Gatsby and Revolutionary Road

In the 1920s Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby exposed the harsh realities behind the 'American Dream'; 30 years later Yates' Revolutionary Road returned to the same themes. Rob Worrall draws out the similarities.

The Great Gatsby (1926) and Revolutionary Road (1961), although separated by at least a generation, are two American novels that share a common cause. Richard Yates was a great admirer of Fitzgerald and it is unsurprising to find Kurt Vonnegut describing the younger writer's novel as 'The Great Gatsby of my time.' By this, Vonnegut is not implying that Yates is pastiche Fitzgerald; rather that the two novels share certain vital characteristics in their poetically expressed, but powerfully evoked, critiques of their own particular eras.

Dreamers in Gatsby

The story of Jay Gatsby and his passion for Daisy Buchanan is well-known; less read (in Britain, at least until recently) is Revolutionary Road, a novel set in the mid-winter to late-summer of 1955 and tracing the desperate, dying months of the mismatched marriage of Frank and April Wheeler. Living, as they do, in the New York suburbia of 'Revolutionary Road', their lives intersect with two other families (each of which has its own particular domestic difficulties), the tedium of nine-to-five office work and the contrasts that exist between the world in which they grew up and that in which they now live. Common to all six major protagonists in Revolutionary Road (and, of course, to Gatsby, Daisy, Nick Carraway, the Wilsons - even to Tom Buchanan and Jordan Baker) is the painful collision between their dreams and the actuality of their lives. Like the much-vaunted 'American Dream' itself, constant disappointment is experienced and yet hope is constantly renewed. 'You can't repeat the past' ventures Nick to Gatsby; 'Can't repeat the past?' he cried incredulously. 'Why of course you can!' Gatsby's riposte of denial captures all that is wonderful ('great') about the dreamer - and all that is doomed to disappointment and destruction.

Daisy dreams but not as vividly as Gatsby. For her, despite the air of romance and magic associated with her maiden name (Fay), the magnetic pull of reality remains a strong attraction. This explains her decision to marry the rich 'preppy jock', Tom Buchanan, rather than to wait for the dashing, but poor, young Major she had kissed in the summer moonlight. The Buchanans' ability to return to the actual, whenever they have permitted themselves a brief flight into fancy, is what preserves them in the commercial, go-getting world of twentieth/twenty-first century America. Gatsby's (and, to some extent, Nick's) inability to follow suit is what endangers the latter and destroys the former.

Myrtle Wilson dreams of escaping from the dirty, humdrum existence of her marriage and of her husband's working environment. She seeks a more elegant lifestyle; an ugly death is what she finds. As the bystanders view her body in the road, they see that '...her left breast was swinging loose like a flap...'. George Wilson dreams of starting life anew, 'out West', like his pioneering forefathers; derangement, leading to murder and thence to suicide is the only journey he undertakes. Nick travels to the East because he dreams of a lucrative and successful city life, unavailable to him in his native Mid-West. By the end of the novel, we find him reversing his journey, recognising that his '...provincial squeamishness...' does not equip him to fulfil his dream, that he is '...subtly unadapted to Eastern life.' It is, of course, Gatsby who dreams the most vividly (and who comes closest to transforming his dream into reality. The closer he comes, however, the more painful is his failure.). How ironic it is that, at the very moment Daisy slips her arm through his, suggesting emotional reclamation, the mystical green light at the end of her dock ceases to be anything more special than a light, coloured green - 'His count of enchanted objects had diminished by one.'

Gatsby's gorgeous (though fake) 'Hôtel de Ville' on West Egg is but a short distance from the ugly (but real) Valley of Ashes, dominated by the unhinged and faded hoarding, advertising the '...wild wag of an occulist', T.J. Eckleberg. (Advertising itself, of course, is a form of dreaming; a means of promising so much which so often falls short of expectations.) This physical contiguity acts, like so much else in this book, as a symbol of what The Observer journalist Ed Vulliamy wrote about America in 2003:

*America was always a dichotomous, Janus nation*

From its founding, it has been a nation in which philosophical idealism has walked hand-in-hand with grasping opportunism.
Gatsby dies and is buried in the presence of a pitifully small group of mourners. The Jazz Age gives way to The Depression; speak-easy junketing is transformed into suicidal leaps, following the Wall Street Crash. Then comes the Second World War, victory, the 1950s and the election of President 'Ike' Eisenhower. Suddenly, we find ourselves in the world of Revolutionary Road. Although nearly thirty years have passed in terms of 'the state of the nation', we find ourselves still in the dream-world outlined above.

Dream worlds in Revolutionary Road

The Wheelers dream of liberation from the stultification of parochial suburbia; Shep Campbell dreams of a passionate affair with April Wheeler, whilst his limited wife, Milly, dreams that hers is a far more exciting and significant life than, in fact, it is. Helen Givings, the mother of a young man so mentally disturbed that he has to be institutionalised, dreams that her son's occasional Sunday visits to the Wheelers will transform a scene of appalling domestic tension and violence into a game of 'happy families'.

*At twilight one evening, taking a stroll to calm her nerves in the blue depths of her back lawn, she had found it peopled in her mind's eye with a family gathering.*

Summer hats and sunny smiles are then evoked. To this generalised picture a particular detail is added:

*Across from them, standing and leaning slightly forward with a glass in his hand, Frank Wheeler was engaged in one of his earnest conversations with John [the son], who was reclining in dignified convalescence on a white wrought-iron chaise longue.*

The influence of Fitzgerald is clear, yet Yates makes this his own Arcadian vision, using lilting rhythms and enchanting atmosphere, positioning his characters in poses of relaxed languor and selecting the moment at which Helen forms this dream-picture with perfection - 'At twilight...'

Just as Helen '...people[s] in her mind's eye... a family gathering', so too do Frank and April trick themselves into believing that they are genuinely interested in each other; Shep and Milly 'spin' a life for themselves, whilst Frank invents a worthwhile facet to his humdrum job with the faceless, soulless 'big organisation' that had sapped the spirit from his own father, a working generation before.

