

The Great Gatsby as a Critique of the Self-Made Man

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Among other things, F. Scott Fitzgerald's masterpiece, *The Great Gatsby*, can be fruitfully read as a critique of the idea of the self-made man in America. The novel recounts the process by which the first-person narrator, Nick Carraway, by evaluating the career of a self-made man, Jay Gatsby, learns a new lesson to live a fuller and more meaningful life. In the end, Gatsby enables Nick to accept the inevitable imperfection of reality.

The childhood of Jay Gatsby, born James Gatz, was characterized by severe deprivation, but, instead of being crushed by it, he aspired to do "great things"¹ because he had "an extraordinary gift for hope" (p. 2) and "some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life" (p. 2). His ambition was well reflected in his famous Franklinesque schedule and resolves that emphasized industry, frugality, cleanliness, social grace, and physical, mental, and moral growth. Each item in the schedule and the resolves is perhaps recommendable, but the implicit assumption behind the schedule and the resolves that one can thus mechanically plan his development and self-realization may lead to a dangerous delusion that one can become what he wills to be. Man's growth is essentially more roundabout, organic, and unpredictable.

As one of the distinguishing marks of a self-made man, Gatsby repudiated his ancestry. "His parents were shiftless and unsuccessful farm people" in North Dakota and "his imagination had never really accepted them as his parents at all" (p. 99). It is important to keep in mind that the first step of his intended transformation is the denial of his parentage. He also tried to disown his impoverished personal history. By liquidating his own past and family lineage, he apparently felt that he obtained a tabula rasa on which he could write whatever history that he liked. He was ready to establish an original relationship with the universe. Consequently, when he later tried to solicit Nick's help, he introduced himself as a "son of some wealthy people in the Middle West—all dead now" (p. 65). He also told Nick that he had been educated at Oxford in accordance with "a family tradition" (p. 65) and that he had "lived like a young rajah in all the capitals of Europe—Paris, Venice, Rome—collecting jewels, chiefly rubies . . ." (p. 66).

Befittingly as a self-made man, Gatsby received very little advanced formal education. He more or less voluntarily deprived himself of the opportunities to gain suitable knowledge and skills and to grasp social and human values gradually and critically. He preferred the school of experience to a small Lutheran college which was, in his eyes, tediously oblivious to his destiny. At the age of seventeen, being dedicated to achieving a new essence, Gatsby adopted, along with his new name, a pseudo-father named Dan Cody, who represented wealth and grandeur as well as frontier ruthlessness. The name-change itself was a formal gesture to renounce his former self and family tradition. Some time after his tutelage under Dan Cody terminated, Gatsby had a fatal encounter with Daisy Fay, a beautiful young daughter of a wealthy family in Kentucky.

It is usually assumed that, in the autumn of 1917, Daisy did really love Gatsby, but we should not ignore the fact that “he let her believe that he was a person from much the same stratum as herself” (p. 149), without revealing his true identity. In other words, what Daisy loved was not the true Gatsby but a fictitious Gatsby. Anyway, when Gatsby kissed Daisy, he witnessed the union of the ideal and the material in her and tasted the blissful world of complete harmony, plenitude, and timelessness. To Gatsby, who had experienced only disorder, deprivation, and discontinuity, this was a moment of eternal happiness. It is highly probable, however, that this euphoria was merely subjectively experienced by Gatsby on account of his capacity for romantic idealization. For one thing, as Victor A. Doyno points out,² this kissing scene in Chapter VI should be read against another kissing scene in Chapter VII, where Daisy’s extremely callous attitude toward kissing is presented with a fully satiric intent. The greatest irony of all is that this momentary rapture was based on Gatsby’s invented, not real, self.

After Gatsby and Daisy were separated, in order to regain the love of Daisy, who subsequently married a wealthy young man from Chicago, Tom Buchanan, Gatsby tried to become a person analogous to the one that Daisy loved in 1917. Thus began a new stage of his attempted transformation. By associating with another pseudo-father, Meyer Wolfsheim, Gatsby succeeded in amassing a huge fortune and bought a palatial mansion in West Egg, Long Island, right across a bay from the mansion of the Buchanans in East Egg. His colossal mansion, which Nick later calls a “huge incoherent failure of a house” (p. 181), is to be regarded not as a place for human habitation but as a kind of shrine dedicated to Daisy, who figured as a goddess in

