

BRONZE MONUMENTS: THE TERROR OF
DEATH AND ITS ROLE IN THE GREAT GATSBY

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is about the way humans cope with death through the lens of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* in the wake of war. The thesis contains three chapters all of which work in succession to build a picture of various characters' death denial. Chapter 2 considers how Nick's narrative is an attempt to deny death through the ritual of mourning. Chapter 3 analyzes wealth in the novel and its role in striving for immortality. Gatsby transcends the limits of an ordinary life with his interest in opulence, while Nick's wealth provides a level of privilege that allows for his avoidance of hardship. Chapter 4 examines the novel's three main female characters: Jordan, Daisy, and Myrtle. The primary goal of this thesis is to demonstrate how the text of *Gatsby* serves as a piece of meta-fiction that functions in concert with its characters to transcend the limitations of mortality.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my mother, Lesa Lynn Talley.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Exegit monumentum aere perennius. This phrase comes from the ancient Roman poet Horace and means, “He completed a monument more durable than bronze.” These words allow for powerful insights into the nature of human mortality and, more importantly, the desire to transcend it. And while it is true that the poets of ancient civilizations often exhibited an uncanny desire to mystify and ritualize death, it is important to note that these behaviors span across the timeline of human evolution. Freud, writing with his usual flair in the twentieth century, speculated that the ritualization of death provided for “a store of ideas...born of man’s need to make his helplessness tolerable and built up from the material memories of the helplessness of his own childhood and the childhood of the human race (24). Thoughts of death and the ways in which humans attempt to cope with it seem uniquely applicable in understanding the work of another twentieth century stylist: F. Scott Fitzgerald

Despite Fitzgerald’s insistence that he was not a “natural” writer (Brucoli 34), the *Great Gatsby*, first published in 1925, is obviously the culmination of extraordinary talent and discipline. In its tightly woven narrative, running at just under 200 pages, *Gatsby* blazes to life with intensity and dimension, sometimes in the space of a single paragraph or even a sentence. The fact that the novel is a quick and pleasurable read, however, may obscure its complexity. Furthermore, one part of Fitzgerald lore adds to this emerging mythology. While it is false that

Fitzgerald died while his works were out of print—the Scribner’s warehouse still had unsold copies of the novel’s first printing in 1940—it is certainly true that *Gatsby* vastly undersold its author’s expectations, and Fitzgerald died believing himself a failure (Brucoli 27). But his sentiment proved itself premature. Like Horace’s durable monument, *Gatsby* outlived its creator and its historical moment as it achieved a kind of deathless reverence in the realm of American letters.

That Fitzgerald’s novel escaped the void of obscurity is perhaps ironic for a book so obsessed with decadence, disposability, evanescence, and wastefulness. In his essay “Gatsby’s Pristine Dream: The Diminishment of the Self-Made Man in the Tribal Twenties” Jeffery Louis Decker conceptualizes the novel’s profligacy thoroughly a purely nativist lens:

Through the eyes of Fitzgerald's narrator, Nick Carraway, *Gatsby* appears in the guise of the archetypal, if somewhat misguided, self-made man in America.

Gatsby's upward struggle is inspired by traditional purveyors of middle-class success, such as Ben Franklin and Horatio Alger Jr.... In this way, *Gatsby* stages a national anxiety about the loss of white Anglo-Saxon supremacy in the Twenties. (52)

In a similar vein, Roger L. Pearson contends that decadence in the novel functions as a religious motif. He writes of *Gatsby's* mansion: “The beauty of this image of *Gatsby's* house is that it is a dual one. It seems that Fitzgerald has created a twentieth-century replica—'a factual imitation'—of Milton's Pandemonium. The image is further solidified in that Mammon was its chief architect and builder (640). And finally, Gregory S. Jay leans towards a Marxist interpretation of the novel stating that *The Great Gatsby* is “a work of cultural criticism that enacts . . . the intellectual analysis of how the social subject can never be conceived, even *ab ovo*, as the inhabitant of a world outside commodification, exchange, spectacle, and in speculation” (164-65).

Critics' emphases on decadence, disposability, and evanescence have at times obscured the novel's preoccupation with durability and immortality. Until this century, academics rarely considered *Gatsby* as a product of World War I. Pearl James, in her book *The New Death*, makes it clear that this connection is critical to understanding the novel's preoccupation with immortality. She states that "the novel signifies that the work of burying and mourning for the dead goes on long after the war is over" (27). I aim to build on this critical angle by examining how the novel's characters create defense mechanisms against the horror of human mortality. Otherwise known as terror management theory, a concept initially developed by cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker that tracks the unconscious mental process that protects humans from the dread of death, this lens injects new meaning into *Gatsby*'s themes of class, power, and status. Terror management provides a critical approach in which these themes become symbols for, and bulwarks against, existential dread. Taken together, these attempts at death denial serve to reshape and satirize a modern United States, bringing with it new perspectives about the fragility of the human condition at the turn of the twentieth century.

Much of the theoretical material I plan to engage for this project comes from the work of Hal Foster and Jay Winter. In his 2004 critical study *Prosthetic Gods*, Foster argues that the opening years of the twentieth century experienced a number of "shocks," which included not only the mechanized slaughter of the First World War and subsequent political revolutions, but also "the heterogeneity of cultural forms" fostered by imperialism and the "'scientific management' of laboring bodies that industrial expansion enforced among the working classes." One way to overcome these shocks was to "aestheticize" them in hopes of overcoming or withstanding their destructive forces (xi). Furthermore, Jay Winter's 1996 *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning* take a broader approach to the issue of death in the twentieth century. While Winter

does not mention *Gatsby* specifically, his work still allows for a better understanding of the novel and its historical context, especially the unique process of grief in the aftermath of World War I:

Commemoration was a universal process after the 1914-1918 war. The need to bring the dead home, to put the dead to rest, symbolically or physically, was pervasive... Families were torn apart by war. Nothing could have reversed completely this tide of separation and loss. But after 1914 there was a gathering together, as people related by blood or experience tried to draw strength from each other during and after the war... In all counties touched by the war, there was a progression of mutual help, a pathway along which many groups and individuals sought to provide knowledge, then consolation, then commemoration.
(28-29)

Foster's and Winter's works, if applied to *Gatsby*, allow readers to better understand Fitzgerald's unique engagement with ritualistic death denial. In the aftermath of World War I it became obvious to even the casual observer of society that the old gods of the West had passed away. In the face of new and terrifying weaponry—indeed, with the machine guns that *Gatsby* himself used—and in the tremendous loss of life, it was necessary to reconsider one's metaphysical standing or find artistic means to overcome mortality. Put simply, death became much more tangible, and therefore threatening, to the survivors of a global conflict. This assertion allows readers to perceive Jay Gatsby's accumulation of money and power not only as an ill-fated scheme to regain his past love Daisy Buchanan, but also as an attempt at immortality, a way to deny death and his own impermanence in the accumulation of material prosperity.

It is hard to quantify the level of devastation that spread across the globe during World War I. That roughly ten million lives came to an end in the early twentieth century hardly seems

like an appropriate place to start in that the vast majority of these dead bodies never found their way home. Deep in the trenches of France and Germany, soldiers encountered instruments of death that seemed almost unimaginable in their destructive power. Axis soldiers lobbed bombs packed with shrapnel; Hemingway fell victim to this technique and nearly lost his life as a result. American machine gunners blasted continuous rounds of ammunition into battlefields covered in smoke. The situation in Europe seemed akin to a description of Hell, and the analogy does a lot in teasing out a new idea of death. Had the vast majority of these young men returned home from the war, its punishment upon the body might be overlooked or understated, but this was not the case.

Even a cursory glance at the battlefields and trenches used during World War I helps put this pathos into perspective. More than a century after the Treaty of Versailles, a tourist in France or Germany still occasions to come across unexploded shells, shredded pieces of uniforms, and bone fragments buried in the mud. In a vast departure from the military decorum of previous wars, these soldiers simply lay where they fell and did not receive any burial rites. Chemical warfare, long-range and high-volume artillery, and military aeronautics decimated many soldiers' bodies into unrecognizable heaps, leaving nothing of value to bury. Death became obscene in the minds of Americans back home, and, perhaps even more provocative, its meaning was ambiguous. Pearl James expands on this notion writing, "The age of death disrupted expectations. Populations in the industrialized world were living longer lives, enjoying lower infant-mortality rates, and developing life narratives in which death was increasingly the plight of the aged" (17). That there was nothing left of victims' bodies to retrieve, or that it was too dangerous to attempt a recovery, drove this new perspective on death.

Foster's argument about the terror of an increasingly mechanized world and Winter's contention that ritual was crucial to grappling with the millions of war dead will assist me in my analysis of *Gatsby's* ritual and ceremony, which are ultimately themes designed to help the characters avoid or deny the inevitability of death. Such ritualistic behavior occurs repeatedly throughout the novel. Some of the most provocative examples concern Gatsby's material possessions. For example, consider Nick's description of Gatsby's mansion in chapter five:

When I came home to West Egg that night I was afraid for a moment that my house was on fire. Two o'clock and the whole corner of the peninsula was blazing with light which felt unreal on the shrubbery and made thin elongating glints on the roadside wires. Turning a corner I saw that it was Gatsby's house, lit from tower to cell. (86)

This scene is complex in that it shows both Nick and Gatsby's intense fear of destruction. When Nick lacks adequate information, or when he approaches an unfamiliar situation as he does here, his mind automatically verges on the apocalyptic—his home engulfed in flames. Remember that Nick and Gatsby both served in the Army, which seems to connect these intense anxieties, as James argues, to some sort of post-traumatic stress disorder (93). While one might argue that this scene simply offers readers a glimpse at Gatsby's cavalier approach to resources, I see something much more primal. Veterans of World War I seemed particularly prone to anxiety about the dark; James Morris notes Hemingway's refusal to sleep with the lights off after his near-death experience as an ambulance driver in Italy (74). One might speculate that this fear stemmed from the symbolic connections between darkness, death, and the unknown. Gatsby reacts in a similar way by attempting to expel this fear through the luminosity of his mansion. This interpretation becomes all the more prevalent when one considers that this scene directly precedes his reunion

with Daisy. The anxiety that Gatsby feels about their upcoming meeting heightens his sense of vulnerability and thus manifests itself in an attempt to deny those anxieties; the fact that these machinations happen on a subconscious level makes them *a fortiori* powerful.