Yates makes brutally clear what he believes dreams to be: they are lies; they mislead us; they inflate us - and then they let us burst.

Towards the crisis within the Wheelers' marriage Frank retires to bed, drunk and alone, following a massive domestic fight. During the course of the night he becomes convinced that April has come to the marital bed, in order to re-assure him that he remains, for her, '...the most interesting person [she] know[s].' When he wakes up in the morning, he cannot decide whether this happened or if it was a dream. What Frank fails to understand but Yates makes abundantly clear is that it makes no difference.

Close connections

The old island '...that flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes - a fresh, green breast of the new world.' is not that dissimilar to 'Revolutionary Road', the attractive backwater off the busy Route 12, which carries the promise of so much: peace, a fresh start, liberal ideals, a great adventure. Both worlds are enticing; both offer so much hope but, ultimately, both worlds are dreams spun by the children of the 1776 Declaration of Independence - and by their inheritors. In Gatsby, the Dutch sailor's idyll is transmuted into the Valley of Ashes; love affairs become drunken brawls, during which brutal slaps break noses. A lust for life results in a solitary death. In Revolutionary Road, the new, neat, 'charming' little houses become centres of ennui, bitter tears and, eventually, suicide. How apt that the amateur dramatic society, formed to inject interest into the lives of those who live in this suburb, should choose The Petrified Forest as their first production. It is a play that resonates with desperate desires that are unfulfilled.

Both Scott Fitzgerald and Richard Yates led outwardly glamorous, successful lives that were blighted by the cancers of the modern world: unhappy marriages, alcoholism, a blaze of fame followed by the darkness of rejection. Like their fictive children, they could dream but, like them, they had to learn that dreams are, mostly, latent disappointments.

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Gatsby’s women

Ian and Michelle McMechan consider Fitzgerald's representation of the women characters in The Great Gatsby.

Besides the timeless ending for which it is so well known, there is much else to admire in F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby, first published in 1925. In The Great American Novel, Philip Roth has a fictionalised Ernest Hemingway describe his contemporary as 'our minor poet Francis Scott Fitzwhat'shisname' and one of the primary attractions of Gatsby is the lyrical quality of its prose, so well exemplified in the final paragraphs of the story. In recent years, however, a wealth of discussion has focused on 'politicised' readings of the text, as opposed to more conventional concerns with its style. Marxists have considered the notion of ownership, for instance; Freudians have pondered the nature of narrator Nick Carraway's attraction to Gatsby and feminists such as Judith Fetterley have examined the ways in which the narrative might be considered misogynist. The issue of whether or not the book hates women is an interesting one - certainly there is a lot to be made of how Fitzgerald deals with gender as events unfold.

Starting with names

The naming of the three main female characters, Daisy Buchanan, Jordan Baker and Myrtle Wilson, is a good starting point in a discussion of how they are represented. Daisy's maiden name is Fay, which comes from Middle English faie. Used as a common noun it means fairy. Daisy's lack of substance (at least from a moral point of view), her flightiness and her beauty are key elements in her depiction. Further, a daisy blossoms between June and August. The name is a compound of the Old English words daeges eage, meaning 'day's eye' (because the petals open at dawn and close at dusk) and a daisy's colours are obviously yellow and white, two key components in the novel's chromatic palette. The impressions generated by Daisy Fay's name are of sunshine, transience and vague unreality.

The name of Daisy's friend Jordan Baker, although seemingly non-gender specific, is probably a reference to cars made by 'Jordan' between 1916 -1932 - models with names like 'Roadster' and 'Playboy' hinting at sexual freedom and playfulness. This allusion suggests the character's independent nature and hints at her potential for causing accidents (developing one of the central motifs in the novel: the destructive potency of the car). In one scene, Nick is critical of Jordan's lack of awareness of other drivers and her egocentrism, to which she replies: 'they'll keep out of my way...it takes two to make an accident'. Early on in the narrative, Daisy's husband Tom (with a typical lack of irony) observes of Jordan's family that 'they oughtn't to let her run around the country this way' and despite her protestations that she is a 'good girl' Jordan is not an angel. Ultimately her apparent lack of care for others might make us grow to distrust her at least.

The third woman, Myrtle Wilson, has a name which like Daisy's, links to botany - a myrtle is a common, evergreen, bushy shrub. The word is a variant of myrrh, the root meaning of which is 'bitter' and it is difficult to distinguish at times whether the sourness with which she is characterised comes from Nick, her lover Tom Buchanan (whose attitude towards her is contemptuous, as demonstrated when he breaks her nose) or Fitzgerald himself.

Introducing Daisy

The reader's introduction to Daisy makes her seem like a Jazz Age fairy tale princess - the sort of fabulous female to whom we imagine the book's epigram refers. The house to which the Buchanans have 'drifted' is even more elaborate than (Nick) expected...The front...broken by a line of French windows, glowing now with reflected gold and wide open to the warm windy afternoon. Tom leads Nick into:

*a bright rosy-colored space...A breeze blew through the room, blew curtains in at one end and out the other like pale flags, twisting them up toward the frosted wedding-cake of the ceiling.*

On an 'enormous couch', two women recline - Daisy and Jordan. Nick wryly observes that they:

*were buoyed up as though upon an anchored balloon. They were both in white, and their dresses were rippling and fluttering as if they had just been blown back in after a short flight around the house.*

The breathy laugh with which Daisy greets Nick is as inconsequential as the atmosphere in the Buchanans' mansion; her words of welcome to her 'second cousin once removed' appear insincere: 'I'm p-paralyzed with happiness.'

