

## A Note on Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*

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*University Review*, Vol XXXIII, No 3, March, 1967, pp. 197-202.

F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* is certainly more than an impression of the Jazz Age, more than a novel of manners. Serious critics have by no means settled upon what that "more" might be, but one hypothesis recurs quite regularly. It is the view that Fitzgerald was writing about the superannuation of traditional American belief, the obsolescence of accepted folklore. *The Great Gatsby* is about many things, but it is inescapably a general critique of the "American dream" and also of the "agrarian myth"--a powerful demonstration of their invalidity for Americans of Fitzgerald's generation and after.

The American dream consisted of the belief (sometimes thought of as a promise) that people of talent in this land of opportunity and plenty could reasonably aspire to material success if they adhered to a fairly well-defined set of behavioural rules--rules set forth in a relatively comprehensive form as long ago as the eighteenth century by Benjamin Franklin. In addition, Americans easily assumed that spiritual satisfaction would automatically accompany material success. The dream was to be realized in an agrarian civilization, a way of life presumed better--far better--than the urban alternative. Thomas Jefferson firmly established the myth of the garden--the concept of agrarian virtue and the urban vice--in American minds. During the turbulent era of westward expansion the myth gained increasing stature.

James Gatz of North Dakota had dreamed a special version of the American dream. Fitzgerald tells us that it constituted "a promise that the rock of the world was founded securely on a fairy's wing." When Gatz lay dead, his father told Nick Carraway that "Jimmy was bound to get ahead." As a child, Gatz set about preparing to realize his dream. He early decided that he could contemplate future glory so long as he scheduled his life properly and adhered to a set of general resolves--resolves quite obviously derivative from *Poor Richard*. "No smokeing [sic] or chewing." "Bath every other day." "Be better to parents." Yes, James Gatz was *bound* to get ahead, bound as securely to his goal as was Captain Ahab to the pursuit of the white whale. The *Great Gatsby* is the chronicle of what happened when James Gatz attempted to realize the promise of his dream.

Gatz thought himself different--very different--from the common run of mankind. We learn that his parents were "shiftless and unsuccessful" and that "his imagination had never really accepted them as his parents at all." He possessed a "Platonic conception of himself. He was a son of God." As a son of *God--God's* boy--he "must be about His Father's business." What was that business? It was "the service of a vast, vulgar, and meretricious beauty." Gatz plainly imagined himself a Christian of the anointed--born of earthly parents but actually a son of God. This is what Fitzgerald sought to convey in establishing that "Jay Gatsby of West Egg, Long Island, sprang from his Platonic conception of himself." That conception moved him to seek out goodness and beauty--certainly a prostituted goodness and beauty, but goodness and beauty nevertheless.

When his moment came--at seventeen James Gatz changed his name. The question of the name change has not received the attention it deserves. Some believe that Fitzgerald derived "Gatsby" from the slang term for pistol current during the Jazz Age--gat. Others see in the act of changing names an intimation of "Jewishness" in the hero, a view supported by the frequency of the name "Jay" among the Jews. Jay Gould comes immediately to mind as do Jay Cooke and J.P Morgan. Also, it is known that the inspiration for the novel came from Fitzgerald's chance encounter with a Jewish bootlegger.

It is, of course, conceivable that Fitzgerald had some or even all of these things in mind, and it is also possible that he had still another thought. Could it be, however unlikely, that he was rendering the literal "Jesus, God's boy" in the name of Jay Gatsby? (In ordinary pronunciation, the 't' easily changes to "d" as in "Gad.") This conjecture might appear hopelessly far-fetched, were it not for Fitzgerald's discussion of Gatz's "Platonic conception of himself," and his direct use of the phrase "son of God.",

In any case, Gatsby began his pursuit of goodness and beauty when he changed his name, and that pursuit ultimately ended in tragedy.

Fitzgerald develops the tragedy of Jay Gatsby as the consequence of his quixotic quest for Daisy Buchanan. Daisy represents that "vast, vulgar, and meretricious beauty" to which Gatsby aspired. When Jay met Daisy, he realized that he had "forever wed [his] unutterable visions to her perishable breath." He knew that "his mind would never romp again like the mind of God.", when he kissed her, "she blossomed for him like a flower and the incarnation was complete." What was the incarnation? In Daisy, Gatsby's meretricious dream was made flesh. He sought ever after to realize 'his dream in union with her.

The trouble with Gatsby's quest was that Daisy was completely incapable of playing the role assigned to her. She was as shallow as the other hollow people who inhabited Fitzgerald's Long Island. She could never become a legitimate actualization of Gatsby's illegitimate dream. Gatsby was himself culpable. He was not truly God's boy perhaps, but he possessed certain grandeur, an incredible ability to live in terms of his misguided dream. Nick Carraway understood this, telling Gatsby at one point that he was "worth the whole damned crowd put together."

Both Gatsby and Tom Buchanan, Daisy's husband, possessed wealth Gatsby at least used his wealth to seek out beauty and claim it for himself. Buchanan the lecher lacked any larger goals. In the end, Daisy chooses to remain with Buchanan, and Gatsby is murdered by the deranged husband of Myrtle Wilson, Buchanan's mistress, who had been accidentally run down and killed by Daisy. Buchanan serves as Gatsby's executioner; he allows George Wilson to believe that Gatsby had killed Myrtle.