Other instances of ritual move beyond the external world and into the internal world of a character's thought patterns. Nick's musing on his thirtieth birthday provides further evidence of death denial:

Thirty—the promise of a decade of loneliness, a thinning list of single men to know, a thinning brief-case of enthusiasm, thinning hair. But there was Jordan beside me who, unlike Daisy, was too wise ever to carry well-forgotten dreams from age to age. As we passed over the dark bridge her wan face fell lazily against my coat's shoulder and the formidable stroke of thirty died away with the reassuring pressure of her hand. (143)

Here Nick is unable to accept his own mortality. It is only through *Jordan* that he is able to find any comfort in his slow creep toward death. But this abstract fear becomes immensely more manageable when passed off onto the material existence of another person. When confronted with the fear of death, Becker states that “we cannot really expect people at large to emerge from their lifelong object-embeddedness and to attain self-reliance” (217). He argues that humans need a higher power, and not necessarily a *spiritual* one, upon which to transfer their anxieties. In other words, Jordan's face and body allows Nick to give form and shape to the metaphysical terror that is death and dying, something concrete with which to wrestle with and ultimately control.

My thesis will include an introduction, three chapters, and a conclusion. The introduction will foreground the theoretical approaches and scholarly context of the argument. Here I will

emphasize my readings of James and Winter, which make it clear that unfinished mourning in the aftermath of World War I—for instance, the inability to grieve for a loved one due to the lack of a body—constituted a major issue for postwar western culture. I will explore the war’s full mechanization, the first usage of tanks, planes, machine guns, and submarines, to illustrate the unprecedented level of violence wrought on the human body.

The three following chapters will assess how Gatsby and Nick engage with various denials of death. The first chapter will consider how Nick’s narrative is an attempt to deny death through the ritual of mourning. I will explain Nick’s fascination with both Gatsby and Jordan Baker; specifically, I will argue that Nick’s experience as a soldier in World War I forced him to consider death in new ways. The abject horror of the global conflict, some of which Nick is too shell shocked to even mention, served to heighten his sense of mortality and diminish his self-worth. I will employ Becker here who argues that one’s “sense of self-worth is constituted symbolically” (3). Put another way, Gatsby and Jordan become symbols through which Nick, in his telling of the story, denies his own fragility.

Chapter 2 will analyze wealth in the novel and its role in striving for immortality. Wealth functions as both a material *and* social trope against the terror of death; Gatsby transcends the limits of an ordinary life with his interest in opulence, while Nick’s wealth provides a level of privilege that allows for his avoidance of hardship. These financial tropes also speak to the highly publicized rise of crime during Prohibition, which Fitzgerald connects with Gatsby. This analogy has particular relevance to America’s postwar situation, in which it became harder to idealize the common man in the face of widespread death anxiety.

Chapter 3 will then examine the novel’s three main female characters: Jordan, Daisy, and Myrtle. I will clarify the novel’s theme of the possession of women as a form of death denial,

and I will also make clear Fitzgerald's usage of gendered violence, which evokes both the loss and aesthetic of soldiers killed in the war. Many modernists found it difficult to write about the war without inflicting verbal or psychic damage to the reader or the men who were their subject matter. I will argue that Fitzgerald finds a way around this problem through indirection, or, in other words, through the depiction of feminized violence.

In the conclusion, I plan to demonstrate that the text of *Gatsby* serves as a piece of meta-fiction that functions in concert with its characters to transcend the limitations of mortality. I will note that modernist writers often built their literature through omission; put another way, I will argue that Fitzgerald and *Gatsby* give narrative structure to a shared cultural experience of forbidden, frustrated mourning in the aftermath of World War I, which ultimately finds its expression in ritualized forms of death denial.

Ultimately, I will trace death's transcendence from a dream state of melancholy contemplation to a vivid reality of obscenity and gore. This new perspective on death, driven by the war in Europe, crosses even the most entrenched canonical boundaries, inspiring a body of work intimately—one might even say *intensely*—preoccupied with death. *The Great Gatsby* begins this journey.

CHAPTER II

NICK AND MACHINE GUNS

F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* is reminiscent of a matryoshka doll, sometimes referred to colloquially as a Russian stacking doll, which is to say that the novel is essentially one story narrated or imbedded around further stories. In *Gatsby*'s case, it is Jay Gatsby's multi-layered story that is imbedded within Nick Carraway's, the narrator's, story. And so intertwined are these narratives that the book often takes on epic, even mythological, proportions as each new layer of its plot adds to the complexity; in fact, with his constant analysis of other people and their interior motives, as well as his careful reconstruction of dialogue and peripheral events, readers tend to forget that Nick is the one telling the story. Other characters, particular Gatsby himself, likewise tend to obscure Nick's role as narrator and moral arbiter. But it is ultimately Nick who survives the events of 1922, and the novel begins and ends with his voice, which is, I argue, a not unimportant caveat.

His association with Gatsby and company, however, is not the only violent milieu that Nick lives through. Indeed, it is important to recall his military service during World War I in which he served, by his own account, as part of the Ninth Machine-Gun Battalion. It is their shared experience of the war, and their collective survival, that serves as the catalyst that binds Nick and Gatsby together; Gatsby himself served in the Seventh Infantry, which was, like Nick's

battalion, part of the Army's Third Division. But these experiences, unifying though they may be, are not without their psychological trauma.

Fitzgerald's own experience in the war might have served as the inspiration for Nick's service record. In danger of being expelled from Princeton for poor grades, Fitzgerald enlisted in the United States Army in October of 1917 and received his commission as a second lieutenant. One year later, Fitzgerald's unit received its overseas orders and arrived in Camp Mills, Long Island. In his biography *The Far Side of Paradise* Arthur Mizener explains that Fitzgerald's unit made it into a transport only to be marched off again (132-133). Ultimately, Fitzgerald never made it overseas before the war ended. There is, likewise, a gaping discrepancy between Fitzgerald's lack of overseas combat and that of his modernist contemporaries like Hemingway, Dos Passos, and Ring Lardner. But like so many of his generation—referred to as “the sad young men” in his 1926 collection of short stories—Fitzgerald had images of war filling his head, perhaps made even more intense by the lack of opportunity to realize them, which may help explain the haunting aesthetic of Nick's narrative.

Nick, too, associates the Great War as the defining moment in his life, though not necessarily in a positive way. That he exhibits myriad symptoms of shell shock, or what we now call post-traumatic stress disorder, throughout his narration is a distinction that warrants critical reexamination. To clarify, modernist scholars have already pointed out this facet of Nick's character. Pearl James observes, “Carraway's narration should be read as that of a shell-shocked soldier whose access to the past is imperfect. Witnessing Gatsby's death, burying him, setting the record straight, defending his reputation, all make Nick's account one that resembles (and may be a substitute for) a war story” (27). However, academics have made few connections between Nick's specific role in the war—that of a machine gunner—and his pattern of behavior

throughout the novel. There is, I argue, ample evidence to support the notion that Nick's military service influences his careful navigation of social spaces as well as his relationship with Gatsby, which is, like the relationship between machine gunners and infantrymen, symbiotic, but flawed, in nature. These connections, and their eventual severance, serve far more than a temporal or metaphorical purpose in that they elucidate the often-ineffable horror of total war, becoming in the process a catalyst for Nick's attempt at storytelling, and, more importantly, a coping mechanism for his own awareness of mortality.

To begin, there is perhaps no better way to encapsulate Nick's psychological anguish than with his own words. Thus, he begins his story, "In my younger and more vulnerable years my father gave me some advice that I've been turning over in my mind ever since" (5). It is, much to the contrary of popular opinion, less important what his father said than what Nick himself has just told the reader about his prior self. His qualifying adjective "more vulnerable" and its association with his earlier life speaks volumes about Nick's mindset as the novel commences. The question, then, is what made his younger years so vulnerable. One answer arises from Nick's adoption of the military mindset. Since the novel begins shortly after his service in the war has ended, one can assume that Nick has experienced a change of worldview. The United States Army's oath of enlistment, first adopted in May 1884 and spoken by all enlisted personnel, including Nick, alludes to this alteration of personality:

... I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign or domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; and that I will well and faithfully discharge the duties of the office on which I am about to enter. So help me God. (*history.army.mil*)

While Nick does not specifically mention the oath, he references his warriorlike mentality, and the difficulty he experiences in abandoning it, shortly after his opening line: “When I came back from the East last autumn I felt that I wanted the world to be in uniform and at a sort of moral attention forever” (6). It seems likely, therefore, that the vulnerability that Nick references is more so a symbol of his loss of innocence at the behest of war rather than a purely emotional state.

Innocence and its corruption by the military continue to operate in the background of Nick’s statements even as he attempts to draw attention away from himself and onto his family. He explains:

My family have been prominent, well-to-do people in this middle-western city for three generations. The Carraways are something of a clan and we have a tradition that we’re descended from the Dukes of Buccleuch, but the actual founder of my line was my grandfather’s brother who came here in fifty-one, sent a substitute to the Civil War and started a wholesale hardware business that my father carries on today. (7)

To rephrase, the entire Carraway founding mythology, a story chockfull of wealth, influence, and power, derives solely from their—somewhat deceptive—avoidance of the Civil War. Nick, in other words, can and should expect to escape hardship. His father says as much to him. As Nick explains, “‘Whenever you feel like criticizing anyone,’ he told me, ‘just remember that all the people in this world haven’t had the advantages that you’ve had’” (5). Yet it is not simply the Carraway family’s deferral from the Civil War which influences Nick’s prewar mindset; in fact, the Carraways’ financial resources—a direct result of the Civil War—seems to be at the forefront of his mind as evidenced by the reference to the family hardware business. Before being exposed

to the realities of the Great War, Nick, I argue, held quite a self-serving, naïve, even positive perception of warfare.