Gatsby's imagination. The stupendously extravagant and riotous parties that Gatsby held on his wide lawn are to be regarded as some religious rites performed on the precinct of the shrine to summon the goddess. As Nick tells us that Gatsby "revalued everything in his house according to the measure of response it drew from [Daisy's] well-loved eyes" (p. 92), his possessions, particularly the pile of his beautiful imported shirts, are offerings to the goddess. Although Daisy was dismayed by the preposterous parties, which were soon terminated, she responded ecstatically to the palatial house and his possessions in it. After thus reestablishing his relations with Daisy, Gatsby expressed his desire to Nick that he should annihilate the five years that separated them. Nick was understandably astonished by the idea.

Much has been said about Gatsby's assertion that one can "fix everything just the way it was before" and that one can "repeat the past" (p. 111), but it is seldom considered in the proper context of Gatsby's peculiar concept of time as a self-made man. As we have already noted, Gatsby earlier felt that he could escape from the constraints of time when he tried to annul his family lineage and his personal past. He believed in man's capacity for eternal beginnings. After he was separated from Daisy, he was able to transform himself from a penniless discharged soldier to a man of tremendous wealth and influence. In externals, at least, he was now equal to the fake image of a rich young man of status that he assumed in front of Daisy in 1917. It is because he felt that he could shape his identity according to his wish, with his tenacity and determination, regardless of his obscure origins, that he believed he could control time at will.

However, the very fact that Gatsby was acutely conscious of his self-creation means that his life was characterized by discontinuity and fragmentation. By deliberately severing himself from the past and history, he got alienated from time. We get an impression that Gatsby could not envision any personal future extending beyond his reunion with Daisy, let alone the future beyond his circumscribed personal future. Because of his intense self-absorption, he could not relate himself to what went before him and what was to come after him. It was a tragic instance of egotism of a self-made man.

It is worth noticing at this juncture that Gatsby was not only out of time but also was diluted over limitless space. Although there is no specific account of Gatsby's concept of space within the novel, we can deduce that Gatsby automatically accepted the idea of unlimited space. He obviously felt that he could at any time remove

himself to a new soil and begin again. What happened eventually was that there existed no spatial as well as no temporal link between James Gatz of North Dakota and Jay Gatsby of West Egg, Long Island. After a series of relocations, Gatsby found himself on the spot where he could watch the house of the Buchanans across the bay, and there was no source of relatedness to the locality except the temporary residence of Daisy, who, with her husband, merely drifted here and there.

Gatsby's dislocation is symbolically represented by his pointless circling of "the Continent" (p. 101) with Dan Cody on his yacht, which was repeated three times over the period of five years during the most formative stage of his life. It was apparently a rite of dislocation. Although many long-distance telephone calls from Chicago, Philadelphia and other cities that intersperse the novel may give the false impression that Gatsby had a mastery of the continental expanse of the country, he even lacked the fundamental spatial point of reference.

If our identity is to be established in time and in space, a man like Gatsby who is out of time and deracinated can never hope to have a meaningful identity. One of the causes of his tragedy was that he abandoned his efforts to live in time and in space.

Now, the creation of Daisy as a false goddess was a great artistic achievement of Fitzgerald. Daisy provided a special kind of motivation for the misdirected efforts of a self-made man. Gatsby was not a true vulgarian and he did not seek his wealth and position as such, but he believed that wealth and status were the essential ingredients of the bliss that he tasted, particularly after he had a traumatic experience of losing Daisy due to his financial and social deficiencies. Daisy is to be regarded as a false goddess as she never promised the real world of plenitude that Gatsby felt he had. Throughout the novel, Fitzgerald presents her not only as a shallow, restless, and goalless person but also as a cruel, corrupt, and dishonest person, and all of these qualities of hers are associated with her wealth and social standing, her being "safe and proud above the hot struggles of the poor" (p. 150). One of the most damning things about her is that she never told her husband that it was actually she that had killed and abandoned Myrtle Wilson. At the time when Nick met Tom after Gatsby's funeral, we realize that Tom still genuinely believed that Gatsby was driving the car when the accident occurred.

