

THE BOOK
AND
AUTHOR

The Great Gatsby was an unlikely book to become one of the handful of enduring American classics, a book to be read and reread, extravagantly loved and universally taught. Scarcely longer than a novella, it made no great impact when it first appeared in 1925. Its reviews and sales were disappointing compared to the enthusiastic reception accorded to Fitzgerald's apprentice novels, *This Side of Paradise* (1920) and *The Beautiful and Damned* (1922), which made him famous. Along with his articles, interviews, short fiction, and widely reported public antics, those books had turned Fitzgerald and his young wife into icons of the younger generation—rebellious, fun-loving, insouciant, and iconoclastic. It would be twenty years before *The Great Gatsby*, with its tragic and elegiac cast, would come to be seen as the representative book of that raucous decade.

Born in 1896, Fitzgerald was still in his twenties when *Gatsby* came out, but his career, along with his marriage to the former Zelda Sayre, was soon to enter a steep decline, and the mixed, largely critical reviews of the novel suggested that his stock was already falling. Eventually Zelda would be hospitalized after a serious breakdown and Fitzgerald would tumble into alcoholism and Hollywood screenwriting, still believing that the meticulous craft he put into *Gatsby* would one day be recognized. In the mid-1930s, after the relative failure of his next novel, *Tender Is the Night* (1934), he hit bottom and described his crack-up in a series of confessional articles for *Esquire*. He died of a heart attack in Hollywood in 1940. It was only after his college friend, the critic Edmund Wilson, edited his unfinished novel *The Last Tycoon* in 1941 and a collection of his articles in 1945 that his reputation rebounded. Along with Hemingway and Faulkner he became the writer's writer for the post-1945 generation, revered and widely imitated. *The Great Gatsby* was canonized not simply as a document of the Jazz Age but as a key to the American psyche and the national experience.

The Great Gatsby is a deceptively simple work with a plot so flimsy—and told so offhandedly—that the particulars stuck with me only after three or four readings. One of the main attributes of fiction, and one of its glories, is what Henry James called “solidity of specification,” the wealth of concrete detail that we recognize as a lived world, even in a fantastic or surreal setting. Both the premise and style of *The Great Gatsby* work against such circumstantial realism. First, we are asked to believe that a young man, newly rich, would buy a Long Island estate just to be across the bay from an old girlfriend, whom he loved five years earlier, who jilted him and married someone else. Instead of moving on he has nurtured the flame, as if committed to “the following of a grail” (155). He gives fabulous parties hoping that she will show up, and when they do meet he expects her to leave her husband and child and run off with him, after telling her husband that she never loved him. This is followed by complications and coincidences that strain credibility, culminating in her rejection and his murder. It would be hard for any writer to make this story believable.

Fortunately, such a summary has little to do with what really takes place in *The Great Gatsby*, for its story trickles out in bits and pieces and its style, fresh and full of surprises, is as sinuous and unpredictable as the narrative. Relying on suggestive language rather than realistic detail, the novel achieves resonance as myth and metaphor rather than as a densely populated fictional world. Gatsby’s background remains vague and his feeling for Daisy Buchanan is shrouded in a haze of idealization more typical of romantic poetry than of modern fiction. Of Daisy we learn, for example: “The exhilarating ripple of her voice was a wild tonic in the rain” (92). Gatsby’s pursuit of his “grail” tells us we are at least as much in the realm of quest romance as in the contemporary world. When he falls in love, his world goes through a metamorphosis as remarkable for its lyrical prose as for its transcendental leap:

Out of the corner of his eye Gatsby saw the blocks of the sidewalks really formed a ladder and mounted to a secret place above the trees—he could

climb to it, if he climbed alone, and once there he could suck on the pap of life, gulp down the incomparable milk of wonder.

His heart beat faster and faster as Daisy's white face came up to his own. He knew that when he kissed this girl, and forever wed his unutterable visions to her perishable breath, his mind would never romp again like the mind of God. So he waited, listening for a moment longer to the tuning-fork that had been struck upon a star. Then he kissed her. At his lips' touch she blossomed for him like a flower, and the incarnation was complete. (118)

No other modern novelist could have sounded such a note, though romance writers would grasp at tawdry versions of it. The language is evocative and poetic rather than descriptive; the final image comes directly from the poetry and letters of Keats, Fitzgerald's favorite writer. It is meant to describe Gatsby's own sense of his dreamy aspirations, if not exactly in his own words. The narrator, Nick Carraway, who represents the dry-eyed, skeptical side of Fitzgerald's temperament, characterizes it as "appalling sentimentality." Yet Gatsby's "unutterable visions" strike a chord in him; they remind him of something ineffable, "an elusive rhythm, a fragment of lost words, that I had heard somewhere a long time ago." Like Daisy's love for Gatsby, locked deep in the past, the words cannot be recaptured, and Nick finds that "what I had almost remembered was incommunicable forever" (118).