But notice the shift in Nick's tone by the time he begins to speak, somewhat ambiguously, of his own experience in the war, an experience that, on account of his family pedigree, probably should have never happened. He says, "...I came back restless. Instead of being the warm center of the world the middle-west now seemed like the ragged edge of the universe—so I decided to go east and learn the bond business" (7). Here Nick is quite negative as he resists the east-to-west trope that is so common in American Bildungsroman literature; its reversal seems to imply a certain disenchantment with the mythos of Westward expansion, a mythos that Nick was presumedly exposed to during his time in the Army. His choice of adjectives, moreover, further reveals the extent of his disillusionment. It is almost as if Nick is so deeply traumatized by his experience that he can only approach it obliquely through parapraxis. Otherwise known as a Freudian slip, parapraxis refers to an error in speech, memory, or physical action that occurs due to the interference of an unconscious, subdued wish or internal train of thought. For example, Nick refers to the Midwest in this scene as "the ragged edge of the universe." At first glance, his usage of serrated imagery appears incongruous with his retrospective, even carefree, tone. But consider the violent nature of the environment from which he has just returned. In his book *The Soldiers' Tale: Bearing Witness to Modern War*, Samuel Hynes writes of an aesthetic of "battlefield gothic" (26) in the European trenches. Hynes goes on to describe three male bodies that are literally pulverized to oblivion by modern weaponry; the only thing left from these bodies, Hynes says, are two amorphous, dismembered parts, which might have belonged to one or all three of the soldiers. It is within reason to assume, therefore, that Nick's choice of words—words that allude to the physical body and occur in fragmented

units—speak to his heightened awareness of bodily damage as well as the terror raging inside of him.

Nick acquired this unusually gory perception of the male body through his duty as a machine-gunner. There is, in my view, hardly any other way to trace this psychological transmogrification without first considering Nick's military service. In his book *Pershing's Crusaders*, Richard S. Faulkner explains the influence of machine guns on World War I battle strategy:

Machine guns were important weapons in the Great War. Used in conjunction with artillery, machine guns helped to prolong the trench stalemate by giving tremendous power to the defender. The machine guns also played an important role in the offense when fired from the flanks or even over the heads of the attacking infantry to keep the enemy's heads down while the assault moved forward. Machine guns moved forward with the infantry and were also used to beat back the counterattacks that the Germans inevitably launched to regain important terrain or disrupt the momentum of an Allied success. (222)

One of the clearest examples of Nick's training as a machine-gunner occurs during his trip through the Valley of Ashes. He describes it thus:

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.

(27)

While there is the obvious attempt by Nick here to conflate the valley and its desolation with the trenches and No Man's Lands of Europe, other aspects of his storytelling technique reveal a tendency to hedge his descriptions around weaponry that, though subtle, illuminates a warped mental state. For instance, his description of the "ash-gray men," presumably a group of workers, lends an uncomfortable ambiance to Nick's prose in its resemblance to the *feldgrau*, or field-grey, uniforms of twentieth-century German armed forces. And in an echo of this similitude, he seems more comfortable in describing these men as an indistinguishable group rather than focusing on them as individuals in spite of, or perhaps because of, his unique experience with modern weaponry. Nick is, to put it another way, sensitive to the movement of a party in the same way a machine-gunner watches for the mass activity of an enemy.

Furthermore, consider the perspective from which Nick describes the valley. His words reveal an almost panoramic viewpoint, which he illustrates as, "a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens; where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys..." Nick's choice to focus on the wheat in the valley is provocative. Wheat often obscured visibility in the battlefields and thus held a unique terror for infantrymen overseas. As army units advanced through the dense wheatfields of Belleau Wood, Soissons, and Blanc Mont, soldiers faced the threat of hidden machine guns and sudden artillery, often experiencing alternating states of fear, nausea, and rage. In fact, another post-World War I novel, Thomas Boyd's *Through the Wheat*, connects its protagonist's increasingly shell-shocked consciousness with the experience of crawling through wheat fields. Fitzgerald reviewed the novel in *The New York Post*, paying particular attention to its construction of consciousness,

which, as Steven Trout notes in *On the Battlefield of Memory*, lends a certain irony to *Gatsby* in its adoption of the traditional war experience (8).

One of the defining aspects of machine-guns during World War I was their usage as defensive weapons. All along the trench lines, machine-gun teams dug in, protecting themselves with defensive nests. The advantage was a bird's-eye view of the surrounding landscape and anyone moving along it. The fact that Nick can make out ridges, hills, gardens, and the ambiguous forms of houses, objects that can only be seen at great distances, and that it is these long-distance images that he recalls and feels most comfortable relating to the reader, elucidates his inability to escape the military mindset, and, perhaps, a kind of subconscious anguish at his loss of an ordinary, or civilian, perspective.

It is also important to note the novel's first social scene, which occurs in tandem with Nick's first encounter with Gatsby. Nick's behavior, and the perspective from which he recalls the event, again reveals his uncomfortable connection with the Ninth Machine-Gun Battalion. He describes the party thus:

There was music from my neighbor's house through the summer nights. In his blue gardens men and girls came and went like moths among the whisperings and the champagne and the stars. At high tide in the afternoon I watched his guests diving from the tower of his raft or taking the sun on the hot sand of his beach while his two motor boats slit the waters of the Sounds, drawing aquaplanes over cataracts of foam. (43)

There is, once more, Nick's signature panoramic perspective as well as the tendency to lump individuals into groups; his observations of people consist only of "men," "girls," and "guests" with no attempt to relate distinguishing characteristics, while his notation of inanimate objects,

the aquaplanes and “cataracts” of foam, warrants a specificity that seems incongruous with his typical pattern. To put it another way, from Nick’s long-range perspective—here he watches from his own home—people devolve into insignificance. There is a palpable denial of humanity to those he observes from afar, which, I argue, stems from his time in the trenches. This denial of humanity is what makes it possible, in the war, to fire his machine gun and to make him ultimately less “vulnerable” than he was before deployment.

Note, too, Nick’s reference to Gatsby’s “blue gardens.” The phrase draws attention to itself in that it makes little sense. That Nick is simply engaging his artistic liberty does not explain his diction because rarely, if ever, would a storyteller as careful as he choose such fluffy language. To understand this choice one must, again, consider Nick’s perspective. Machine-gunners in Europe used trench maps to navigate and map the surrounding landscape, and color was an important part of their technique. Until early 1918, German trenches were usually overprinted in red, with British or Allied trenches shown in blue, but thereafter cartographers reversed the colors for the remainder of the War with German trenches shown in blue to match the French trench map color system (*NationalArchives.gov*). It seems likely, therefore, that Nick’s phraseology, combined with his propensity to conflate individuals into anonymous groups, reveals a man deeply affected, and not for the better, by the impact of war.

These analyses are, admittedly, only implicit examples of Nick’s trauma. But there are moments when he refers explicitly to his time in the Army, which, I assert, serves to reinforce his earlier observations. During his pivotal first encounter with Gatsby, Nick refers to his service in the Ninth Machine-Gun Battalion, to which Gatsby replies, “I was in the Seventh Infantry until June nineteen-eighteen.” (51). This is an important piece of information in that it reveals Gatsby’s training as an infantryman, otherwise known as a doughboy—a job that, it is essential

to note, functions in close association with machine-gunners. Nick's willingness to be candid during his first meeting with Gatsby seems to stem from their shared experience in the war; in fact, Gatsby instantly picks up on this distinction. He tells Nick, "Your face is familiar," (51) which, I argue, serves far more purpose than a simple icebreaker. Indeed, Gatsby is quick to seal this connection by inviting Nick to go out with him on Long Island Sound in the morning (52). The point is that the relationship between Nick and Gatsby is symbiotic and ultimately evocative of the bond between infantry doughboys and machine-gunners. However, research into this facet of military strategy illuminates a critical flaw. I again rely on Richard S. Faulkner to help make my point:

The last reason why the use of machine guns in the AEF was not as effective as might have been hoped was due to the fact that few of the army's infantry battalion, regimental, and brigade commanders knew how to best employ them in battle. Each infantry regiment had its own machine gun company with sixteen guns, and each infantry brigade contained a machine gun battalion armed with sixty-four guns. The machine gun companies were generally put at the disposal of an infantry battalion during an operation and were left with little scope for independent action. (224)

Put in context, infantrymen held a certain power, for better or worse, over those who operated machine guns. And in an echo of this characteristic, Gatsby the infantryman holds power over Nick the machine-gunner. But the social situation of Gatsby's party calls for a different standard of measurement: it is the mystery and evocative quality surrounding Gatsby, rather than a certain weapon or rank, that so disenfranchises Nick.

Like most unstable relationships, including the one between infantrymen and machine gunners, Nick harbors conflicting viewpoints on Gatsby. For all his storytelling gifts, Nick struggles to find the right language to best describe his neighbor. To give an example, within the same paragraph he describes Gatsby as someone with “one of those rare smiles with a quality of eternal reassurance in it,” (52) as well as a person “whose elaborate formality of speech just missed being absurd” (53). Nick, moreover, variously describes Gatsby in both spectral and physical terms: he is “the silhouette of a moving cat” (25) as well as a “brown, hardening body” (104). The flawed connection between infantryman and machine gunners, as well as an understanding of their power differentials, combined with the evidence derived from Nick’s choice of words, reestablishes and clarifies the heretofore obscured aspects of Gatsby that are so traumatizing for Nick, which in this case is his inability to understand Gatsby motives, or, at the very least, put them into a proper perspective.