Judging from Daisy's ready answer to the question as to the nature of Gatsby's business that he "owned some drug-stores, a lot of drug-stores" (p. 110), Gatsby obvi-

ously explained to her that the source of his large income was the legitimate operation of a chain of drugstores. In reality, in order to earn a fortune the amount of which would exceed, or at least approximate, that of Tom's inherited money, Gatsby engaged in various lucrative criminal activities, under the tutelage of Meyer Wolfsheim, who was reputed to have "fixed the World's Series back in 1919" (p. 74). Although Fitzgerald chose to leave the details of Gatsby's illegal business activities to the reader's imagination, there are enough hints to conclude that Gatsby was involved with bootlegging and gambling in the past and that he was currently engaged in a large-scale handling of stolen or counterfeit bonds. The long-distance call from Chicago that Nick answered after Gatsby's death amply suggests that all the six mysterious long-distance calls that Gatsby received, made, or waited for were concerned about the dealing of the fraudulent bonds.

Richard Chase says that neither Fitzgerald nor Nick shows any interest in Gatsby's illegal activities,³ but this is hardly borne out by the text. If we only consider the matter of the telephone calls, we notice that Fitzgerald very strategically placed them within the novel. Gatsby was called, for instance, to answer the first long-distance telephone call mentioned in the book, immediately after he identified himself to Nick at one of his parties. Gatsby himself made a call in the middle of a lunch that he was having with Nick and Meyer Wolfsheim. The most telling case is witnessed when Gatsby was elatedly showing Daisy around his magnificent house shortly after they met again. He was enjoying a moment of triumph, when the phone rang and Gatsby answered it in great confusion:

"Yes. . . . Well, I can't talk now. . . . I can't talk now, old sport. . . . I said a *small* town. . . . He must know what a small town is. . . . Well, he's no use to us if Detroit is his idea of a small town. . . ." (p. 95)

This was the most untimely call imaginable and, as David W. Noble points out, in this scene, "Fitzgerald's satire has reached its most dramatic moment."⁴ Fitzgerald relentlessly pursues the same line of criticism and tells us that even after the fatal car accident, when Nick tried to call Gatsby, he found that the line "was being kept open for long distance from Detroit" (p. 156). His pretended being as a successful businessman was based upon a complete sham.

In this context, the reader will naturally recall a small incident connected with the bond business. In return for Nick's service, Gatsby one time tried to offer him a business deal which was "a rather confidential sort of thing" (p. 83). Although Nick

refused to accept the offer, without knowing the exact nature of the deal, because of his fastidiousness, he says, writing about the career of Gatsby in 1924, that he realizes that “that conversation might have been one of the crises” (p. 83) of his life.

The confrontation of Gatsby and Tom in the New York hotel room, of course, occasioned the unmasking and collapse of Gatsby as Tom mercilessly disclosed part of Gatsby’s criminal activities. Both Fitzgerald and Nick were more than interested in the clandestine nature of Gatsby’s business activities. Gatsby’s criminality, indeed, is important in our assessment of Gatsby as a self-made man, as it reflects the confusion of his moral identity.

To be rather schematic, there are two main channels through which we connect our separate individual selves with those of others. First of all, we relate ourselves with others through work. Work provides us with the means to belong to the human society through performing various needed roles. Gatsby’s expenditure of his vital energy, however, was utterly wasteful as it was never conducive to the discovery of truth, the creation of beauty, or the improvement of the quality of our lives in general. Criminal activities such as Gatsby’s preclude one’s possibility of feeling solidarity with humanity. Unless one finds some human worth in his work, he naturally feels isolated and alienated. The tragedy is that Gatsby was completely insensitive to the dehumanizing aspect of his work, because, as a self-made man, he had shed off all the moral commitments to the society and was prepared to engage in whatever activity needed to gain what he sought, not excluding, it is hinted, the act of murder.

The other channel is love. We gain a human identity by loving others and being loved by others. Without a capacity for love, we would be lost souls. A person like Gatsby who can commit psychological patricide and matricide without remorse has a slim chance of establishing a viable relationship with others. In spite of his professed love for Daisy, we have an uneasy feeling that it issued primarily from his intense self-love, which was closely linked with “his Platonic conception of himself” (p. 99). No one would be deceived into thinking that there existed between Gatsby and Daisy a mature love. Daisy was a kind of measurement against which he tried to fathom his worth. Paradoxically, then, Gatsby was ultimately a loveless person, because he lacked a degree of selflessness which is essential, along with other qualities, to mature love.