Daisy's 'low, thrilling voice' is compelling, however:

*It was the kind of voice that the ear follows up and down, as if each speech is an arrangement of notes that will never be played again...there was an excitement in (it) that men who had cared for her found difficult to forget: a singing compulsion, a whispered 'Listen.'*

The hint of sexual appeal is clear enough, though the attraction here is more that of a flirtation - an idea which continues in the following dialogue between the cousins (who are sufficiently distant not to make the suggestion improper). Daisy's hazy connection with sexuality is confirmed by her 'irrelevantly' referring to her three-year-old child, who Nick has never previously seen. When we eventually meet 'Pammy' in a key moment in Chapter Seven, it seems that she is just another of Daisy's innumerable possessions, something for her to 'show off' when guests call:

*- a freshly laundered nurse leading a little girl came into the room.
'Bles-sed pre-cious,' [Daisy] crooned, holding out her arms. 'Come to your own mother that loves you.'
The child, relinquished by the nurse, rushed across the room and rooted shyly into her mother's dress.
'The Bles-sed pre-cious! Did mother get powder on your old yellowy hair? Stand up now, and say-How-de-do...You dream, you. You absolute little dream.'...Daisy sat back upon the couch. The nurse took a step forward and held out her hand.
'Come, Pammy.'
'Good-by, sweetheart!'
With a reluctant backward glance the well-disciplined child held on to her nurse's hand and was pulled out the door.*

This trophy daughter, on display for a matter of moments, is the tangible consequence of the Buchanans' unhappy marriage. Daisy's attitude towards motherhood, which might at best be termed indifferent, may be a reaction to Tom's philandering and her lack of love for her husband. Whatever its wellspring, it does not induce great sympathy for her.

Jordan's masculine control

If Daisy embodies one kind of female sensuality Jordan represents an altogether different type of woman - one with more 'masculine' qualities. She arrives in the novel as striking, single, self-sufficient, and well-heeled, sharing Daisy's status as a 'Silver idol'. Jordan seems untouchable and tantalizing but despite her many advantages, she is 'discontented'. Her indolence is made patent:

*'we ought to plan something' yawned Miss Baker...*

Nick's initial description of Jordan reflects an emptiness or sterility - she is 'cool...white...impersonal' and betrays an 'absence of all desire...'

Later when Jordan is 'summoned' to speak to Gatsby it is the 'jauntiness' in her movements and the way in which she '(wears) her evening dress...like sports clothes' which attracts Nick to her. '(M)asculine' personal qualities such as her self assurance and emotional containment lead the critic Frances Kerr to observe 'No other woman in the novel has such control'. It is Jordan's desire both to observe and be at the heart of events without having to commit any substantial emotional resource which might be seen as a fatal flaw in her character - that and the fact that she is 'incurably dishonest'.

A deep-seated competitive urge has caused her to be ruthless and uncompromising - Nick explains:

*She wasn't able to endure being at a disadvantage.*

A feminist reading might, for example, applaud the fact that she has reached the peak of sporting achievement by becoming a golf champion (golf, after all has traditionally been the preserve of the upper-middle-class male) but then recoil when it is revealed that she has a reputation (possibly undeserved) for cheating:

*she had moved her ball from a bad lie in the semi-final round...a caddy retracted his statement, and the only other witness admitted he might have been mistaken.*

Not exactly a role model for women, then.

Myrtle's raw appeal

Where Daisy is all light and air and Jordan only slightly more grounded, the working class Myrtle Wilson is dust and dirt. The tones in which Fitzgerald draws her are mainly grey and brown and she hails from a 'valley of ashes'. Myrtle's appeal, in contrast to Dasiy's, is raw and earthy: 'She had changed her dress to a brown figured muslin, which stretched tight over her rather wide hips' as Nick notes on first meeting her. Her 'intense vitality' expands in Tom's presence until 'she seem(s) to be revolving on a noisy creaking pivot through the smoky air.' Myrtle appears as some form of marionette in fact - a grotesque fairground-attraction doll.

Myrtle's final moment is one of the most memorable scenes in the narrative. Struck by the car carrying Daisy and Gatsby back from their unhappy visit to New York with Nick, Jordan and Tom, her life 'violently extinguished (she) knelt in the road and mingled her thick dark blood with the dust.' In death, Myrtle is made to embody the ebbing vigour of the 1920s, her:

*left breast was swinging loose like a flap...(her) mouth...wide open and ripped a little at the corners, as though she had choked a little in giving up the tremendous vitality she had stored so long.*

Sympathy is certainly generated here, but the element of detachment with which events are reported might suggest that it is the consequences of her death rather than any real feeling for her character in which Fitzgerald has the largest stake.

Myrtle is the victim of the 'apocalypse' which eventually leads to Gatsby's murder at the hands of her grieving husband (though Daisy was of course driving the car which killed her). Her negligence at the wheel - for which Gatsby assumes the blame and suffers the consequences - with all the substantial irony that entails - is the distillation of her general carelessness. That she runs away in the aftermath, leaving her lover isolated and desolate, is not likely to make us feel any more positive towards her.

Owning Daisy

Much of Fitzgerald's success in The Great Gatsby derives not from the sentimentality which surrounds his hero, but from the skill with which he depicts Daisy - in a set of largely unpleasant people, her surface qualities distinguish her. Unfortunately, the hollowness of her soul creates a vacuum into which Gatsby is sucked and in which he is finally destroyed. Fetterley argues that in the book 'ownership of women is invoked as the index of power: he who possesses Daisy Fay is the most powerful boy', that, in fact, she is no more than the prize over which Tom and Gatsby fight. The critic sees the hero's fate very much as his own doing - her sweeping assertion is, indeed, that 'American literature is male' and that 'The major works of American fiction constitute a series of designs on the female reader...' Whether or not we agree with her or her view that 'the drama of The Great Gatsby involves an attack on Daisy,' is entirely up to us; what is true is that Fitzgerald's portrayal of women is by no means straightforward.