Finally, the keystone theme that binds together my analysis of Nick boils down to one word: omission. Nick appears unable to approach the obscene reality and surreal quality of his life, conditions that developed as a result of his experience in the war, with candor. Time and again, he simply implies or evokes these circumstances without specifically naming them. In a major indicator of the novel’s essential modernism, most of the time Nick does not seem aware of these subconscious forces driving his psyche. His perception of the Valley of Ashes from a metaphorical machine-gunner’s nest, his tendency to deny the humanity of individuals, his symbiotic but flawed relationship with his fellow veteran Gatsby, his references to a more vulnerable but departed period in his life—all these elements work together to reveal his deteriorated condition.

It is important to note, however, that this diseased state is purely psychological. Nick, indeed, has little patience for or interest in the physical body, which may explain his constant denial of humanity to those around him. Nick is, at bottom, unable to heal his psychological wounds but not because of unresolved remorse, regret, or shame. He never actually gets that far. Rather, it is the inability to understand the unconscious forces working inside of him that constitutes his bane. But he is hardly to blame for this situation. In fact, by the time he begins his story he seems to be more of a victim of melancholia than bullets or bombs. Sigmund Freud, writing in his 1915 essay “Mourning and Melancholia,” helps clarify this assertion:

Feelings of shame in front of other people, which would more than anything characterize this latter condition [remorse], are lacking in the melancholic, or at least they are not prominent in him. One might emphasize the presence in him of an almost opposite trait of insistent communicativeness which finds satisfaction in self-exposure. (585)

Nick represents the apex of “insistent communicativeness.” He is the kind of person who never declines an invitation to a party; in fact, his appetite for conversation is so intense that he joins a party *within* a party when Jordan asks him to come to her own get-together during Gatsby’s first social event (36). But Nick reveres the written word above all other forms of communication and not in small part because of its lasting power. And it is ultimately through his book that he immortalizes his obsession with conveyance.

Nick’s narrative haunts him even if he does not understand why. And the same could be said of the novel’s modern audience. A reconsideration of his character as a melancholic, as well as an awareness of how he continues to operate as a machine-gunner, avoids some of the clichés and limits of previous *Gatsby* scholarship.

CHAPTER III

GATSBY'S THANATOPHOBIA

Any analysis of Jay Gatsby, even uncommon ones, always risks dissolution into tautologies. The contradictory layers of Gatsby's personality, as well as his exaggerations and lies, often lead to critical frustration. But this challenge, intimidating though it may be, is simply part of the territory when it comes to *Gatsby* criticism. That the titular character of Fitzgerald's masterpiece possesses layers of meaning—not unlike Whitman's famous declaration of "I contain multitudes" (12)—encourages a critical reexamination in its own right, especially in areas of analysis heretofore unexplored. The pursuit of fame, the corruption of innocence, the need for affirmation, and other similar tropes, all touched upon and exhausted by previous scholars, certainly contribute to the complex characterization of Gatsby. But complexity for its own sake is just bad writing. Fitzgerald, I argue, intended to emphasize above all else in his protagonist one of the primal and elemental terrors that drives human behavior: thanatophobia, the literal meaning of which is "death aversion."

The fear of death, argue psychologists and sociologists, binds human beings together through its universal experience. The noun "aversion" is, likewise, a useful steppingstone to understanding Gatsby as Fitzgerald intended. Indeed, the primacy of Gatsby's death anxiety forces the more surface levels of his psyche—fame, money, power—to take a backseat. It is important to note, too, that many of the connections drawn between Gatsby and his death focus

almost exclusively on its metaphorical, rather than its literal, meaning. For example, Maureen Corrigan writes of *Gatsby*, “Almost every page of the novel references water . . . he [Gatsby] drowns (symbolically) in his pool when his dreams spring a leak and he can no longer float” (36). But ignoring *Gatsby*’s actual death, as well as the way death colors every aspect of his life, in favor of emblematic analyses constitutes a great disservice to the novel. I suggest a reading that, like my analysis of Nick, emphasizes *Gatsby*’s ritualistic behavior, those actions he uses to deny or avoid an awareness of his impermanence, as a logical consequence of his military service.

It is imperative to note that the first world war lent an apocalyptic excitement to modernist literature. Jay Winter says of this phenomenon:

Fiction, memoirs, short stories, and plays reveal a wealth of evidence as to the war’s mobilization of motifs and images derived from the classical, romantic, and religious traditions of European literature. One of the most salient instances of the backward-looking character of this body of writing is its use of apocalyptic images. The varied and rich appeal to a tradition of eschatology, to a sense of the world coming to an end, shows precisely the opposite. The Great War was, in cultural terms, the last nineteenth-century war, in that it provoked an outpouring of literature touching on an ancient set of beliefs about revelation, divine justice, and the nature of catastrophe. (178).

In other words, the war’s total mechanization—its usage of planes, tanks, and machine guns—shifted the popular perception of apocalypse from a damnation of the spirit to a damnation of the body. This distinction was, of course, especially true for veterans who saw and experienced gruesome injuries.

But even before his military service begins, Gatsby is sensitive to the existential terrors of life. Halfway through the novel, he tells Nick of his early life in Lake Superior, a time when he went by his real name of Jay Gatz, and appears to allude to his fear of death:

The most grotesque and fantastic conceits haunted him in his bed at night. A universe of ineffable gaudiness spun itself out in his brain while the clock ticked on the wash-stand and the moon soaked with wet light his tangled clothes upon the floor. Each night he added to the pattern of his fancies until drowsiness closed down upon some vivid scene with an oblivious embrace. For a while these reveries provided an outlet for his imagination; they were a satisfactory hint of the unreality of reality, a promise that the rock of the world was founded securely on a fairy's wing. (105)

The references to a ticking clock as well as the moon emphasize Gatsby's yearning for *change*; in other words, the discrepancy between who he is and who he wants to be constitutes a gulf too wide for Gatsby's contentment. To paraphrase Emily Dickinson, to be a "nobody" like Jay Gatz only serves to emphasize the "ineffable gaudiness" of life: isolation, depression, and even boredom are the hallmarks of ordinary existence, which are insufferable to a young man trying to deny his own fragility. Poverty, of course, plays a role in Gatsby's frustration in that he lacks the material resources to ignore or distract himself from mortality. Yet it is the suggestion of consummation that stands out most clearly in this scene. This young version of Gatsby wants to marry the "rock of the world"—the unavoidable loneliness, despair, and failures of life—with the unreality of a "fairy's wing," which, not unlike the sprites of Shakespeare, suggests Gatsby's desire for an airy, insouciant rebirth.

But any serious scholar of modernism cannot disregard the fact that Gatsby draws attention to his military record. He often reminds Nick, and therefore the reader, of his experience in the war and usually in a histrionic manner. Midway through the novel's plot, Gatsby shows Nick his medal from Montenegro, which, he says, he earned for valor: "He reached into his pocket and a piece of metal, slung on a ribbon, fell in my palm" (71). Gatsby, furthermore, makes a point to tell Nick that this medal is a "thing I always carry" (71). The point of this scene, I assert, is to establish the extent to which the war remains on Gatsby's mind even after he has returned home. However, Gatsby makes no attempt to qualify his fixation as either good or bad; he simply leaves the matter unstated.

That Gatsby is unwilling to expand on his time in Europe beyond an ambiguous military decoration, even to a fellow veteran like Nick, underscores a psychological break that is subtle but important. Freud, in his 1939 book *Moses and Monotheism*, helps qualify my argument:

It may happen that a man who has experienced some frightful accident—a railway collision, for instance—leaves the scene of the event apparently uninjured. In the course of the next few weeks, however, he develops a number of severe physical and motor symptoms which can only be traced to his shock, the concussion or whatever else it was. He now has a "traumatic neurosis." It is a quite unintelligible—that is to say, a new—fact. The time that has passed between the accident and the first appearance of the symptoms is described as the "incubation period," in a clear allusion to the pathology of infectious diseases, ... the characteristic that might be described as "latency." (67-68)

Gatsby, likewise, experiences an "incubation period" between his "accident," which in this case is his military service, and the first emergence of symptoms. Recall that the novel takes place in

the spring of 1922, a full four years after the armistice on the Western Front. Exposure to traumatic circumstances followed by seemingly unscathed mental health, in turn followed by a breakdown, also helps explain Gatsby's short time at Oxford. Of his university experience Gatsby states, "It was in nineteen-nineteen, I only stayed five months" (99). The official reason for Gatsby's truancy, the reader later deduces, stems from his desire to return to Daisy; however, the proximity between the two years—1918 and 1919—suggests Gatsby's initial break from reality, his devolution into someone, as Nick puts it, "confused and disordered" (110), which in turn becomes the entire catalyst for the novel.

Gatsby further reveals his mental disturbance through his incessant repetition of the past. In an echo of Nick's wartime trauma, Gatsby longs for the comfort of prewar innocence. But in this case, his desire takes the form of romantic pursuits rather than social alienation. Consider this early moment with Daisy which, Gatsby tells Nick, occurred shortly before his departure to Europe. Though already intimate with each other, the war interrupts the courting process between Gatsby and Daisy: "He stretched out his hand desperately as if to snatch only a wisp of air, to save a fragment of the spot that she had made lovely for him. But it was all going by too fast ... and he knew he had lost that part of it, the freshest and the best, forever" (153). It is here in Louisville, a place and time at this point untouched by the war, that Gatsby first assumes the Orpheus-like posture of outstretched arms. That he repeats this gesture in West Egg after having achieved so much worldly success, that he finds himself still insatiable even after reuniting with Daisy, suggest that his desire for her goes beyond social ambition—as he puts it, "beyond her, beyond everything" (95)—and instead aims at something more basic: a return to life before the war, an untraumatized, unscarred existence.

