

Time and Timelessness in the Great Gatsby

From Novels for Students

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

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

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

Gatsby is gorgeous and creates a sense of wonder in Nick for the daring nature of his impossible but incorruptible dream. It is the attempt itself and the firm belief that he can achieve the impossible that makes Gatsby more than the sum of his (somewhat shabby) reality. As a seventeen-year-old he transformed himself from plain James Gatz, to Jay Gatsby for whom anything is possible. As he rowed out to Dan Cody's sumptuous yacht off the shore of Lake Superior, he was crossing towards opportunity, and a Platonic conception of himself (based on the Greek philosopher Plato's theory of perfect forms, which interprets everything on earth as a better or worse copy of these forms, as well as the conception of a new self-identity). Gatsby conforms to an ideal of himself that transforms reality into possibility. This audacity and disregard for ties binding him to his own past is his apprenticeship

for loving Daisy. In defiance of the class difference separating them, he aspires high to this girl in a golden tower, the "king's" daughter, whose voice is full of money. Gatsby does not seem to realize that his idea of Daisy, whom he weds with a kiss one summer night, has as little bearing on reality as Jay Gatsby does.

Gatsby is a romantic, but he is also made up of romantic stories by other people who speculate and rumour about his unknown past. Nick takes it upon himself to tell the story and thus to tell Gatsby's story as he pieced it together from different sources, and Nick characterizes himself as someone who understands Gatsby better, who wants to set the record straight, and who sides with Gatsby against the world that made him up and then deserted him. It is Nick alone who arranges Gatsby's funeral and meets with his father, and the bitterness of the lesson about humanity that Nick learns from this experience affects the way he tells the story. Certainly, Nick is also romanticizing Gatsby. He contrasts the wondrous hope which Gatsby embodied against the corruptness of his bootlegging business (Gatsby's fortune in fact came from illegal alcohol sales) and against the more corrupt society which preyed on Gatsby. Against the background of the times and of upper-class society like that represented at his parties, Gatsby's extraordinary gift for hope and his romantic readiness stand out as transcendent.

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

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

as tragedy.

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