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Print

# Narrative structure and voice in The Great Gatsby - Nicolas Tredell

Nicolas Tredell author of a Continuum Reader's Guide to The Great Gatsby, explores the tantalising way in which Fitzgerald withholds and releases information and misinformation about his protagonist, making the process of reading a constant process of discovery and re-discovery.

When The Great Gatsby is summarized, it can seem like an improbable fiction, with its coincidences, mistaken identities, and violent deaths. But most readers find the novel convincing from its reflective first sentence to its visionary finale, when the story of Gatsby's Romantic dream aspires to become the story of the USA itself. Many elements contribute to this remarkable achievement, but two intimately interrelated aspects are crucial: its narrative structure and narrative voice.

## Getting to know Gatsby

The key feature of the narrative structure of Gatsby is the fragmentary, sporadic, and sometimes non-chronological way in which it releases information (and misinformation) about its title character, so that we get to know him piecemeal, as we might get to know a real person. This information comes in a variety of forms: Nick's summative judgements on Gatsby, especially near the start and end of the novel, when he affirms Gatsby's superiority to those around him; his vivid sensory impressions of the man, his mansion, his parties and his car; his evocations of Gatsby's consciousness at crucial moments, for example when Gatsby shows Daisy round his mansion for the first time, and when she does not phone on the last afternoon of his life; the rumours and myths that circulate about him; Jordan Baker's memories of his courtship of Daisy in Louisville in 1917 and its aftermath; Tom Buchanan's allegations about his criminal activities; Meyer Wolfshiem's recollection of him as an impoverished ex-soldier; and Gatsby's own extended accounts of his earlier life, which are mostly modulated through Nick's voice rather than given in direct speech.

## An example: Chapter Four

As an example of this fragmentary release of information, we can focus on chapter four, in which Gatsby becomes truly alive to Nick for the first time. The second paragraph of the chapter recounts more of the rumours and myths which circulate about Gatsby: for example, that he once killed a man who discovered that he was a nephew of Paul von Hindenburg (a First World War German field marshal). These rumours are followed by what Nick presents as hard documentary evidence, the famous roll-call of Gatsby's guests in the summer of 1922 written 'on the empty spaces of a time-table', which vividly conveys the energetic, mobile, sometimes disreputable milieu in which Gatsby has risen to prominence. Nick then evokes his closest encounter with Gatsby so far, when Gatsby drives him to lunch in New York in his 'gorgeous car' and announces that he will tell him 'God's truth' about his life. But his cliché-ridden account of living 'like a young rajah in all the capitals of Europe', 'trying to forget something very sad that had happened to [him] long ago', and becoming a war hero, fails to convince Nick, who is nonetheless fascinated: 'it was like skimming hastily through a dozen magazines'. But his incredulity is challenged when Gatsby shows him a medal from Montenegro which looks authentic and a photograph of himself in what could be an Oxford setting. Moreover, Gatsby intimates that a 'sad thing' really did happen to him and that Jordan Baker will tell Nick more about it over afternoon tea.

As Gatsby nears the city, his car is stopped by a motorcycle policeman who quickly apologizes and lets him drive on when Gatsby shows him a Christmas card he has received from the police commissioner. This sign of his connection with the forces of law and order is complemented by the living proof of his 'gonnegtion' with organized crime in the shape of Meyer Wolfshiem, 'the man who fixed the World's Series back in 1919', whom Nick meets when Gatsby takes him to a Forty-second Street restaurant for lunch. After Wolfshiem leaves, Tom Buchanan comes into the restaurant, apparently by chance, and Nick introduces him to Gatsby. But Gatsby disappears almost immediately - an instance of a recurrent pattern in the novel in which he comes close to Nick and to the reader but quickly recedes or vanishes.

In the next scene, Jordan Baker, over tea at the Plaza Hotel, provides an extended flashback to a day in October 1917 when she saw Gatsby and Daisy together for the first time, and then relates some of the subsequent history of the relationship between Gatsby and Daisy which culminated in Daisy's marriage to Tom. Afterwards, Nick remarks on the 'strange coincidence' of Gatsby buying a house opposite Daisy's, but Jordan sets him right:

*it wasn't a coincidence at all [...] Gatsby bought that house so that Daisy would be just across the bay*

For Nick this is an immensely significant moment:

*He came alive to me, delivered suddenly from the womb of his purposeless splendour.*

## Reading as discovery

Chapter Four exemplifies the strategic withholding and release of information and misinformation about Gatsby, the rhythm of tantalizing distance and sudden closeness, which operates throughout the narrative. By the end of the novel, we have learnt a lot about Gatsby, and it is possible to construct a chronological summary or chart of his life, though many gaps and enigmas remain. But if the novel itself had employed a straightforward chronological structure, it would have been a different book. The structure that we have involves us in a process of discovery in which we piece together Gatsby's life and character from the fragments which are released to us. Even on repeated re-readings of the novel, the fascination of the discovery process persists, and fresh facets and configurations can always emerge. This is one of the reasons why, as the leading Fitzgerald scholar and biographer Matthew J. Bruccoli once remarked, 'The Great Gatsby is inexhaustible'.

## Listening to Nick

It is Nick Carraway's voice - his first-person narrative discourse - which binds Gatsby's fragments into a coherent and convincing tale. Twenty-first-century ears will undoubtedly hear race, class and gender prejudices in that voice and may also catch whispers of desire to which Nick turns a deaf ear; but these make his voice more plausible, persuading us that we are - or might be - listening to a real person speaking from a real time and place. Nick's voice, moreover, is complex, encompassing a range of tones: for example, a romantic, imaginative tone which can identify with Gatsby's romantic aspirations and disappointments and evoke them in lyrical or bleak prose; a sceptical tone which doubts the sincerity of fashionable poses, such as Daisy's assertion of bored sophistication; and a censorious tone which expresses the desire that the world should be 'in uniform and at a sort of moral attention forever' after the Gatsby débâcle. These tones contribute to the movement between identification and detachment epitomized in Nick's description of himself as:

*within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life.*

## Trauma and transformation

Nick's capacity for detachment, the poise and urbanity which he maintains whatever tone he adopts, should not muffle the deep trauma which resonates in his voice. The 'foul dust' which 'floated in the wake of [Gatsby's] dreams' has 'temporarily closed out [his] interest in the abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men'; West Egg 'still figures in [his] more fantastic dreams' in a surreal, nightmarish way; Gatsby's death leaves the East 'haunted for [him], distorted beyond [his] eyes' power of correction'. Voicing the tale of his encounter with Gatsby is a way of working through this trauma, which will never be wholly healed and which will undergo a transformation, in the great final passage of the novel, from a personal to a national wound, when Nick's voice becomes the voice of the bard who speaks for the tribe, for the descendents of the original settlers who came 'face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to [man's] capacity for wonder' and whose dream foundered on the rock of reality.