Daisy might well represent, for Gatsby, what Ernest Becker refers to as a “love object.” Mass disillusionment with traditional institutions such as religion in the aftermath of the Great War led human beings, Becker explains, to seek out new ways to define the meaning of their lives:

He [modern man] fixed his urge to cosmic heroism onto *another person* in the form of a love object. The self-glorification that he needed in his innermost nature he now looked for in the love partner. The love partner becomes the divine ideal within which to fulfill one’s life. All the spiritual and moral needs now become focused in one individual. Spirituality, which once referred to another dimension of things, is now brought down to this earth and given form in another individual human being. (160)

Likewise, Gatsby makes an extraordinary effort in the story he tells Nick to link Daisy with notions of spirituality. To understand this assertion, one must first consider the etymology of the noun “spirituality.” According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word derives from the Latin *spiritualis*, which means, literally, “of or pertaining to breath, breathing, wind, or air.” Notice, then, how often air and breathing imagery crops up in Gatsby’s banter about Daisy: He “wed his unutterable visions to her perishable breath” (85); Louisville “seemed to spread itself in benediction over the vanishing city where she had drawn her breath” (117); in reference to her house he explains, through Nick, “what gave it an air of . . . intensity, was that Daisy lived there” (114). Despite this oversentimentality on Gatsby’s part, Daisy hardly qualifies as a moral person; in fact, Nick, who is apparently unaffected by the need to romanticize women, even refers to her multiple times as “artificial” (67, 166). But for Gatsby, a man traumatized by war and in need of cosmic reassurance, a denial of his fantastical perception of Daisy would serve only to

undermine his delusion. His glorification of her personhood, on the contrary, enables the fulfillment of his search for meaning, or at least an illusion of it.

Note, too, how Gatsby behaves before his first reunion with Daisy. This moment is a critical plot point in the novel but one that comes with myriad opportunities for misplaced attention. In other words, it is less important what happens during the actual reunion—in toto Gatsby comes across as awkward and knocks over a clock—than what happens immediately *before*. Around thirteen hours prior to the planned reunion, Nick describes an unusual event:

When I came home to West Egg that night I was afraid for a moment that my house was on fire. Two o'clock and the whole corner of the peninsula was blazing with light which felt unreal on the shrubbery and made thin elongating glints on the roadside wires. Turning a corner I saw that it was Gatsby's house, lit from tower to cell. (86)

Just like certain illnesses that get worse at night, Gatsby seems at his most anxious during times of darkness. Some scholars link the mansion exclusively with notions of opulence. In reference to its grandeur, Roger L. Pearson writes, “The lights that decorate the mansion, the expensiveness of its appointments, the opulence of its library, all contribute to this image” (640). But his choice to light up his house has nothing to do with his cavalier approach to resources. Gatsby's behavior here boils down to, I argue, fear of the unknown. Symbolically, there is a certain triangulation between darkness, death, and the unknown. This analysis is not only theoretical in nature. In fact, there are real-life, documented connections between nyctophobia, the fear of the dark, and World War I veterans. In his book *The Ambulance Drivers*, James McGrath Morris notes Hemingway's refusal to sleep with the lights off after his near-death experience as an ambulance driver in Italy (74). Hemingway was so afraid of the dark after he

returned home that his sister, Ursula, would sleep by his side for fear he might wake up alone. That Gatsby experiences tremendous anxiety about the uncertain outcome of his upcoming reunion with Daisy is well established. Indeed, it is only through Jordan Baker that Gatsby feels comfortable enough to suggest a get-together (83). But, unlike his contemporary Hemingway, he has no sister to blunt his apprehensions. And so he reacts, I assert, by attempting to expel this fear through the luminosity of his mansion.

But this scene risks a devolution into ambiguity if one does not consider the military's effect on Gatsby's spatial and temporal awareness. In fact, nighttime in the trenches was both the busiest and the most dangerous for infantry units. Under cover of darkness, soldiers often climbed out of their trenches and moved into No Man's Land, a desolate area of several hundred yards riddled with barbed wire, land mines, corpses, and wounded soldiers (Fussell 47-49). It is within reason to make a connection between those horror-filled nights that Gatsby spent as an artillery doughboy in Europe, nights of uncertain outcome, and the decision to, as Nick says, glance into rooms as the "house blazed gaudily on" (64). To rephrase, the subconscious memory of his uncertain time in the trenches heightens his sense of mortality, blowing the situation with Daisy out of all proportion, and thus manifests itself in an attempt to deny those anxieties through literal illumination. Ritualization again goes a long way in explaining Gatsby's behavior in that it allows for a symbolic connection to something that is meaningful for him, which in this case is Daisy. The rite of lighting his house in the hours before their reunion adds both comfort and clarity to Gatsby's war-torn psyche.

Furthermore, the events leading up to Gatsby's death warrant critical reexamination. It is well established across the spectrum of his work that Fitzgerald often pitted technology against the human body in a kind of fatalist dichotomy. In *Gatsby's* case, its characters' penchant for

careless driving—driving being an emerging technology in the early twentieth century—becomes a metaphor for their vulnerability to disaster. James says of this assertion, “car accidents are most important in *Gatsby*, where they resonate across the text as a series of events that are simultaneously connected (and therefore predictable) and abruptly unexpected” (89). Other critics have debated the novel’s climatic car accident only in terms of class justice, or to be more specific, the lack thereof, often pointing out that no one is held accountable for it. But I suggest a different reading, one that connects Gatsby’s behavior after the accident to yet another layer of his thanatophobia, all of which facilitates the necessary circumstances for his own death.

I depart from the standard reading of the novel in my assertion that it was Gatsby, and not Daisy, who was driving the yellow Rolls-Royce that killed Myrtle. A reading of the novel which sees Daisy as the one behind the wheel certainly has its merits; but assigning the blame to Gatsby adds a layer of complexity heretofore unexplored in scholarship. Of course, Gatsby explicitly states that Daisy was in the driver’s seat. But this is very possibly a false admission driven by Gatsby’s survival instinct, and one that is egged on and encouraged by Nick. He deduces the “truth,” or *thinks* he does, when he asks Gatsby, ““Was Daisy driving?”” (151). Only after hesitating, and in a moment of self-preservation, does Gatsby concede and seize on Nick’s version of events.

The best evidence for my contention that Gatsby was indeed behind the wheel comes from the witnesses at the scene. For example, Michaelis, Wilson’s friend and an eyewitness to the accident, confirms only the broadest details of the event: ““There was two cars ... One comin’, one goin’, see?”” Another witness, described simply as a “pale, well-dressed Negro” also confirms nothing specific about the drivers: ““It was a yellow car ... Big yellow car. New”” (147). And even Nick, also an eyewitness who gives his own brief description of the car wreck,

reveals no identifying information: “The ‘death car,’ as the newspapers called it, didn’t stop; it came out of the gathering darkness, wavered tragically for a moment and then disappeared around the next bend” (144). But scholars have often placed more emphasis on Nick’s massaging of events as well as the connection between femininity and automobiles in modernist literature. For example, in her book *Driving Women: Fiction and Automobile Culture in Twentieth-Century America* Deborah Clark writes, “the car often functions as the site that calls into question the issues of female agency, female power, and gender itself” (118). But the car accident in *Gatsby* is, I argue, just that—an accident, completely separated from any notions of gender, and, in its allusion to the terrible power of technology, ultimately an essential element of modernism in the aesthetic organization of Fitzgerald’s plot.

Gatsby’s acknowledgment of guilt is hardly a chivalric notion. Indeed, I would suggest two alternatives. First, Gatsby does not command much trustworthiness when one considers all his previous lies; he lies about the origin of his wealth, he lies about his love life, and he allows people to believe he reads the books in his library when, based on their unseparated pages, he does not. Second, Nick maintains an interest throughout the novel in protecting Gatsby’s reputation, going so far as to erase an obscene word scrawled on the steps of Gatsby’s house after his death (188). It seems more likely that, in his desire to shield Gatsby from harm, Nick suggests an alternative to the car wreck which assigns the blame to a scorned Daisy.

The upshot of Gatsby being the one behind the wheel, at least when it comes to the novel’s basic plotline, is that it allows for a foreshadowing of his death, one that both he and the reader experience simultaneously. To rephrase, Gatsby as the driver recalls the ancient Greek tragedies’ emphasis on fate, where the attempt to avoid an oracle is the very thing that enables it to happen. Like *Oedipus Rex*, Gatsby’s fate remains ambiguous to him throughout the novel; he

expects Daisy to be the catalyst for his downfall even as he succeeds in winning her back. But in the end his *own* insecurities and inability to be happy place him to the Plaza Hotel, and later, behind the wheel of the Rolls Royce, all of which would be lost to the reader if Daisy were the driver.

The reader has myriad reasons, of course, to assume that Gatsby understood he had killed someone: first, the fact that the car “wavered,” or hesitated, after the wreck seems indicative of his awareness; and second, that Gatsby commits a hit-and-run absolutely confirms his knowledge of the situation. His culpability, unintentional though it may be, in this locus of gore and violence appears to trigger a reaction not unlike that of a shell-shocked soldier. Two and a half hours after the wreck, Nick, in the driveway of Buchanans’ home, explains that Gatsby, “stepped from between two bushes into the path” (150). From a psychoanalytical point of view, Gatsby’s behavior here is akin to a body language tactic known as “blocking.” Like hands placed across the eyes in times of extreme stress, the bushes allow Gatsby to create a kind of ad hoc barrier against the knowledge of Myrtle’s death and his role in it.

And a page later, when Nick begins to explain Myrtle’s gruesome injuries, Gatsby confirms my suggestion of shell shock by interrupting, “Don’t tell me, old sport” (151). In fact, in the manuscript version of the novel obtained by Peral James, Fitzgerald originally allowed Gatsby to further qualify his discomfort: “Don’t tell me old sport ... I saw enough of that in the war” (63). To put into context, the car accident breaks Gatsby’s illusion of death and gore as an anonymous, ambiguous, Eurocentric phenomenon, which brings the concept into his full awareness. Gatsby, away from the trenches, at home, and without the regalia of a uniform is unable to filter his responsibility for Myrtle’s death through an anesthetized, military mentality. Indeed, Nick makes note of “the luminosity of his pink suit,” (150) which emphasizes Gatsby’s

encapsulation within civilian life. This suggestion of doom and fragility ultimately prefigures his own demise.

