

## Preface

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What little I've accomplished has been by the most laborious and uphill work, and I wish now I'd *never* relaxed or looked back—but said at the end of *The Great Gatsby*: “I've found my line—from now on this comes first. This is my immediate duty—without this I am nothing.”

—F. Scott Fitzgerald

*The Great Gatsby* does not proclaim the nobility of the human spirit; it is not politically correct; it does not reveal how to solve the problems of life; it delivers no fashionable or comforting messages. It is just a masterpiece.

The best reason to read literature is for pleasure. One gauge of F. Scott Fitzgerald's achievement is that many admiring readers are unaware of the complexity of *The Great Gatsby* because the novel is a pleasure to read. It is therefore necessary to invoke his 1922 pre-*Gatsby* declaration: “I want to write something *new*—something extraordinary and beautiful and simple + intricately patterned.” Masterpieces are not accidents. Geniuses know what they

are doing or trying to do. They need luck, but knowing how to use the luck is an essential element of a writer's equipment.

F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896–1940) was a romantic and even tragic figure: a brilliant writer who achieved success with his first novel (*This Side of Paradise*, 1920), participated in the glamorous expatriate life in France during the Nineteen-Twenties, and then experienced a series of personal and professional blows during the Thirties. The Fitzgerald legend has attracted readers to his work; but his words matter—not the mostly distorted and inaccurate anecdotes of dissipation. Between 1920 and 1940 he published four novels, including *Tender Is the Night*; a play; 160 short stories; and essays. He was writing a superb Hollywood novel, *The Last Tycoon*, when he died. Assessing his career for his daughter Scottie he wrote from Hollywood at a low point in 1939: “I am not a great man, but sometimes I think the impersonal and objective quality of my talent, and the sacrifices of it, in pieces, to preserve its essential value has some sort of epic grandeur.”

Fitzgerald was not the playboy of American literature, although certain fans like to think that he was an irresponsible writer. He was an alcoholic—as were other major American writers—but he was a serious writer and a hard worker. He did not scribble *The Great Gatsby* drunk. The novel had a three-year process of evolution, and Fitzgerald tested his material in the short stories that preceded *The Great Gatsby*. The gestation of the characters and themes can be readily observed in “Dice, Brass Knuckles & Guitar” (1923), “The ‘Sensible Thing’” (1924), and particularly “Winter Dreams” (1922). “Absolution” (1924) was sal-

vaged from a lost early version of a novel that became *The Great Gatsby*. The novel developed through layers of drafts and achieved its ultimate brilliance when Fitzgerald revised and rewrote it in the galley proofs. At the stage when most authors are finished with their work he was still perfecting *The Great Gatsby*. The published facsimiles of Fitzgerald's manuscripts and works-in-progress provide instruction on the art of his fiction, which was the art of rewriting.

*The Great Gatsby* is a classic—a novel that is read spontaneously by pleasure-seekers and under duress by students. A popular classroom fallacy holds that classics are universal and timeless. Literature has staying power, but it is subject to metamorphosis. Every reader's response to a work of fiction is determined by his or her presuppositional bias, beliefs, experience, and knowledge.

Fitzgerald ebulliently proclaimed in 1920 that “An author ought to write for the youth of his generation, the critics of the next, and the schoolmasters of ever afterward.” Although this edict—perhaps a prophecy—was triumphantly fulfilled by *The Great Gatsby*, the novel was written by a man of his own time about his time. *The Great Gatsby* was published in 1925; therefore many of its details now seem as remote as those in the world of Charles Dickens's fiction. Great fiction is great social history; Fitzgerald's work has become automatically identified with an American decade: The Jazz Age (which he named) or The Roaring Twenties or The Boom. Since *The Great Gatsby* is the defining novel of the Twenties, which have become trivialized and vulgarized by people who weren't there, it is necessary and useful to provide a corrective assessment of that era and Fitzgerald's response to it. The Twenties were not a ten-year

binge during which everybody got rich and danced the Charleston in speakeasies while drinking bootleg hooch. Certainly the reaction to America's participation in World War I—which ended on 11 November 1918—triggered disillusionment, moral reevaluation, social experiment, and hedonism. Although Fitzgerald joined the parties and chronicled them, he wrote in judgment. The Twenties were primarily an era of possibilities and aspiration—a dominant Fitzgerald theme. In “Echoes of the Jazz Age” he wrote: “It was an age of miracles, it was an age of art, it was an age of excess, and it was an age of satire.” It was also an age of achievement, especially in American literature: Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Thomas Wolfe, Willa Cather, Sinclair Lewis, Ring Lardner, Eugene O'Neill, John Dos Passos, Wallace Stevens, e. e. cummings, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot.