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# From Green Light to Green World – An Ecocritical Reading of The Great Gatsby

Professor Nicolas Tredell offers an ecocritical reading of a novel more readily associated with the city, materialism and modernity than nature.

The Great Gatsby may seem like a classic example of the modern urban novel, in which green is above all the colour, not of nature, but of the artificial light that shines at the end of Daisy’s dock, and where the city, not the country, is the place of possibility and satisfaction. But the Valley of Ashes in the novel provides a quintessential image of environmental devastation, and Gatsby often refers to nature, for example in its correlation between the progress of the action and the rhythm of the seasons (from spring through summer to autumn) and its sense of the presence of the elements of water (Gatsby’s house is on the edge of the sea) and fire (the heat seems to threaten at one point to ignite the straw-stuffed seats of Nick’s train).

Gatsby does not, however, offer a simple opposition between the natural (seen as inherently good) and the artificial (seen as largely bad). Rather, Fitzgerald’s novel registers how nature, culture, and technology, and human and non-human life forms, are intermixed in society. It thereby offers a more complex ecological perspective that accords with much modern ecocriticism, which has broadened its scope from a focus on ‘nature’ poetry and prose to encompass the portrayal of ecological relationships in all literary texts, including those with a largely urban setting and those written before the emergence of a modern ecological consciousness.

This article offers an ecocritical interpretation of The Great Gatsby that aims to shed fresh light on a much-discussed novel and also to provide an example of ecocritical practice that could be applied, with appropriate modifications, to other literary texts. We examine three ecocritical aspects of The Great Gatsby: its use of a modified form of ‘the green world’; its concern with the interaction of nature and technology; and its representations of animals and other non-human life-forms.

## The Green World

An image of the green world occurs near the end of The Great Gatsby, when Nick, physically close to nature as he lies on the beach at the sea’s edge, envisions

*the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors’ eyes – a fresh, green breast of the new world.*

Here is a vision of nature as unspoilt and maternal, new and nurturing. But it also seems irretrievably in the past, and necessarily brief. Human beings, exemplified here by the early Dutch settlers, may pause momentarily to contemplate, rather than appropriate, their environment, but will quickly start to alter it, sometimes rapaciously – a process summarised in Nick’s reference to the island’s ‘vanished trees, the trees that made way for Gatsby’s house’.

Insofar as the green world persists in the present time of The Great Gatsby, it does so in lawns and golf courses, cultivated remnants of the original ‘fresh, green breast’ that has been appropriated and divided. Nick leaves a Middle West of wide lawns and rents a bungalow where his lawn is unkempt compared to Gatsby’s. Gatsby’s own lawn becomes less a natural space than an open-air theatre where people act out their fantasies and desires and it is only after his death that the grass grows again, becoming almost as long as Nick’s. But a cultivated lawn may still retain a natural energy, as in this description on Nick’s first visit to Tom’s house:

*The lawn started at the beach and ran toward the front door for a quarter of a mile, jumping over sun-dials and brick walks and burning gardens – finally when it reached the house drifting up the side in bright vines as though from the momentum of its run.*

There is an ironic contrast here with Tom himself, who might once have moved powerfully on a football field, but whose natural energies are now blocked.

The active sportsperson in The Great Gatsby is Jordan Baker, not Tom, and while the novel never directly shows the green golf courses on which she plays, they figure as places of defeat and corruption – where Jordan loses in the finals and where she allegedly moved her ball from a bad lie – and of freshness, if at a distance: Jordan’s voice usually

*came over the wire as something fresh and cool as if a divot from a green golf links had come sailing in at the office window.*

Here the telephone mediates Nick’s contact with the green world of the golf course – one of several examples in The Great Gatsby of the interaction of nature and technology.

## Nature and Technology

The Great Gatsby shows that nature and technology are more deeply interfused than ever before in the twentieth century. For example, time-lapse photography, which compresses a natural process taking several days or weeks into a few seconds or minutes, creates a new awareness of nature that enhances our perceptions of its processes – as when Nick observes

*the great bursts of leaves growing on the trees – just as things grow in fast movies.*

Gatsby’s car, a triumph of modern engineering, is exalted by its connections to nature through its multiple reflections of solar power –

*terraced with a labyrinth of wind-shields that mirrored a dozen suns*

– and through the resemblance of its interior to a glass house for the cultivation of delicate plants – ‘a sort of green leather conservatory’.

Much of the spectacle Gatsby creates implies the power of money and artifice to control nature. Nick jocularly alludes to this when, describing his first visit to a Gatsby party, he refers to the

*premature moon, produced like the supper, no doubt, out of a caterer’s basket.*

But this is a joke; Gatsby’s control does not extend so far: and the vulnerability of technology and money to natural forces is demonstrated at the start of Chapter 5 when Nick returns home to see all the lights ablaze in Gatsby’s house but subject to the

*wind in the trees which blew the wires and made the lights go off and on again.*

Human beings share the world with powerful elemental forces which they cannot wholly control; they also share the world with animals and other forms of non-human life.