Gatsby was also friendless. All the people who thronged his estate during the parties were there to have fun. They were not there as Gatsby’s friends. In fact,

most of them did not even know Gatsby. When he died, even the second pseudo-father, Meyer Wolfsheim, whom Nick called Gatsby's "closest friend" (p. 172) refused to attend Gatsby's funeral. Nick is somewhat exceptional as he did not desert him until the end, but we should remember that when Gatsby approached Nick for the first time, it was merely to use him for his own purpose that he did so. In fact, Gatsby's whole approach to other human beings is characterized by its manipulateness. He either used people for his benefit or assaulted them when they stood in his way. No matter how despicable Tom was, he was not simply to be "wiped out" (p. 132) when he inconvenienced you just as Gatsby felt he was. There is something horrifying about Gatsby's grasp, or the lack of grasp, of reality.

Although Gatsby was not conscious of the fact, he was alienated from humanity. He had voluntarily closed down the two channels through which we relate ourselves with others and gain a human identity. In communion only with himself, he had his moral identity totally disintegrated.

Gatsby's sudden and violent death is an appropriate end to his life according to the logic of the novel. It is significant that his lonely death was brought about by an accidental agent. His "heightened sensitivity to the promises of life" presupposed his passionate denial of the limitations of life. It is ironic that Gatsby, who dreamed of a complete reordering of the universe, ended his life by one of the accidents of life. It is the combination of the limitations and possibilities of life that constitutes our human lot. In other words, as long as we remain human, we can never escape from the limitations of life.

The last page of the novel presents an often-quoted, powerfully evocative passage in which Fitzgerald has Nick associate Gatsby's quest with the dream of the archetypal immigrants that they had when they first saw the continent:

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 sailors' 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. (p. 182)

All too often, this passage is read without reference to its ironic intent. It is usually read either as a celebration of the American dream of total possibilities or as a betrayal of Fitzgerald's incorrigible commitment to romantic idealization. Charles Thomas Samuels, for example, says that in this passage "Nick affirms Gatsby's greatness by seeing him as the prototype of the dreamers who established the new world,"⁵ and Frederick J. Hoffman suggests that this passage reveals one of the "crucial failures of control in Fitzgerald's art" as "the opportunity to judge becomes an occasion for attachment and sentimental defense."⁶

We would not do justice to the passage, however, if we would not recognize the ironic stance of the author to the whole matter. The verb *flower* in this passage in which the new world is likened to a woman immediately makes the reader think of another equally evocative passage in the novel, in which Daisy, at the touch of Gatsby's lips, "blossomed for him like a flower" (p. 112). The phrase *in whispers* makes the reader hark back to a number of passages related with Daisy again. She had a charming way of saying things "in a murmur" (p. 9), and, in a tableau-like scene of Daisy sitting and talking with Gatsby, she was saying something "low in his ear" (p. 97). When she sang, she sang "with the music in a husky, rhythmic whisper, bringing out a meaning in each word that it had never had before and would never have again" (p. 109). The seductive quality of her voice in whispering is couched in the passages in which these quoted phrases appear and Nick was aware of this quality of her voice when he says, "Daisy's voice was playing murmurous tricks in her throat" (p. 105). We now begin to understand that, in the passage quoted above from the final page of the novel, the new world is not just likened to a woman, but to Daisy, or more precisely, a woman like Daisy. Like a Siren in the legend, this woman was luring the Dutch sailors to destruction.

We have seen that Daisy is presented as a false goddess in the novel, who led Gatsby to think that, with her wealth and beauty, she embodied the timeless world of harmony and plenitude, although Gatsby was more to blame for plunging into the pitfall owing to his propensity for excessive romantic idealization. Nick once calls Daisy's voice as "a deathless song" (p. 97), but this is a case of speaking with one's tongue in his cheek. Her voice eventually proved to be a death's song.

In this context, we must pay attention to the careful selection of the verb *pander* in the passage. The verb conjures up a cluster of ideas such as seductiveness, deceptiveness, impurity, and lowliness, centering around an illicit sexual union.

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Furthermore, we should not single out the phrase, “a fresh green breast of the new world,” and take it as an optimistically romantic view of the landscape, without any qualification, because indelibly planted in our mind is the sterility of “the waste land” (p. 24) of the valley of ashes, through which all the four principal characters repeatedly passed. One of the strategies of Fitzgerald is to have a preceding passage or passages undercut the romantic excesses of a later passage. The most notable example of the amplification of this device is the characterization of Daisy. We are allowed to witness the emptiness of Daisy before we come to know the fantastically romantic view of her held by Gatsby, with the result that we respond to his idealization with reservations and skepticism. As a matter of fact, we detect a note of irony in each instance of romantic idealization, both Nick’s and Gatsby’s, and the author clearly meant us to do so.