Other suggestions of Gatsby's doom serve to further intertwine his fixation on ritualization. Unlike the lighting of his house, these later rituals come with mixed results, which underscores Gatsby's increasing loss of control. Consider the last paragraph of chapter seven in which Nick describes Gatsby's post-crash behavior outside the Buchannan's house: "He put his hands in his coat pockets and turned back eagerly to his scrutiny of the house, as though my presence marred the sacredness of the vigil. So I walked away and left him standing there in the moonlight—watching over nothing" (153). The Buchannan house operates as a metaphorical lifejacket for Gatsby's terror here; to rephrase, the view of their home appeals to Gatsby, not because of Daisy's presence within it, but because it reminds him of his own home, a place under his complete control and replete with his idiosyncratic rituals. Furthermore, note the unique body language on display by Gatsby: his hands shoved inside his coat jacket, which creates an image of deep contemplation, marks the beginning of the ritualization process as well as a desire for solitude. Nick assumes outsider status within the same moment, and Gatsby's decision to turn his back on him, the only person on his side at this point, suggests the primacy, for Gatsby, of ritual over reason.

Gatsby, to be sure, appears to accept the premonitions of his death as inevitable. For example, note the construction of his final words to Nick: "Well—goodbye" (161). The pause between words, which Nick feels is important enough to record with an em dash, alludes to asystole, a form of cardiac arrest colloquially referred to as flatline. However, whether or not Gatsby accepts his looming death *without fear* remains open to further debate. It is provocative to note, therefore, the pastoral setting that Gatsby chooses for his demise. Admittedly, West Egg

lacks the tremulous romantic sensitivity of an earlier era, and so, I argue, Gatsby endears to contrive a bucolic environment with his lush backyard and pool. Nick describes Gatsby's mansion, on more than one occasion, as being cloaked in "mid-summer flowers (72) as well as surrounded by "amorphous trees" (124). To rephrase, in contrast to Nick's Valley of Ashes, a place where ashes replace wheat, Gatsby's mansion maintains a connection with the idyllic, which suggests, perhaps illusorily, a sense of Edenic safety.

The chauffeur, too, uses pastoral language to describe Gatsby's final moments. In fact, the chauffeur, an often-overlooked character, performs an essential role in the novel in that he allows the reader to "see" Gatsby's unique death and as well as understand his fear. Nick, who speaks with the chauffeur after the murder-suicide and relates his [the chauffeur's] description of events, puts it thus: "Gatsby shouldered the mattress and started for the pool. Once he stopped and shifted it a little and the chauffeur asked him if he needed help, but he shook his head and in a moment disappeared among the yellowing trees" (169). In parallel with the maritime tropes of pastoral literature, the pool is akin to the sea in miniature; in the same vein, the cluster of trees evokes, again in miniature, the sublime aesthetic of untouched nature. Even more important, this gentle setting is completely antithetical to the violence and gore of No Man's Land. It seems likely that Gatsby chooses this place to die out of an unconscious desire to soften the experience of death that he, as an infantryman, is so familiar with. In other words, his retreat into a pseudo pastoral world implies both his continuing need for existential comfort as well as his ultimate failure to overcome the fear of death.

Nick shrouds Gatsby with ritualistic language as soon as he comes in contact with his dead body. Recall the final sentence of chapter eight that, in its highly specific diction, highlights the failure of ritual to save Gatsby's life: "It was after we started with Gatsby toward the house

that the gardener saw Wilson's body a little way off in the grass, and the holocaust was complete" (170). That Nick chooses the word "holocaust" to describe this final connection with Gatsby speaks volumes about the latter's association with ritual. "Holocaust" comes from the Old French *holocauste*, which means, literally, "burnt offering." But notice that Nick does not minimize the milieu to which this offering applies; in fact, he uses annular language—"complete"—to suggest that Gatsby's entire life, not just his time in West egg, was one gigantic march toward ritualistic sacrifice. The liminal space between truth and perception blurs for the final time as the novel comes to a close and neither Nick nor Gatsby are better for it.

Finally, Fitzgerald's construction of Gatsby's thanatophobia makes clear that the social order of a post-war America will survive only at the exclusion of desire. Put another way, Gatsby's persistent fear of death, and the need to suppress it through various means, exposes uncomfortable truths about reality that, especially for a fellow veteran like Nick, are too disturbing to confront or even recognize. Nick's ambition to recontextualize Gatsby's trauma, his seemingly willful misunderstanding of in many ways his closest companion, echoes the broader American culture of the early twentieth century, which, if the Roaring Twenties are a guide, also placed great emphasis on avoiding the emotional consequences of total war.

CHAPTER IV

DOMESTICATED WOMEN

Who could ever forget the iconic book cover for *The Great Gatsby*? Created by Spanish-born Francis Cugat, who designed posters and movie sets in New York before he became an art designer in Hollywood, the cover painting evokes a sense of moodiness and disorientation that pleases the eye and piques curiosity. Its milieu of blurry city lights set in a background of deep navy blue works to draw the viewer's attention to a pair of floating eyes and lips. Inside those disembodied irises rest two female nudes, which, perhaps more than any other image in the novel, helps elucidate one of its major themes.

That *Gatsby* concerns itself with various notions of femininity does not escape even the most passive scholar. But what this emphasis means in the larger context of the twentieth century, and the process by which it changed over the course of almost one century of scholarship, remains ambiguous. Fitzgerald himself often seemed uncertain about how to conceptualize the novel's female characters. In an April 1925 letter to his editor Maxwell Perkins, he described his depression over the book's lackluster sales and places the blame on its women: "...*And most important*—the book contains no important woman character and women controll [sic] the fiction market at present" (Corrigan 151). With the benefit of hindsight, and the obvious success he had in creating compelling female characters, many people find it hard to believe that Fitzgerald could be so self-critical.

But his words underscore a problem in modernist literature in that, though memorable, these characters and their portrayals are deeply misunderstood. Frances Kerr argues that the book's attempt at emotional katharsis is largely to blame for this oversight:

[*The Great Gatsby*] took shape in the context of a discourse in which ideas about the appropriate kind and degree of emotion in art were inflected with concerns about manly detachment, discipline, and craftsmanship. Avant-garde imagery ranging from the lightly mocking to the caustic and offensive was sometimes used to cast sentimentality, self-indulgent personal expression, and intellectual posturing as feminine. (410)

Yet even Fitzgerald's own personal and creative life seems ripe with gender biases which portray women as inferior. Ashley Lawson explores this contention in her essay *The Muse and the Maker: Gender, Collaboration, and Appropriation in the Life and Work of F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald*:

We find that, despite the specific conditions of his own personal and creative relationship with his wife, he relied on a discourse that has its roots not only in modernist notions of art but also in the patriarchal rhetoric that has long been used to denigrate...women (82).

To rephrase, Fitzgerald's attempt at asserting his artistic masculinity seems to have influenced his perception of femininity as nothing more than a vehicle for hysterical posturing.

All of *Gatsby's* women embody unsympathetic roles. But these women do not evoke the reader's apathy from the suggestion of loose morals. Judith Sanders emphasizing a collective immorality between the key female characters, writing, "Competition among men for women's

sexual attention and loyalty—and among women for men’s—occupies much narrative space: it plays a critical role in events and provokes violence, including fatalities (138). Yet it is their inability to induce sympathy, a distinction removed from sexual connotations, that tends to stick out, which, I argue, says a lot about Fitzgerald’s intentions. Daisy Buchanan, Jordan Baker, and Myrtle Wilson all provoke and betray a desire for coherent and predictable differences between masculinity and femininity. Furthermore, these women serve as an embodiment for war’s desires in that, through their control and domination, they allow both Gatsby and Nick to recapture the illusion of comfort and security that they lost in the trenches: Jordan is as indifferent as the soldiers who have been desensitized in battle; memories of Daisy would be what helped Gatsby endure mechanized battle; and Myrtle is the one who most resembles a war death. And when combined with the novel’s explicit violence, these distinctions ultimately create a unique, gendered metaphor which serves to anthropomorphize the war’s enigmatic damages.

Gatsby’s first image of femininity comes early in the opening chapter when Nick arrives at the home of his old friends, Daisy and Tom Buchannan. As he gets his first glimpse at the recondite Jordan Baker, Nick engages in what Pearl James refers to as the modernist “cult of masculinity” (194). When one considers Nick’s recent experience in the war, as well as the sense of displacement he expresses in the novel’s opening paragraphs, his description of Jordan comes across as an ad hoc attempt to shift the reader’s focus away from his inadequacy and vulnerability; in other words, Nick’s awareness of his own mortality, no doubt driven by the terrors of total war, is too extreme to be conquered without some sort of mental gymnastics. This plot point, which is in large part successful, comes at the expense of Jordan’s womanhood:

The younger of the two was a stranger to me. She was extended full length at her end of the divan, completely motionless and with her chin raised a little as if she

were balancing something on it which was quite likely to fall. If she saw me out of the corner of her eyes she gave no hint of it—indeed I was almost surprised into murmuring an apology for having disturbed her by coming in. (13)

Notice Nick's subtle desire for consummation with Jordan. His description of her body suggests a sexual submission not unlike the missionary position. The full-length extension of her body, as well as her immobility—key features of the missionary position—suggests a power differential between Nick and Jordan, one not unlike Rembrandt's *The Abduction of Proserpina*. But with its emphasis on domination, this is an allusion that leaves no room for female sexual autonomy. And in tandem with the mythology of Persephone, Jordan's abundant sensuality, the expression of which often serves as a vehicle for female liberation, becomes just another method for male satisfaction.

Consider, too, Nick's focus on Jordan's mouth. His diction—that reference to her chin being “raised a little as if she were balancing something on it which was quite likely to fall”—implies a fragility that seems to ridicule whatever inherent poise Jordan possess. That she is a woman capable of balance and symmetry gives way to Nick's suggestion of fatalistic doom. And with this suggestion of mockery, he ultimately destabilizes Jordan's aesthetic regularity while maintaining his own.