## Animals

In Chapter 4, Gatsby claims to have hunted big game, and Nick, while sceptical of Gatsby’s stories, is sufficiently impressed to imagine ‘the skins of tigers flaming in his palace on the Grand Canal’. But it is a more domestic exploitation of animals that features in the novel, focused in the dog that Myrtle buys in Chapter 2. The dog, which never gets a name, is a commodity; the resemblance of its seller to the oil tycoon John D. Rockefeller is both a joke, contrasting the dog seller’s poverty with the tycoon’s wealth, and a reminder that the dog is a source of profit, even if the markup may be less than Tom brusquely suggests when he pays the seller ten dollars and tells him ‘Go and buy ten more dogs with it’. For Myrtle, the dog is a fashionable accoutrement, an extension of the dresses she wears and her tapestry furniture. Although she is initially concerned with it to the extent of sending an elevator boy for a box full of straw and some dog biscuits, she quickly forgets about it. As the drunken afternoon continues, Nick observes that the

*little dog was sitting on the table looking with blind eyes through the smoke and from time to time groaning faintly.*

Here, neglect shades over into cruelty, and there is a continuum between Myrtle’s indifference to the dog and Tom’s brutality to Myrtle; both are bought commodities subject to their owner’s whim. When, on buying the dog, Tom settles the question of its gender by coarsely declaring ‘It’s a bitch’, we feel he might sometimes speak of Myrtle in the same way.

## Gatsby’s Menagerie

Animal life also enters into The Great Gatsby through the guest-list in Chapter 4. When Tom, at a Gatsby party, calls it, defensively and derisively, ‘this menagerie’, the guest-list names show that this noun – meaning ‘a collection of wild animals kept in captivity for exhibition’ – fits the bill to some extent, although the definition needs to be extended for Gatsby’s menagerie since it includes, not only mammals, but also plants, trees and fish.
We have, for example, Bull; Blackbuck (a small Indian gazelle); Civet (a wild cat with glands that yield a strong scent); Klipspringer (a rock-dwelling antelope); Roebuck (a male roe deer); Beluga (a white-toothed whale); Hammerhead (a kind of shark); Hornbeam (a deciduous tree of hard, pale wood) and Duckweed (an aquatic flowering plant). Through such names, the world of non-human life permeates Gatsby’s parties. Some of the names are of animal predators and thus reinforce a view of non-human life as aggressive and ruthless – what Lord Tennyson called in his poem In Memoriam (1850) ‘Nature red in tooth and claw’. But beyond this the names convey the pulsing variety, energy and creativity of the non-human world, and the way in which, like the green world and like natural forces such as sun and wind, it interacts with human society in a shared ecosphere. The task of ecocriticism is the analysis of the multifarious representations of such interactions in literary texts.

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# Highways and Low Roads – The Automobile Motif in The Great Gatsby

Rose Page gets behind the wheel, taking one of Fitzgerald’s key motifs for a drive as well as looking under the bonnet to see how it works as part of his narrative machine.

You don’t even have to open some editions of Fitzgerald’s novel to be confronted by Gatsby’s gleaming Rolls-Royce; its headlights beam out at you from the front cover while its shimmering contours give the reader a glimpse of the luxury and excess within the book’s pages. The protagonist’s car forms a kind of frontispiece to the text, both a positive emblem of elegance and progress and a sinister portent of death. We can see the car as a setting in itself – as much a place where the action occurs as the Buchanan mansion or the hotels of Manhattan.

Crucially, the interior of a car is a strangely liminal zone. It is a place which is at once intensely public and exposed to any number of passers-by (just think of all those witnesses in the final, fatal smash) and yet simultaneously offers an illusion of privacy, a privileged sense of being able to see out while safe, concealed, even superior inside. Much like Nick as narrator, the novel’s drivers consequently put themselves in a position that is simultaneously powerful and vulnerable. Doubtless, the automobile is a highly ambiguous symbol, but let’s tackle three possible readings; the car as a touchstone of character, as a social marker and as an emblem of destruction.

## A Touchstone of Character

The automobile frames many of Nick’s interactions with Gatsby. Indeed, it is Gatsby’s chauffeur who first invites him to a party, while their first time spent alone together occurs in the hot leather seats of Gatsby’s car. It is in this moment, four chapters into the novel, that we are first treated to an extended description of the vehicle.

*I’d seen it. Everybody had seen it. It was a rich cream colour … swollen here and there in its monstrous length with triumphant hat-boxes and supper-boxes and tool-boxes, and terraced with a labyrinth of wind-shields that mirrored a dozen suns.*

From the outset then, the car is heavy with symbolism. Like its owner, its reputation precedes it; it is as much an object of gossip as Gatsby himself. It is replete with the insignia of success: boxes filled with clothing, food and (in a nod to the notion of constructing one’s own future) building materials. A portable microcosm of the luxury his party guests have come to expect, it verges on the excessive. ‘Swollen’ bears not only connotations of sickness and intemperance, but also implies something on the verge of bursting. It is not the only word with sinister undertones; the ‘monstrous’ size and ‘labyrinth’ of wind-shields both suggest that, if we instead read the car an extension of its owner, our growing impression of Gatsby is not a wholly positive one. Readers may begin to question what cheap conjuring trick is being attempted upon them by the narrator, as we see Gatsby and his car through a profusion of light and mirrors.

However, it is not only Gatsby who can be intimately linked to his motor vehicle. The narrator, Nick Carraway, talks persistently in automotive metaphor. He even describes himself in mechanical terms, as ‘full of interior rules that act as brakes on my desires’. By thus reducing both himself and Gatsby to automatons, he may be commenting on the rigidity of social expectation at the time. Alternatively, we may read this line as a counterpoint to his description of Jordan as a ‘rotten driver’. Unlike those he observes, he alleges he has a restraint – ‘brakes’ – that he cannot credit in others. In particular, Fitzgerald depicts women and cars as a fated combination: Jordan Baker (ironically named after both the Jordan Motor Car Company and the Baker motor vehicle) drives perilously, while Daisy and Myrtle are reduced to murderer and road-kill, respectively. But why use the symbol of the automobile so extensively? Simply put, the car becomes synonymous with its owner. The way you drive echoes the way you live; the decisions you make on the road are indicative of your very nature. By the end of the novel, the metaphor is literalised – it is the car smash in the Valley of Ashes that provides the ultimate test of character for all those involved.