The novel is appropriately set in the get-rich-quick decade that brought about the organization of crime as a concomitant of Prohibition. Gatsby's criminal activities are kept mysterious, but it is evident that he has been a bootlegger. The Twenties were a time of stock-market speculation and speculation—though penny-ante stuff compared to the Eighties—and Gatsby is involved with stolen securities. On 3 September 1929 the Dow-Jones Industrial Average reached a high of 381; it fell to 261 on 28 October. (It reached a low of 41 in 1932; in 1995 it broke 5,000.) The Wall Street crash marked the end of the Twenties boom and initiated the Great Depression of the Thirties. What Fitzgerald called “the most expensive orgy in history” was over.

An essential aspect of the American-ness and the historicity of *The Great Gatsby* is that it is about money. The

Land of Opportunity promised the chance for financial success. Gatsby, who makes his fortune in ways never envisioned by Benjamin Franklin, does not understand how money works in society. He innocently expects that he can buy anything—especially Daisy. She is for sale, but he doesn't have the right currency.

It has become convenient to refer to *The Great Gatsby* as “the great American novel.” If this phrase means anything, it means that the novel is the great work of fiction with defining American thematic qualities and that James Gatz/Jay Gatsby is the great American character. (Adherents of Huck Finn take issue and umbrage.) Gatsby is the American self-made—indeed, self-invented—man. He believes in the American Dream of success (“the orgasmic future”); he fulfills it; he confuses it with Daisy; he is betrayed by it. The appellation *great* as applied to Gatsby reverberates with irony. He is truly great by virtue of his capacity to commit himself to his aspirations. Yet at the same time the adjective indicates the tawdry and exaggerated aspects of his life: Hurry, hurry, hurry! Step right up and see the Great Gatsby! (Tom Buchanan describes Gatsby's car as a “circus wagon.”) It is crucial to differentiate the ostentatious Gatsby from the admirable Gatsby. Thus Nick instructs the reader in the fourth paragraph of the novel:

If personality is an unbroken series of successful gestures, then there was something gorgeous about him, some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life, as if he were related to one of those intricate machines that register earthquakes ten thousand miles away. This responsiveness had nothing to do with that flabby impressionability which is dignified under the name

of the “creative temperament”—it was an extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness such as I have never found in any other person and which it is not likely I shall ever find again.

Great fiction creates memorable characters; and the essentially incredible Jay Gatsby is made convincing by means of narrative point of view and narrative structure. Gatsby is the hero, but Nick Carraway is the central figure. Most of Gatsby’s speech is retold by Nick, who is the voice of the novel and the voice of the novelist. The structural plan depends on Nick, the *partially involved narrator* who documents all the events and relates them in the order he learned them—except for the details of Gatsby’s biography at the opening of Chapter VI. Nick serves as a trustworthy reporter and, reluctantly, as judge: “No—Gatsby turned out all right at the end; it is what preyed on Gatsby, what foul dust floated in the wake of his dreams that temporarily closed out my interest in the abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men.”

Complexity for the sake of complexity is bad writing; the structure of *The Great Gatsby* is functional. The reader is required to reconstruct the actual chronology of events, much of which is revealed in flashbacks—thereby becoming a collaborator in the narrative. Most important, the reader is responsible for sorting and re-ordering the lies and truths about Gatsby. Thus:

Chapter III: Nick hears rumors at the party about the mysterious Gatsby.

Chapter IV: Gatsby tells Nick a mostly false autobiography during their car ride to New York; Jordan Baker tells

Nick about Gatsby’s courtship of Daisy in 1917.

Chapter VI: Nick relates biography of Gatsby’s youth: “He told me all this very much later, but I’ve put it down here with the idea of exploding those first wild rumors about his antecedents, which weren’t even faintly true”; Nick retells Gatsby’s account of falling in love with Daisy—but impressionistically, not in Gatsby’s words.

