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THE GREAT GATSBY, by F. Scott Fitzgerald, 1925

In retrospect it is perhaps not surprising that contemporary reviewers mainly missed the mark in their appraisals of Fitzgerald's masterpiece, *The Great Gatsby*. His first novel, *This Side of Paradise* (1920), a novel of growth, was thinly disguised autobiography written in the third-person, a viewpoint that numerous reviewers saw as flawed. *The Beautiful and Damned* (1922) was marred by a self-conscious preoccupation with the deterministic philosophy that undergirds American literary naturalism. By 1925 he was known primarily as the historian of the Jazz Age (which he named) and chronicler in slick American weeklies and monthlies of the American flapper (which, in fiction, he invented). His best artistic efforts had appeared in middlebrow, mass-circulation magazines like *The Saturday Evening Post* or had been buried in H.L Mencken's sophisticated but low-circulation *Smart Set* before their appearance in two slightly publicized collections with flashy titles, *Flappers and Philosophers*(1920) and *Tales of the Jazz Age* (1922).

Critics and reviewers were understandably caught off-guard when Fitzgerald published at the height of the Roaring Twenties a novel which, after its apotheosis (circa 1950), would, not infrequently, be cited as the Great American Novel. Typical of the early reviews of *The Great Gatsby* was the first, whose spirit is caught in its headline: "F. SCOTT FITZGERALD'S LATEST DUD." Even Mencken, who noted some of the book's redeeming qualities, saw it finally as "a glorified anecdote." In the minority was T.S. Eliot, who was deeply moved by the novel and hailed it as "the first step American fiction has taken since Henry James," an opinion that has now been echoed and elaborated upon in scores of books and more than a hundred journal articles dealing with *The Great Gatsby*.

Fitzgerald's ambitious goal as he approached the composition of *The Great Gatsby* was to "write something *new*--something extraordinary and beautiful and simple + intricately patterned." And it is indeed largely because of his concern with matters of form aimed at simplicity and intricacy of pattern that the novel succeeds on so many levels: the simplicity, or apparent simplicity, of Nick Carraway's first-person viewpoint, allows the reader, on the one hand, to see how the narrative is being constructed and, on the other, to participate in Nick's sense of discovery as the separate strands of the narrative take on meaning at various levels of abstraction in such a way that they seem, both to Nick and to the reader, to have been inseparably linked from the beginning. There was, of course, nothing new about first-person narration in the 1920's. It had a long history in the English novel dating back to the mid-18th century. In America, two distinguished first-

person narratives, Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* and Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, preceded *The Great Gatsby*, as did scores of first-person narratives by Edgar Allan Poe. But Fitzgerald, who was reading and studying Joseph Conrad during the composition of *The Great Gatsby*, was interested in exploring subtle uses of narrative viewpoint. On the novel's most superficial level, that of Jay Gatsby's all-consuming love and pursuit of Daisy Buchanan, Nick, in service of Fitzgerald's goal of simplicity, becomes a logical choice as narrator. His physical proximity to the main characters and his trustworthiness situate him ideally to serve as a kind of Jamesian confidant on several fronts, one who can, in fact, know details of the story from many points of view and observe much of the action firsthand.

Obviously, the creation of a reliable narrator of the Gatsby-Daisy story at the heart of *The Great Gatsby* was central in Fitzgerald's achieving verisimilitude. However, the simple love story was merely the foundation for a narrative structure that would accommodate Fitzgerald's ideas about irreconcilable contradictions within the American Dream and ultimately about the ideal quest itself. Young Jay Gatsby, through the discipline of Benjamin Franklin-like charts and schedules, has prepared himself to receive all that America has to offer and believes naively that he can have the embodiment of it, the wealthy Louisville debutante Daisy Fay, the only "nice" girl he has ever known, if he can but find the currency to buy his way into her life. It is Nick, the middle-class everyman without particular allegiance to either the privileged or working class, who has enough objectivity to comprehend the awful irony that Gatsby's dream has been futile from the beginning: he will never be accepted into the world of old money that Daisy could never leave. At this level the love story approaches allegory, and because Nick, like all of the main characters in the novel, is a Westerner, he is credible as narrator of the allegory, which he calls "a story of the West, after all." He knows about the infinite hope of the frontier spirit, and he also has witnessed the corruption of the American promise of equality for all.

On the second level, therefore, Fitzgerald transcends the novel of Jazz-Age, bull-market manners that it could have been in the hands of a less ambitious craftsman, and ascends to the level of the great 19th century French novelists, who, in Lionel Trilling's words "take the given moment as a moral fact." But beyond this, Nick's narrative must carry the burden of the novel's more abstract concern with idealism in the real world. Gatsby "sprang from his Platonic conception of himself." He creates "the Great Gatsby" from the raw material of his early self, James Gatz, and from a boundless imagination, an embodied spirit capable of anything it chooses to do. But when, at last, Gatsby kissed Daisy and "forever wed his unutterable visions to her perishable breath, his mind would never romp again like the mind of God." The ideal world, in Gatsby's case, shatters in the face of the real one. It has, of course, happened before with Dutch sailors who "for a transitory and enchanted moment" contemplated the "fresh green breast of the new world." And, as Nick knows, it will happen as long as there is a human spirit to contemplate mystery.

The intricate weaving of the various stories within *The Great Gatsby* is accomplished through a complex symbolic substructure of the narrative. The

green light, which carries meaning at every level of the story--as Gatsby's go-ahead sign, as money, as the "green breast of the new world," as springtime--is strategically placed in chapters one, five, and nine. The eyes of T.J. Eckleburg "brood on over the solemn dumping ground," which is the wasteland that America has become, and their empty gaze is there at crucial moments such as that of Tom's visit to his mistress in the Valley of Ashes and before and after her death, a reminder that God has been replaced by fading signs of American materialism. The sustained good driver/bad driver

metaphor, through which Fitzgerald hints at standards of morality and immorality, is evident at virtually every turn of the novel: Daisy runs over Myrtle and will not stop to accept responsibility; Jordan Baker (whose name combines two brands of automobile from the 1920's) wears her careless driving as a badge of honor; Owl Eyes, the drunken philosopher in Gatsby's library who shows up at his funeral to informally eulogize him as "the poor son of a bitch," is involved in an accident leaving Gatsby's party. With these symbols and motifs, Fitzgerald imparted, in the words of his editor, Maxwell Perkins, "a sort of sense of eternity."

It is difficult to assess the enormous influence of *The Great Gatsby*. John O'Hara and J.D. Salinger are two of many American authors who have proclaimed Fitzgerald's brilliance, and Salinger's first-person narrative, *The Catcher in the Rye*, shares thematic and formal concerns with *The Great Gatsby*. However, as has been noted, Fitzgerald's is "a fiction that is difficult to imitate but from which much can be learned." While *The Great Gatsby* undoubtedly advanced the novel form in the tradition of Henry James, as Eliot maintained, its primarily legacy is perhaps its affirmation of Fitzgerald's hope that in the age of great experimentation which Modernism was, the traditional novel, guided by simplicity and used with care, could still contain, in his words, "something *new*--something extraordinary and beautiful."

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[bibliographical information modified from original]

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