## A Social Marker

We may argue that the text is all about motion and momentum. It deals with movement from one place to another, either literally, as characters restlessly speed between Manhattan and their respective homes, or metaphorically, as Gatsby (and, indeed, Nick) attempt to move ‘up in the world’. Perhaps, then, we can see a parallel between Gatsby’s upward social mobility and the persistent forward motion of the automobile. Still, to complicate matters, Fitzgerald reminds us constantly of the security and comfort of the past. Nick laments leaving behind his rose-tinted memories of the Mid-West. Gatsby idealises his early encounters with Daisy. Regardless of whether these perfect pasts are illusory, they are painted as preferable to the ‘portentous, menacing road of a new decade’, framed again in the language of the automobile. David Laird calls Gatsby’s Rolls-Royce a ‘poetic space’, the means by which Gatsby intends to ‘transcend the mundane traffic of the world’. Yet in this sense, the car is an equivocal symbol. While automobiles allow for progress, they also seem to exacerbate social divisions in the novel. In one notable instance, the road becomes a zone of racial exclusivity. When Nick spots a limo driven by a white driver with black passengers, aside from taking this as illustrative of the fact anything is possible in the new age, his language reeks of white supremacy.

*Three modish Negroes, two bucks and a girl…I laughed aloud as the yolks of their eyeballs rolled toward us in haughty rivalry.*

His contemptuous – or incredulous – laughter is damning, especially alongside the dehumanising epitaph of ‘bucks’. Progress, it seems, comes at a moral cost.

## The Death Car

Another symbolic value we may attribute to Fitzgerald’s automobiles is their association with death and destruction. Death haunts the roads, even far beyond the funereal Valley of Ashes. As a faltering joke, Nick tells Daisy that all her friends in Chicago miss her so much their cars have ‘the left rear wheel painted black as a mourning wreath’. Strangely, upon passing a funeral on the way into Manhattan, Nick also comments that he

*was glad that the sight of Gatsby’s splendid car was included in their sombre holiday.*

As enraptured as the characters are by the romance of the automobile, we readers must surely question Nick’s proclamation here, not least in his strange, jarringly juxtaposed euphemism for death as ‘sombre holiday’, but also in his assertion that the mere sight of the vehicle can somehow compensate for the awareness of mortality that accompanies it.

Moreover, a disproportionate number of car accidents seem to occur around Gatsby and his parties, ominously foreshadowing the final smash. Some are darkly humorous and referred to only in passing – a drunk lay on the driveway and ‘Mrs Ulysses Sett’s automobile ran over his right hand’. Others, while initially amusing, have a more sinister undertone. A somewhat incapacitated man at the first party Nick attends drives into a ditch and is reprimanded by an unimpressed crowd. An onlooker declares that, ‘if you’re a poor driver you oughtn’t to try driving at night’ and (with surprisingly good comic timing for a drunk) he retorts ‘but I wasn’t even trying’. Thus, we return to the central premise – that the novel’s proliferation of cars mirrors its proliferation of the cruel or intoxicated or irreverent young upstarts who drive them. Ultimately, perhaps the car can be seen as a kind of grim reaper; in cahoots with its careless drivers, it hoovers up the vulnerable and leaves a trail of destruction in its wake.

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# The Wizard of West Egg – Sources and Symbolism in The Great Gatsby

Keats and the Romantic poets are often quoted as inspirations for Fitzgerald’s iconic novel, along with American novelists, Edith Wharton and Willa Cather. Simon Mold explores a few other influences, including The Wizard of Oz and TS Eliot’s The Waste Land.

## The Wizard of Oz

Two idiosyncratic influences upon The Great Gatsby appeared in the later 19th century: Lewis Carroll’s Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland (1865), which then in turn provided a template for Lyman Frank Baum’s The Wonderful Wizard of Oz (1900 in book form). The strange tale of a little girl meeting grotesque creatures down a rabbit hole or, in the sequel, through a looking-glass provided a model for Baum, whose resourceful heroine Dorothy was clearly inspired by Alice. Baum’s story originally appeared as a serial in St Nicholas Magazine for young people, which is where the young Fitzgerald first encountered it; he was later to adapt many of the story’s details and themes and incorporate them into The Great Gatsby. These ranged from basic plot ideas to details that provide key symbols in the novel. Nick suddenly encounters a colourful and magical new land (Carraway is carried away, like Dorothy) and the Wizard turns out to be, like Gatsby, an elusive ‘humbug’ and merely the creator of an illusion. The yellow bricks in both tales ultimately symbolise disappointment, either as the road to a fake wizard or, in Gatsby, to George Wilson’s run-down garage, part of

*a small block of yellow brick sitting on the edge of the waste land.*

Oz’s former career as a circus balloonist – manned, static hot-air balloons were used at the time as aerial advertisements for the show – is echoed in the description of Daisy Buchanan and Jordan Baker

*buoyed up as though upon an anchored balloon*

on a couch at the Buchanans’ house, a description later reinforced by Tom’s scornful description of Gatsby’s car as a ‘circus wagon’, with its seat of ‘hot, green leather’ sourced from Baum’s delusion-inducing Emerald City. A very readable article by Laura Barratt draws many more fascinating parallels of this sort.

Baum’s short ‘Introduction’ to The Wonderful Wizard of Oz is little known, yet revealing. The author claims that

*the story [...] was written solely to please children of today [... and] in which [...] heartaches and nightmares are left out.*

This claim is as great a humbug as the Wizard; at the very least Baum has his tongue very firmly in his cheek given, for example, the easy willingness of the main characters to abandon each other, and the numerous casual deaths of various monsters.