Many of Nick's criticisms of Jordan, I argue, are subconscious censures of Gatsby. Because of their shared gender and common experience, Nick feels too deep a camaraderie with Gatsby to even come close to scrutinizing him; however, the obvious issues he takes with Gatsby's lifestyle are too powerful for suppression and therefore manifest in condemnations toward Jordan, someone within easy access and who commands much less of Nick's respect. Recall his opinion of Jordan during one of their first outings in the city:

Jordan Baker instinctively avoided clever shrewd men and now I saw that this was because she felt safer on a plane where any divergence from a code would be thought impossible. She was incurably dishonest. She wasn't able to endure being at a disadvantage, and given this unwillingness I suppose she had begun dealing in subterfuges when she was very young in order to keep that cool insolent smile turned to the world and yet satisfy the demands of her hard jaunty body. (63)

What is so provocative about this description is how closely it lines up with Gatsby's own behavior and background. Some of Nick's words in this excerpt seem almost nonsensical until one considers how they overlap with words he later uses to describe Gatsby. For example, the reference to her "hard jaunty body," a phrase Nick recycles to describe Gatsby's "brown, hardening body" (104), implies a masculinity incongruous with Jordan's femininity. Nick is not at a loss for words; rather, he is unconsciously describing his lack of faith in Gatsby's mythology.

Furthermore, notice the parallels between this description of Jordan and what Nick knows about Gatsby. Nick senses the same incurable dishonesty in Gatsby when Gatsby describes his education at Oxford; Nick notes Gatsby's "sideways" look and says, "I knew why Jordan Baker had believed he was lying" (69). Jordan's supposed "dealing in subterfuges when she was very young" could just as well describe Gatsby's mysterious experience with Dan Cody during the former's youth. Nick, unwilling and unable to suffer further emotional turmoil after his time in Europe, wants to maintain the homosocial bond between himself and his fellow veteran, and so he uses Jordan as a strawman for his criticisms, which ultimately allows for the maintenance of hegemonic masculinity.

Jordan embodies phallic imagery almost exclusively throughout the novel and often to the detriment of her femininity. Nick seems most comfortable with her when he can subdue her girlish qualities through his language. Nowhere is this assertion clearer than during one of their dates in the city, which occurs at the end of chapter four:

It was dark now, and as we dipped under a little bridge I put my arm around Jordan's golden shoulder and drew her toward me and asked her to dinner. Suddenly I wasn't thinking of Daisy and Gatsby any more, but of this clean, hard, limited person, who dealt in universal skepticism, and who leaned back jauntily just within the circle of my arm. (84)

For Nick, Jordan subverts the stereotypical qualities often associated with women—she lacks any connection with softness, nurturance, or sensitivity. Instead, Nick perceives her as “hard” and “limited.” It matters little if Jordan actually possesses either of these masculine qualities; as the narrator, Nick holds tremendous power over the people in his life in that he can manipulate their depiction to the reader at will. Furthermore, note how his adjectives contribute to the suggestion of a phallus: “hard,” of course, needs no explanation; but to describe Jordan’s presence as “limited” alludes to the constrained timespan within which a phallus can remain erect. In other words, Nick filters his sexual desire for Jordan through a masculine lens, which in its familiarity to him serves to reduce any threat of unhinged female sexuality. That Nick uses hedging language—“clean”—to soften his allusion to the sex act further underlines his desire to squash Jordan’s potential for sexual independence.

But Nick ultimately eschews a sexual relationship with Jordan in favor of a metaphysical one. To rephrase, his connection to her stems more from his inner turmoil than any real romantic proclivities. The natural outgrowth of such a situation is the creation of a symbiotic relationship,

but it is important to note that, in this case, the proverbial scales tip much farther in Nick's favor than Jordan's. Ernest Becker helps put this idea into perspective with his research on human dependency: "We enter symbiotic relationships in order to get the security we need, in order to get relief from our anxieties, our aloneness and helplessness; but these relationships also bind us, they enslave us even further because they support the lie we have fashioned" (56). His thoughts about Jordan near the end of chapter seven encapsulates this desire for existential comfort:

Thirty—the promise of a decade of loneliness, a thinning list of single men to know, a thinning brief-case of enthusiasm, thinning hair. But there was Jordan beside me who, unlike Daisy, was too wise ever to carry well-forgotten dreams from age to age. As we passed over the dark bridge her wan face fell lazily against my coat's shoulder and the formidable stroke of thirty died away with the reassuring pressure of her hand. (143)

Here Nick is unable to accept his own mortality. It is only through *Jordan* that he is able to find any comfort in his slow creep toward death. But this abstract fear becomes immensely more manageable when passed off onto the material existence of another person. When confronted with the fear of death, Becker states that "we cannot really expect people at large to emerge from their lifelong object-embeddedness and to attain self-reliance" (217). He argues that humans need a higher power, and not necessarily a *spiritual* one, upon which to transfer their anxieties. In other words, Jordan's face and body allows Nick to give form and shape to the metaphysical terror that is death and dying, something concrete with which to wrestle with and ultimately control.

Daisy Buchannan, too, embodies the betrayal of femininity for both Nick and Gatsby; however, this independent femininity, while often connected to the notion of twentieth-century

female drivers, has less to do with automobiles and more to do with the reversal of another popular trope: women in need of male rescue. Deborah Clark refers to this breakdown of gender distinctions but links its occurrence to the emergence of cars:

The development of the motor car affected women across the country, helping to break down boundaries between urban and rural life, opening up possibilities to get out of the house and, in so doing, also destabilizing established categories of class and gender. No longer relegated to the home, women now drove into the public sphere, exercising control over the latest technology. (10)

Yet most of *Gatsby's* men seem oblivious to the threat of women drivers and instead fear the destabilization of women in need of saving. Note this description of Daisy's romantic needs in chapter six during the novel's second party scene:

After all in the very casualness of Gatsby's party there were romantic possibilities totally absent from her world. What was it up there in the song that seemed to be calling her back inside? What would happen now in the dim incalculable hours? Perhaps some unbelievable guest would arrive, a person infinitely rare and to be marveled at...who...would blot out those five years of unwavering devotion.
(115)

It is important to understand that this fantastical narration springs from Nick's mind. Notice, therefore, the domestic quality of his illusion: he uses the noun "casualness" as well as the phrase "back inside," both of which imply the domiciliary care of running a household. In other words, the stereotype of the domesticated woman is in full effect here. But there remains an implied hope for sexual gratification which warrants a fuller analysis. His reference to the "dim incalculable hours," though suggestive, falls short of a sexually explicit representation. However,

Nick is more than willing to abandon his decorum in favor of a reclamation of Daisy as a sexual object; his phrase “blot out” suggests an inability within Nick to face reality, which in this case is reality of an independent, possibly asexual woman, all of which highlights the male desire for escapism through the erotic.

When Daisy finally reenters Gatsby’s life and later his home, there is a consistent effort on Gatsby’s part to orient her toward a stereotypical domesticity, which, in its failure, drives him into depression. In the presence of both Nick and Daisy, Gatsby makes a point to open his closets and throw his clothes into a heap on a table: “He took out piles of shirts and began throwing them one by one before us, shirts of sheer linen and thick silk and fine flannel which lost their folds as they fell and covered the table in many-colored disarray” (97). But Daisy’s reaction lacks the homely sensitivity that Gatsby seems to want so bad. “‘They’re beautiful shirts,’ she sobbed, her voice muffled in the thick folds. ‘It makes me sad because I’ve never seen such—such beautiful shirts before’” (98). Her reaction, in other words, eschews domesticity in favor of intense materialism, a disposition that Gatsby is more than willing to abandon at this point after having reconnected with Daisy. In fact, Fitzgerald indicates the end of this scene with white space instead of dialogue, which, in its accentuation of silence, serves to underscore Gatsby’s frustration.

While the above example is, admittedly, subtle in nature, Gatsby later explicitly voices his disappointment in Daisy’s resistance to domesticity. Note Gatsby’s reaction when Nick and Daisy decide to end the evening and leave the mansion:

As I went over to say goodbye I saw that the expression of bewilderment had come back into Gatsby’s face, as though a faint doubt had occurred to him as to the quality of his present happiness. Almost five years! There must have been

moments even that afternoon when Daisy tumbled short of his dreams—not through her own fault, but because of the colossal vitality of his illusion. It had gone beyond her, beyond everything. He had thrown himself into it with a creative passion, adding to it all the time, decking it out with every bright feather that drifted his way. No amount of fire or freshness can challenge what a man will store up in his ghostly heart. (101)

That Nick wants to highlight the infeasibility of Gatsby's desires seems apparent in this paragraph's diction: "dreams," "illusion," and "ghostly" imply an ephemeral quality to Gatsby's love for Daisy, which makes its consummation hard to define much less achieve. Furthermore, the richness of Gatsby's inner beliefs, and his certainty that these beliefs have the power to shape his reality, alludes to a form of ritualization known as animism. The word describes an ontological perspective which emphasizes the primacy of fantasy over actuality. Though not the first psychologist to describe the phenomenon, Sigmund Freud provides a provocative explanation of its structure in a 1924 autobiographical study: "I discovered under the primitive scheme of the universe known as 'animism' the principle of the over-estimation of the importance of physical reality...which lies at the root of magic as well" (40). Put in context, Gatsby's belief in the power of his inner rituals to influence his relationship with Daisy fail because they are simply too extreme to ever come to fruition. The risk inherent in the "colossal vitality of his illusion" stems from Daisy's humanity; Gatsby ultimately loves a vision of Daisy created in his mind and one which, in its wild transcendence, can never match reality. It is important to note, too, that his fantasies of Daisy often serve to deny or ignore any suggestion of corporality. This lack of materiality allows Gatsby to avoid the fact that Daisy will eventually decay like all other material items in space and time.