Fitzgerald's effort to communicate the incommunicable is balanced by his irony and satire. *The Great Gatsby* is at once a social novel that evokes a specific time and place and a poetic novel about a young man's dreams. Fitzgerald's language rises at times to an astonishing eloquence, especially in the near-perfect codas to each chapter and, famously, in the novel as a whole, but it can also be dry and sardonic, as in the wry accounts of Gatsby's parties, of numerous minor characters (such as Gatsby's gangster friend, Wolfsheim), and at times of Gatsby himself. The novel pulls together many strands of twenties culture, from organized crime and illegal booze to Wall Street wealth, young migrants from the Midwest, and the frivolous young flappers of the party scene. But the

story, and sometimes the very syntax, also points to the vague and the ecstatic—to intimations, however transient, of another order of being, “a secret place above the trees” where Gatsby feels he could “suck on the pap of life, gulp down the incomparable milk of wonder.” Like the Romantic poets, Gatsby yearns for a fullness of being, an emotional transcendence, that is at once uplifting and impossible to sustain, intoxicating but finally disillusioning. This paradox is central to poems like Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale” and Wordsworth’s Immortality Ode but hardly material for most novelists, whose stock in trade is the mundane, the ordinary. This is the heightened language of desire, the milk of inspiration, that reaches for the infinite only to founder in frustration. But once the object takes on flesh and blood, once it is incarnated in another person’s “perishable breath,” it becomes bounded, vulnerable. Gatsby’s failure is built into his huge but absurd ambition. This grail can be sought and sighted but never carried home.

Gatsby’s origins are shadowy. His background and real identity are not to be revealed till late in the novel. We never learn much about how he made his money, though we can see that it was connected to bootlegging, crime, and Prohibition. By telling the story through the eyes of Nick Carraway and telling it in flashbacks, with gaps and omissions, Fitzgerald keeps Gatsby at a distance, preserving his mystery but also allowing us to make judgments of his dreams and follies, as Nick does. To Tom Buchanan, Daisy’s husband, a realist in the worst sense, a man without imagination, Gatsby is no more than a “common swindler,” a contemptible competitor simply to be eliminated. But Nick, for whom Gatsby at first represents “everything for which I have an affected scorn” (8), comes to admire not only his self-made identity but his foolish, futile visions of grandeur and romance. “They’re a rotten crowd,” he tells him. “You’re worth the whole damn bunch put together” (160). He grows disenchanted with the scene and leaves New York to return to the Midwest, but he becomes Gatsby’s Ishmael, the survivor who will tell his story. While others could sense Gatsby’s “corruption,” only Nick also grasps his “incorruptible dream” (160).

The book could easily have been called *The Education of Nick Carraway*.

Gatsby is an amorphous figure, more an idea than an actual person, because he aspires to something indefinable, “the incomparable milk of wonder.” We first meet him through wild rumors about who he is and where he comes from—the gossip of the spongers and freeloaders who crash his parties. As a self-made man he keeps his biography vague, mixing truth, half-truth, and pulpy legend, like that later piece of self-invention, the young Bob Dylan. He doesn’t actually appear until a quarter of the way into the novel, and Nick first greets his tales with “incredulous laughter,” though some of the most far-fetched turn out to be true. Tom Buchanan, born to wealth and entitlement, sees through him right away as “Mr. Nobody from Nowhere,” engaging in “a presumptuous little flirtation” (136, 138). Gatsby himself had told Nick all those stories because “I didn’t want you to think I was just some nobody” (73). The real history of his transformation from James Gatz to Jay Gatsby, from poor boy to lavish party giver, and from penniless soldier to Daisy’s lover, comes out by fits and starts, almost in reverse chronological order. Writing in 1924, Nick moves from the summer of 1922, when most of the action takes place, back to 1917, when Gatsby and Daisy fell in love, then to Gatsby’s youthful dreams and adventures, to his childhood, and finally, in a daring reach into history, back to the Dutch sailors to imagine their sense of wonder at the new world. In place of the inquest late in the novel, which turns into a tissue of lies, Nick’s inquest into Gatsby’s life resembles an archaeological dig in which we reach the earliest layers last, or a mystery novel that haltingly yields up its secrets. “So we beat on,” the novel concludes, “boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past” (188).