Chapter VII: Gatsby proves that he went to Oxford; Tom Buchanan reveals Gatsby’s bootlegging activities.

Chapter VIII: “It was this night that he told me the strange story of his youth with Dan Cody . . .” (see Chapter VI); Nick repeats Gatsby’s account of his falling in love with Daisy and the consummation, his war record, Daisy’s unfaithfulness (without source), and his return to Louisville after the war.

Chapter IX: Meyer Wolfshiem tells Nick about his partnership with Gatsby; Mr. Gatz shows Gatsby’s boyhood schedule to Nick.

However, there are integral chronological problems in *The Great Gatsby*. The present-time events occupy three months in 1922, from Nick’s dinner with the Buchanans in early June to Gatsby’s funeral in early September, followed by Nick’s departure in October. Elapsed time is unaccounted for during June and July; too much action is crowded into late August. There are inconsistent time signals. These difficulties partly result from Fitzgerald’s general language (“a few days,” “several weeks,” “about six weeks”); but the chronology for June and July events was blurred by his decision to transpose Chapters II and III between manuscript and typescript. Here is the time-scheme for the summer 1922 action:

- page 16. lines 10–11 “In two weeks it’ll be the longest day in the year.” About 7 June: Nick visits Buchanans.
- 30.22 “a few days before the Fourth of July”: Nick, Tom, and Myrtle go to New York.
- 62.14–15 “in midsummer”: Nick begins dating Jordan—some time in July.
- 69.1 “past month”: Nick has known Gatsby for a month by the time they drive to New York in late July; therefore Nick had attended first Gatsby party in late June.
- 82.27 “about six weeks” since Buchanan dinner (c. 7 June); therefore late July when Jordan tells Nick about Daisy and Gatsby. Reunion of Daisy and Gatsby is a few days later.
- 107.20 “several weeks” between reunion and the Sunday when Tom and friends come to Gatsby’s house; therefore mid-August.
- 110.17 “the following Saturday”: Tom and Daisy attend Gatsby’s party—mid- or late August.
- 120.1 “a week ago”: Gatsby replaces servants and parties stop—late August.
- 120.26 “almost the last” day of summer, c. Labor Day. Plaza Hotel confrontation and death of Myrtle.
- 175.4 “the third day” after Gatsby’s murder: Mr. Gatz arrives on “a warm September day.”

It is appropriate and utilitarian that *The Great Gatsby* have an “intricately patterned” chronology, for time is a

major theme in the novel—and in all of Fitzgerald’s best fiction. The novel begins “In my younger and more vulnerable years . . .” and ends “borne back ceaselessly into the past.” It uses some 450 time-words, including 87 appearances of *time*. Episodes are reinforced by time symbolism: the Buchanan lawn is described as “jumping over sundials”; Nick’s famous list of people who attended Gatsby’s parties is written on a timetable; Gatsby knocks over a clock during his reunion with Daisy; and Klipspringer plays “In the meantime, In between time——”.

The time theme encompasses the related themes of mutability and loss. Fitzgerald wrote in 1924 while he was working on *Gatsby*: “That’s the whole burden of this novel—the loss of those illusions that give such color to the world so that you don’t care whether things are true or false as long as they partake of the magical glory.” Gatsby does not accept the process of time. His most memorable statement is: “‘Can’t repeat the past?’ he cried incredulously. ‘Why of course you can!’ ” Ultimately the novel is about American history, compounding the time theme and the aspiration theme. *The Great Gatsby* closes with Nick’s eloquent broodings on the unfulfilled potentialities of the new world—“for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent . . . face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder.”

F. Scott Fitzgerald died in 1940 fearing that he was a failure, forgotten. *The Great Gatsby* led the Fitzgerald rediscovery and restoration of 1945–50 because it is a miracle—though not his only miracle. Literary miracles are the

work of writers who come closer than other writers to expressing what is in their minds through innate genius augmented by control, technique, craft.

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# The Great Gatsby

Then wear the gold hat, if that will move her;  
If you can bounce high, bounce for her too,  
Till she cry "Lover, gold-hatted, high-bouncing lover,  
I must have you!"

—THOMAS PARKE D'INVILLIERS

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