In the final sentence of the novel, “So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past,” Nick represents human struggles in the image of our rowing our “boats against the current.” This sentence also has been too often interpreted to mean Nick’s unqualified faith in the endeavors like those of Gatsby, but it is again erroneous to single it out and read it independently of what precedes it. As Victor A. Doyno suggests,⁷ a parallel image of the dead body of Gatsby floating on a mattress in his swimming pool necessitates our reading this sentence with ironic stance.

There was a faint, barely perceptible movement of the water as the fresh flow from one end urged its way toward the drain at the other. With little ripples that were hardly the shadows of waves, the laden mattress moved irregularly down the pool. A small gust of wind that scarcely corrugated the surface was enough to disturb its accidental course with its accidental burden. (p. 162)

Our response to the final sentence of the novel should be restricted by this final image of Gatsby. Indeed, the final sentence should be read with those significant elements of the boats, the current, the implied river, and the hopeful riders, in an ironic contrast with the mattress, the little ripples, the swimming pool, and a defunct dreamer. If we pay attention to these two overlapping images as we should, we cannot help realizing that Fitzgerald, with full knowledge, had the hopeful riders in the final sentence of the novel heavily burdened with the shadow of the dead Gatsby in pathetically reduced surroundings. Just as Gatsby’s attempt to conquer time ended

in failure, so the hopeful riders are “borne back ceaselessly into the past” on the river of time.

After experiencing Gatsby’s tragic life and death, Nick decided to return to his Middle Western home. It is often suggested that what awaited him in his hometown could not be any better, but as Charles Thomas Samuels says,⁸ the point is that he went home because it *was* home. Although he fled his hometown in the spring of 1922 to live permanently in the East, he recognizes now, writing the story of his experience in New York, that it is the Middle Western landscape that he can melt himself “indistinguishably” (p. 177) into. He is also readier to value his family heritage. As a matter of fact, the novel begins with his acknowledgement of his moral indebtedness to his father. He is now at peace with the fact that his father carries on the family tradition of the wholesale hardware business, which presumably held no promise of self-fulfillment in his eyes earlier in 1922. While Gatsby had a large photograph of Dan Cody, not of his father or grandfather, hung on the wall over his desk, Nick acknowledges, with no aversion, the facial resemblance between him and his great-uncle, who initiated the family business two generations ago and whose painting hangs in Nick’s father’s office.

By reviewing Gatsby’s career, Nick gains a more cautious outlook toward life. He is now aware that a self-creative impulse of a fatherless, motherless, pastless, and loveless man like Gatsby, who exists in unlimited space, could very easily turn into a self-destructive force. He also recognizes the importance of learning to live within his imperfect reality. He may not succeed his family business and he may yet leave his hometown again, but he will never separate himself from the mature point of view that he has gained.

With its complex suggestiveness, *The Great Gatsby* is another of the great novels analyzing the American experience. As a brilliant critique of the self-made man, it is to be compared with such novels as William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* and Robert Penn Warren’s *All the King’s Men*.

Notes

1. F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Son, n. d.), p. 150. All the references to *The Great Gatsby* hereafter will be to the pages of this Scribner’s paperback edition with 182 pages, and the pages will be indicated parenthetically in my text.
2. Victor A. Doyno, “Patterns in *The Great Gatsby*,” *Modern Fiction Studies*, XII (Winter 1966–1967), pp. 420–422.
3. Richard Chase, *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (New York, Doubleday, 1957), p. 164.

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4. David W. Noble, *The Eternal Adam and the New World Garden* (New York: George Braziller, 1968), p. 157.
5. Charles Thomas Samuels, "The Greatness of 'Gatsby'," *The Massachusetts Review*, VII (Autumn 1966), p. 792.
6. Frederick J. Hoffman, *The Twenties* (New York: Free Press, 1965), p. 143.
7. Victor A. Doyno, "Patterns in *The Great Gatsby*," p. 424.
8. Charles Thomas Samuels, "The Greatness of 'Gatsby'," p. 791.