The Great Gatsby is often linked to the American Dream, going back to Benjamin Franklin and Horatio Alger, but that usually stands for material success, not emotional expansion. Gatsby acquires wealth not for its own sake but to fulfill his exalted notion of life’s possibilities. As a young man “his heart was in a constant, turbulent riot” (105).

He leaves college after two weeks because of its “ferocious indifference to the drums of his destiny, to destiny itself” (106). His ambition and desire take shape in Daisy, and he makes love to her “because he had no real right to touch her hand.” He can offer her no security, for he has “no comfortable family standing behind him,” as Tom does. In the Army his social status, or lack of it, is obscured, but “at any moment the invisible cloak of his uniform might slip from his shoulders” (155). The purpose of Gatsby’s money, five years later, is to enable him to run that reel backwards, to freeze time and undo the past. But the past resists being rewritten, just as the social hierarchy resists the admission of nobodies. Gatsby offers Daisy “romantic possibilities totally absent from her world” (116), but her own limitations and his exalted demands make failure inevitable.

Standing between Gatsby and happiness is the hard reality of social class in the figure of Tom Buchanan, the former college athlete whose “thick body” is “capable of enormous leverage — a cruel body” (122, 13). His “wholesome bulkiness” (157) once appealed to Daisy; now he seems merely “hulking” (18). Like his mistress, Myrtle Wilson, who teems with frustrated vitality and dies a gruesome death, Tom is as solid and physical as Gatsby and Daisy are gossamer and nebulous. But unlike Myrtle, who thinks Tom will leave his wife and marry her—which links her with Gatsby—Tom has no truck with romantic illusions. Since Gatsby comes from nowhere, he could hardly be a serious rival. At seventeen Gatsby had made himself up: he “sprang from his Platonic conception of himself” (105). Daisy floats through the lives of both men, linked to Tom by bonds of money and class but also to Gatsby by the hopes he has projected on her, colossal illusions to which she could never measure up.

Fitzgerald knits the novel together with such linkages and parallels between the characters. Nick is Daisy’s cousin but, increasingly, Gatsby’s friend. He went to college with Tom, whose values he quietly despises. He is seeing Jordan Baker, who is a minor echo of her friend Daisy. Tom and Wilson, Myrtle’s husband, make “a parallel discov-

ery," (130) within an hour of each other, that there is someone else in their wives' lives. Myrtle and Daisy love the same man but in different ways. By accident or design, Tom provokes Wilson into killing his rival, just as Daisy, driving Gatsby's car, accidentally kills hers. Such correspondences make an intricate mesh of a seemingly haphazard tale. So do many echoing words (such as "careless" and "wonder"), plot devices (such as auto accidents), and symbols (such as the valley of ashes, which evokes T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*; the green light sighted by Gatsby on the Buchanans' dock; and the blind but brooding eyes of T. J. Eckleburg, like those of a god who long departed). These leitmotifs structure the novel more tellingly than its action or plot.

The Great Gatsby is more than a triumph of craft; it is a searching foray into the myths and realities of American culture. In Fitzgerald's breathtaking conclusion, the young Gatsby's "milk of wonder," then the "wonder when he first picked out the green light on Daisy's dock," lead us finally to the earliest layer of the novel, the Dutch sailor before the "fresh, green breast of the new world," coming "face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder" (187–88). Gatsby is at once a glorious dreamer, the inheritor of Emersonian notions of self-invention, and a man whose fabricated identity "had broken up like glass against Tom's hard malice" (154)—done in by the resistance of society, the inexorable shifts of time and history, and the iron limits of the real. Gatsby's naive and gigantic demands upon the world give him a claim to greatness, but he is also a kind of frontier showman, an illusionist, the Great Gatsby, who stages his own life. But the crowds at his parties don't show up for his funeral, Daisy abandons him and stays loyal to her class, and Nick, alone among his supposed friends, remains faithful to him and weaves the web of his astonishing story.

Work Cited

Fitzgerald, F. Scott. 1950. *The Great Gatsby*. Harmondsworth, England: Penguin.

Copyright of Critical Insights: The Great Gatsby is the property of Salem Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.