Gatsby was as alone in death as he had been in life. Of all the hordes who had accepted his largesse when alive, only one--an unnamed "owl-eyed man" who had admired Gatsby's books--appeared at the funeral. He delivered a pathetic epitaph "The poor son-of-a-bitch." The tragedy is over; Fitzgerald speculates on its meaning through the narrator, Nick Carraway. Carraway notes that Jay and the others--Nick himself, his sometime girl friend Jordan Baker, Daisy, and Tom--all were from the Middle West. It was not the Middle West of popular imagination, of the lost agrarian past, but rather the cities of the middle border. "That's my Middle West," muses Carraway, "not the wheat or the prairies or the lost Swede towns, but the thrilling returning trains of my youth, and the street lamps and sleigh bells in the frosty dark and the shadows of holly wreaths thrown by lighted windows on the snow," Carraway continues: Gatsby and his friends "were all Westerners, and perhaps we possessed some deficiency in common Which made us subtly unadaptable to Eastern life." The East held many attractions, but the expatriate Westerner lived there at his peril. So Carraway went home. He could at least survive, though he might not prosper, in prairie cities.

Why had Gatsby failed? It was because the time for dreaming as Gatsby dreamed had passed. In what must be, in its implications, one of the most moving passages in American literature, Fitzgerald completes his commentary on Jay Gatsby: "His dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know it was already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity behind the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night."

The future to which Gatsby aspired is indeed in the past. His dream--the American dream--had been nurtured in the agrarian past that was no more. Fitzgerald's symbolism is never more ingenious than in his depiction of the bankruptcy of the old agrarian myth. The task he accomplishes through the most haunting and mysterious of the symbols which appear in the book--the eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg. Here is one of the cruelest caricatures in the American novel. For Dr. T. J. Eckleburg is none other than a devitalized Thomas Jefferson, the pre-eminent purveyor of the agrarian myth.

What is it that Dr. Eckleburg's eyes survey? It is the valley of democracy turned to ashes--the garden defiled: "This is a valley of ashes--a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens; where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and, finally, With a transcendent effort, of men who move dimly and already crumbling through the

powdery air. Occasionally a line of gray cars crawls along an invisible track, gives out a ghastly creak, and comes to rest, and immediately the ash-gray men swarm up with leaden spades and stir up an impenetrable cloud, which screens their obscure operations from your sight ... [Dr. Eckleburg's] eyes, dimmed a little by many pointless days under sun and rain, brood on over the solemn dumping ground" Fitzgerald thus presents a remarkably evocative description of the corruption that had befallen Jefferson's garden.

At the very end of the novel, Fitzgerald betrays his affection for the myth of the garden, despite his awareness that it could no longer serve Americans. His narrator Carraway once again serves as the vehicle for his thoughts: "And as the moon rose higher the inessential houses began to melt away until gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailor's eyes--a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby's house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder."

Alas, poor Jay Gatsby! "Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter--tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms further... And one fine morning--" Alas, all of us! The novel ends on a desperately somber note: "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past."

American writers in the Twenties were an entirely new breed--divorced from the literary tradition which had matured between the Civil War and World War I. That tradition culminated in the literary Establishment presided over by William Dean Howells in the last years before the outbreak of the Great War. Henry F. May has summarized the basic tenets of Howells and his minions in *The End of American Innocence*: Howells "had always insisted that real truth and moral goodness were identical, and he had always held that politics and literature were both amenable to moral judgment. He had always believed that American civilization was treading a sure path, whatever the momentary failures, toward moral and material improvement."

What had outmoded Howells? It was the realization, anticipated before the Great War but complete only in the Twenties, that America had been transformed--transformed by the onset of an overwhelming process of industrialization and urbanization which had superannuated traditional American beliefs--beliefs nurtured in the bosom of the agrarian past.

In these circumstances, a revolution in manners and morals was inevitable. World War I augmented rather than inaugurated the trend. Post-war writers undertook a comprehensive critique of traditional faith. Some abhorred the change; others welcomed it. In any case, almost all of the great writers of the Twenties accepted the fact of the intellectual and emotional revolution deriving from the obsolescence of pre-war standards. They launched a comprehensive critique of traditional faiths, and for their efforts they received much public notice and approbation.

What accounts for the success of these literary revolutionists? The answer resides in the fact that America was generally "new" in the Twenties. George Mowry and other recent historians have effectively documented the distinctive "modernity" of America in the wake of World War I—a modernity discernible in the mass culture as well as among the elite. The transitional years had passed; the change from the rural-agricultural past to the urban-industrial future was relatively complete, and readers as well as writers responded to this reality. To be sure, the defenders of the old America ensconced behind crumbling barricades in the Old South and the farther Middle West fought extensive rearguard actions--fundamentalist assaults on evolution, prohibitionist bans on spirituous liquors, and racist campaigns for the preservation of white Anglo-Saxon Protestant America--but these were last desperate attempts to postpone the inevitable. The most important fact about reaction in the Twenties was that it failed. In each instance "modernity" ultimately triumphed over tradition.

Significant writers in the Twenties were above all dedicated to the imposing task of pointing out the error of living in terms of obsolete values--however useful those values might have been in the past. This effort is perhaps most obvious in the novels of Ernest Hemingway. In *The Sun Also Rises* Hemingway wastes little time investigating the reasons why Jake Barnes, Lady Brett, Robert Cohn, and other characters in the novel must live differently than before. Hemingway's emphasis is on method--on how to live in the revolutionized context. Scott Fitzgerald dealt with the other side of the coin--the bankruptcy of the old way. Jay Gatsby's dream was patently absurd--however noble, however "American." Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson were unsound guides to life in the modernity of the vast eastern Urbana, the East of West Egg, Long Island--and also for life in the new Midwest to which the chastened Carraway returned. The final irony of the novel is that Fitzgerald could discern no beauty in the city to compare with the beauty, however meretricious, inherent in Gatsby's Platonic conception of himself.