Baum also claimed that the name Oz had no especial significance, being, he said, derived from the letters O-Z on a filing cabinet; but the Wizard’s opening words to Dorothy – ‘I am Oz, the Great and Terrible’ – surely remind us of Shelley’s sonnet ‘Ozymandias’, which describes how the crumbling remains of a once-powerful ‘king of kings’ now preside over a barren desert. This is one idea, in The Great Gatsby, behind the baleful advertisement featuring the head of Dr TJ Eckleberg, who is similarly positioned overlooking the equally barren Valley of Ashes. (Oz also appeared to Dorothy as a giant head.) Oz’s Emerald City is re-imagined, with a twist, as Gatsby’s mansion: whereas in Baum’s story all the Emerald City’s citizens are forced to wear green spectacles, which disguise the fact that the apparently ubiquitous wealth is actually an illusion, the character in Jay Gatsby’s entourage who wears distinctive spectacles, Owl-Eyes, is the one person who actually sees his host for what he really is – and is the only regular party guest to attend his funeral. Even the name ‘Munchkin’ might have given Fitzgerald an idea or two – for the name Baum came up with for his cute little inhabitants of the Land of Oz can of course be read as ‘Gobble up your family’, which seems an apt description of the shadowy dog-eat-dog world of Meyer Wolfshiem with his suitably dog-eat-dog surname.

## Window Dressing

In 1897 Baum, a man of many parts, founded the retail trade journal The Show Window, drawing on previous experience running his own store, Baum’s Bazaar, in Aberdeen, South Dakota, in 1888/89. He thus virtually single-handedly popularised the art of department store window dressing, an art-form derived from designing theatrical sets and intended to attract (or seduce) potential customers by offering them a view of a magical world glimpsed through glass. The term ‘window dressing’ quickly became a metaphor for superficial delight, especially characteristic of the new world of advertising that Americans in particular fell in love with in their millions. This theme runs through both The Wonderful Wizard of Oz and The Great Gatsby, most obviously in the latter as the many ways in which Jay Gatsby dresses himself and his mansion up in the hope of attracting his star ‘customer’, Daisy.

In another paragraph in Chapter 4 about Gatsby’s car, Fitzgerald describes the vehicle as

*terraced with a labyrinth of wind-shields that mirrored a dozen suns*

in which the passengers sat ‘behind many layers of glass’, in a kind of mobile, magical shop-window. But Fitzgerald has already forewarned us that such visions have their limitations; when Nick asserts in Chapter 1 that

*life is much more successfully looked at from a single window, after all*

we might concur if we could read ‘easily’ instead of ‘successfully’. As his assertion stands, however, it represents a partial, blinkered view of the world that is essentially unimaginative and selfish. It is akin to his jaundiced suggestion that personality is ‘an unbroken series of successful gestures’ – a description which would also easily fit the shallow world of advertising.

## Coney Island

At the start of Chapter 5 Gatsby suggests unsuccessfully to Nick that they go to Coney Island, the New Yorkers’ pleasure ground on the south side of Long Island. Fitzgerald, however, implies quite strongly that Gatsby’s mansion is in any case a kind of upper-class parody of Coney Island. Tom’s description of Gatsby’s guests as a ‘menagerie’ recalls Coney Island’s Noah’s Ark experience, and this and the famous freak shows were an inspiration for the beginning of Chapter 4, a set piece consisting of a highly unrealistic list of weird and wonderful names, many derived from animals, like the Hammerheads – loansharks, presumably, James B. (‘Rot-Gut’) Ferret, and so on. Interestingly, the most famous escape artist of the time, Harry Houdini, also performed at Coney Island, and it is not too far-fetched to see Jay Gatsby as the Houdini of his own private circus on West Egg, always one bound ahead of his pursuers until his final tragedy.

## The Waste Land

Fitzgerald greatly admired the 20th century’s most important poem in English, The Waste Land, (1922) by TS Eliot (alias TJ Eckleberg?), with its themes of post-war rootlessness, sterility, and loss of moral standards, belief and vision. There are bits of The Waste Land scattered all through The Great Gatsby, and indeed both novel and poem share the technique of borrowing and then reshaping pre-existing material. Eliot’s title, derived from Arthurian legend, probably provided the idea for the Valley of Ashes with the figure of the blind prophet Tiresias suggesting the unseeing eyes of TJ Eckleberg. The loveless relationships alluded to in The Waste Land find their echo in The Great Gatsby, which is full of sterile and fruitless liaisons like Daisy and Gatsby, or Tom and Myrtle. Daisy’s daughter Pammy is little more to her mother than a fashion accessory. Given the portrayal of Jordan Baker as a proto-lesbian, her relationship with Nick was always likely to stall. Eliot’s lines

*The nymphs are departed.
And their friends, the loitering heirs of city directors;
Departed, have left no addresses.
WL 179-81*

lie behind the departure of Tom and Daisy in Chapter 9, and of Meyer Wolfshiem whose name ‘wasn’t in the phone book’. Eliot’s

*These fragments have I stored against my ruins*

suggest Nick’s straining thoughts at the end of Chapter 6 –

*I was reminded of something – an elusive rhythm, a fragment of lost words, that I had heard somewhere a long time ago.*

Both works begin their narrative in spring, with April being, as Eliot ominously pronounces,’the cruellest month’. And the title of the fourth section of The Waste Land is ‘Death By Water’.

Eliot’s borrowing and reshaping is not just from literary texts but from popular culture as well. Fitzgerald, like Eliot, shows his debt to canonical writers like Keats and novelists like Edith Wharton but equally, as his interest in The Wizard of Oz or Coney Island shows, he also draws on iconic texts of a different kind, allowing a bit of their magic to rub off on his own work.

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