It is tempting to examine Myrtle Wilson only in the context of her violent death underneath the wheels of a runaway Rolls Royce. Her final moments stick out in the reader's mind thanks in no small part to the graphic description of her dead body, which seems incongruous in a text filled with such lovely prose. Yet her earlier interactions with Nick, Tom, and George, though subtle, elucidate a discomfort with her femininity that echoes my earlier analysis of Jordan and Daisy. For Nick in particular, Myrtle's femininity is so ambiguous that it borders on the threatening. Consider his first description of her, which occurs early in chapter 2: Then I heard footsteps on a stairs, and in a moment the thickish figure of a woman blocked out the light from the office door. She was in the middle thirties, and faintly stout...Her face, above a spotted dress of dark blue crepe-de-chine, contained no facet or gleam of beauty" (29). It is provocative that Nick assigns obfuscating language to Myrtle's presence: the phrase "blocked out the light" is ripe with double metaphors in that it is both negative, and, for Nick, self-serving.

The homosocial bond, a categorization that defines the social, political, and sometimes sexual ties between men, serves as the foundation of my analysis. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the phrase describes social rituals "between members of the same sex, especially men." While all three female characters—Jordan, Daisy, and Myrtle—disrupt the emotional connections between men throughout the novel, none seems to have quite as powerful an effect as Myrtle does. This assertion seems especially true when it comes to Nick. Just before the quartet takes their fateful trip to the Plaza Hotel, Nick alludes to the disconnect between Tom, George, and himself:

He [Wilson] had discovered that Myrtle had some sort of life apart from him in another world, and the shock had made him physically sick. I stared at him and then at Tom, who had made a parallel discovery less than an hour before — and it

occurred to me that there was no difference between men, in intelligence or race, so profound as the difference between the sick and the well. Wilson was so sick that he looked guilty, unforgivably guilty — as if he had just got some poor girl with child. (130)

The scene exudes a kind of pseudo-intimacy between the three men. Nick adopts the role of caretaker for Tom and George; as evidenced by his intermittent relationship with Jordan, Nick feels no deep connection with members of the opposite sex and therefore remains firmly entrenched in the ritual of homosocial bonding. He is, in other words, the only member of the group who can maintain his emotional health, and he says as much in the second sentence with his reference to “the sick and the well.” Moreover, he lacks any observable sympathy for Myrtle who appears only as a brief afterthought in his description despite her obvious victimhood. His concern lies, instead, with the men and especially George. This assertion comes into full focus in Nick’s final sentence. To Nick, George looks like “he had just got some poor girl with child,” which indicates the extent to which Myrtle shatters the trio’s unspoken social ritual.

Moreover, Nick’s allusion to procreation again shores up his thinking in terms of death denial. Procreation often constitutes a vehicle with which humans can defy death and ultimately see themselves live on in the form of another person. The fact that Nick’s simile appears to reference procreation out of wedlock does much to underscore the novel’s consistent belief that rituals ultimately fail in their pursuit of social ascendancy. George’s final emergence into domesticity—perfectly summed up with Nick’s image of nascent family life—constitutes a betrayal of masculinity that Nick, and for that matter, Tom, cannot accept.

Myrtle, too, is the one whose death most resembles that of a soldier in the battlefield. Indeed, her femininity seems to be, at least for Nick, the requisite quality which makes the

display of carnage possible. In the novel's final death scene, her body serves as a stand in for the countless gruesome deaths of soldiers on European battlefields: "they saw that her left breast was swinging loose like a flap, and there was no need to listen for the heart beneath. The mouth was wide open and ripped at the corners, as though she had choked a little in giving up the tremendous vitality she had stored so long (106). Machinery pummels her body, catching her by surprise—but the event also surprises Nick who seems aware of a tremendous sense of irony in the connection between the war's waste of human life and Myrtle's failed dash for freedom.

Finally, *Gatsby's* meditation on the twentieth-century woman reveals an innate desire for coherent and predictable differences between masculinity and femininity. Gatsby and Nick seem terrified at the potential for the women in their life to disrupt their social bonds; Tom and George, for their part, exhibit a subtler fear. The difference may boil down to Gatsby and Nick's experiences in the male-dominated trenches of Europe, experiences that Tom and George do not share. No doubt the impulse toward survival hardened the connection between those men who spent time in the war. Women, and their capacity to unravel these bonds, must be kept under wraps if Gatsby and Nick expect to maintain their holocaust.

Female characters have, of course, been a source of male unease since the early modern days of theater and even before then to the ancient epics. The trope, used countless times in Shakespeare's works, relies on the notion that women often hold exorbitant sway over their male counterparts due to exceptional beauty. The same holds true of Helen of Sparta, who in becoming Helen of Troy launched a thousand ships and set the stage for Homer's two great epics. But for *Gatsby's* men, women are terrifying in their power to humiliate and, like the Great War, a painful reminder of fear and destruction.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION: THE GREAT GATSBY REDUX

In his last year of life, deep in the Hollywood Hills, Fitzgerald finally achieved sobriety and sought to repair many of his previous relationships; though he remained estranged from his wife, Zelda, Fitzgerald succeeded in his recommitment to former friends and colleagues. Indeed, his roommate at the time, gossip columnist Sheilah Graham, later described this year as the happiest period of their relationship (Frank 309). Yet the author still perceived himself as a literary failure, and for all intents and purposes, he was. As a habit, when he would fall into a depression Fitzgerald would roam the streets of Hollywood and say to strangers, “I’m F. Scott Fitzgerald. You’ve read my books. You’ve read *The Great Gatsby*, haven’t you? Remember?” (Frank 202). Often the answer was no, which makes sense: By 1940, *Gatsby* was mostly out of print, and Fitzgerald’s final royalty check earned him a mere thirteen dollars, mostly from copies he had bought himself.

Eighty-eight years after the novel’s original publication, Baz Luhrmann’s film version of *Gatsby* cost well over one hundred million dollars to produce. The book sells on average five hundred thousand copies per year and has sold more than thirty million copies worldwide since 1925. It is almost tragic to think what Fitzgerald would have done with all those resources. There would certainly have been plenty of rowdy parties, late-night carousing, and conversations in exotic cars.

Had he lived even ten more years, Fitzgerald's life might not have looked so different from that of Jay Gatsby. Yet it is more than just monetary considerations that encourages the public's continued fascination with Fitzgerald. Part of his larger-than-life appeal comes from beyond the grave. Studied all around the world, in both academic and casual settings, *The Great Gatsby*, as well as the man who created him, remain "alive" today.

If Fitzgerald the man is everlasting then so are his characters. Nick Carraway would certainly find comfort in such a notion. As a piece of metafiction, Nick's narrative is divine. At its most basic, *Gatsby* is Nick's attempt to keep Gatsby and his legacy alive. But the book seems to reach beyond this goal in its bestowal of immortality onto Nick as well. It is not clear, however, if he desires such an outcome from his labors; Nick often masks his own wants and needs in favor of Gatsby's. But whatever his intentions, the reality is that Nick's words transcend mortality. There is a certain irony to the entire situation. Fitzgerald and Nick, two veterans exposed to the worst horrors of death, still dared to live forever. But immortality begets immortality.

Gatsby resists easy categorization. While often studied at the academic level, it is also read in high schools and by the general public. In one sense, the novel's ability to appeal to a broad audience helps encourage its longevity. Fitzgerald recognized the accomplishment of his earlier novels, and he might have sensed that this success could be leveraged to build a diverse crowd of supporters. Goals created carry the promise of fulfillment, which Nietzsche referred to as the "will to power." But I like to think of *Gatsby*'s star as the product of something much purer than unabated ambition. In his simple desire to create something beautiful, Fitzgerald discovered a way to live and live again. Even when the man himself finally succumbed to the demons of alcoholism and depression—brought on in no small part from his military service—*Gatsby* climbed to greater and greater heights. Such is the tragedy of life and death.

One question, though, remains: To what end does *Gatsby* seek to accomplish its goal of elucidating the post-World War I human condition? One way to solve this problem is to focus on the functions of metafiction. One may argue that the novel itself, and Nick's careful construction of its narrative, acts as a form of ritualistic death denial. To understand this assertion, one must first consider how Nick perceives his role as narrator. Nick, with his money tempered by sensitivity, is both an insider to the glitterati lifestyle of the 1920s and an outsider. And he makes it clear early in the novel that he intends to use his unique position as a license to pass judgment. He states, "Yet high over the city our line of yellow windows must have contributed their share of human secrecy to the casual watcher of the darkening streets, and I was him too, looking up and wondering. I was within and without" (40). This seemingly God-like aura explains Nick's interest in storytelling: In the power to reshape events as he sees fit, Nick gains a modicum of control over the uncertain flow of life, which ultimately allows him to deny his own fragility.

But it would be a major oversight to ignore the novel's titular character and his own perspective about what it means to die. *Gatsby* and the man himself reveal how difficult it is to remain true to an ideology, especially in the face of extreme adversity. Gatsby is a man who wants to embody the role of a moral compass, but it is not a role he can accept without some sort of personal gain. From the earliest moments of the novel, even outside of the context of ritualization, Gatsby plays to his supposed sense of conscience to manipulate those around him. *Indeed*, there is a side of him that is so driven by opportunity and the desire to gain money and power that he seems almost blind to the inevitable consequences. And it seems equally true that, when the opportunity presents itself, he is willing to abandon his carefully constructed role in

favor of personal gain. This is the ultimate tragedy of human rituals throughout the ages: almost all of them fall short of their creator's lofty intentions.

What then remains of F. Scott Fitzgerald in the modern world of literature? Most of the human qualities that endeared him to those who knew him—his ambition, his sense of style, his prodigious personal charm, and his love for the English language—have been forgotten. But there remains as always his great story, beginning with a father's advice to his son and ending with a grisly murder-suicide, a mythology without parallel in American literature. *The Great Gatsby* is a novel of prodigious proportions written during a time of tremendous social upheaval, and in this regard, Fitzgerald is at his most prophetic. And in his thirst for rebirth in the wake of global tragedy, in a haunting novel's search for meaning, Fitzgerald found life after death.

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