism, and he never even considers trying to live up to the moral standard he demands from those around him. He has no moral qualms about his own extramarital affair with [Myrtle](#), but when he begins to suspect Daisy and [Gatsby](#) of having an affair, he becomes outraged and forces a confrontation.

Daisy Fay Buchanan: Born Daisy Fay, she is Nick's cousin, Tom's wife, and the woman Gatsby loves. In her youth, she fell in love with Jay Gatsby and promised to wait for him until the end of the war. During their separation, however, Tom Buchanan proposed to her; comparing Tom's wealth to Gatsby's poverty, Daisy decided not to wait for Gatsby after all. Daisy is insubstantial and vapid, a careless woman who uses her frail demeanor as an excuse for her extreme immaturity. She, in her wealth and beauty, is the symbol of all that Gatsby desires. She kills Myrtle Wilson while driving Gatsby's car. Gatsby selflessly assumes responsibility for Myrtle's death.

Daisy Buchanan

Partially based on Fitzgerald's wife, Zelda, Daisy is a beautiful young woman from Louisville, Kentucky. She is Nick's cousin and the object of Gatsby's love. As a young debutante in Louisville, Daisy was extremely popular among the military officers stationed near her home, including Jay Gatsby. Gatsby lied about his background to Daisy, claiming to be from a wealthy family in order to convince her that he was worthy of her. Eventually, Gatsby won Daisy's heart, and they made love before Gatsby left to fight in the war. Daisy promised to wait for Gatsby, but in 1919 she chose instead to marry Tom Buchanan, a young man from a solid, aristocratic family who could promise her a wealthy lifestyle and who had the support of her parents.

After 1919, Gatsby dedicated himself to winning Daisy back, making her the single goal of all of his dreams and the main motivation behind his acquisition of immense wealth through criminal activity. To Gatsby, Daisy represents the paragon of perfection—she has the aura of charm, wealth, sophistication, grace, and aristocracy that he longed for as a child in North Dakota and that first attracted him to her. In reality, however, Daisy falls far short of Gatsby's ideals. She is beautiful and charming, but also fickle, shallow, bored, and sardonic. Nick characterizes her as a careless person who smashes things up and then retreats behind her money. Daisy proves her real nature when she chooses Tom over Gatsby in Chapter VII, then allows Gatsby to take the blame for killing Myrtle Wilson even though she herself was driving the car. Finally, rather than attend Gatsby's funeral, Daisy and Tom move away, leaving no forwarding address.

Like Zelda Fitzgerald, Daisy is in love with money, ease, and material luxury. She is capable of affection (she seems genuinely fond of Nick and occasionally seems to love Gatsby sincerely), but not of sustained loyalty or care. She is indifferent even to her own infant daughter, never discussing her and treating her as an afterthought when she is introduced in Chapter VII. In Fitzgerald's conception of America in the 1920s, Daisy represents the amoral values of the aristocratic East

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Jordan Baker: Daisy's longtime friend, Jordan Baker is a professional golfer who cheated in order to win her first tournament. Jordan is extremely cynical, with a masculine, icy demeanor that Nick initially finds compelling. The two become briefly involved, but Jordan rejects him on the grounds that he is as corrupt and decadent as she is.

Myrtle Wilson: An earthy, vital and voluptuous woman, Myrtle is desperate to improve her life. She shares a loveless marriage with George Wilson, a man who runs a shabby garage in the valley of ashes. She has been having a long-term affair with Tom Buchanan, and is incredibly jealous of Daisy. After a fight with her husband, she runs out into the street and is hit and killed by Gatsby's car.

George B. Wilson: George is a listless, impoverished man whose only passion is his love for his wife, Myrtle. He is devastated by Myrtle's affair with Tom. After her death, the magnitude of his grief drives Wilson to murder Jay Gatsby before committing suicide himself.

Meyer Wolfsheim: A notorious underworld figure, Wolfsheim is a business associate of Gatsby. He is deeply involved in organized crime, and even claims credit for fixing the 1919 World Series. His character like Fitzgerald's view of the Roaring Twenties as a whole is a curious mix of barbarism and refinement (his cufflinks are made from human

molars). After Gatsby's murder, however, Wolfsheim is one of the only people to express his grief or condolences; by contrast, the socially superior Buchanans fail to attend Gatsby's funeral.

Henry Gatz: Gatsby's father; his son's help is the only thing that saves him from poverty. Gatz tells Nick about his son's extravagant plans and dreams of self-improvement.

Dan Cody: A somewhat coarse man who became immensely wealthy during the Gold Rush. He mentored Gatsby as he was a young man and gave him a taste of elite society. Though he left Gatsby a sum of money after his death, it was later seized by Cody's ex-wife.

Michaelis: Wilson's neighbor; he attempts to console Wilson after Myrtle's death.

Catherine: Myrtle Wilson's sister. Tom, Myrtle and Nick visit with her and her neighbors, the McKees, in New York City.

The McKees: Catherine's neighbors. Mr. McKee is an artist; both McKees are shallow gossips who concern themselves only with status and fashion.

Ewing Klipspringer: A shiftless freeloader who almost lives at Gatsby's mansion. Though he takes advantage of Gatsby's wealth and generosity, Klipspringer fails to attend his funeral.

Owl Eyes: An eccentric, bespectacled man whom Nick meets at one of Gatsby's parties. He is one of the few people to attend Gatsby's funeral.