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Research Article

## Beauty Against the Grain: The Great Gatsby

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**Abstract:** With *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald created a narrative frame intertwined with the historical discourse of the Dutch sailors and the American Dream. However, Fitzgerald’s handling of the passing of time calls for another interpretation. Gatsby’s past is to be intended both as a loss and as a source of strength. But the moment he “has” Daisy, Gatsby has come to the end of possibility. With this in mind, the narrative is not about Gatsby’s love for the beautiful Daisy, wife of Tom Buchanan, ex-football star. Instead, it is the successful attempt to recapture the past, the paradoxical beauty of beating against the current. And in this purpose, there is no defeat.

**Keywords:** American Dream, Bakhtin, Fitzgerald, Gatsby, Time

Sheilah Graham was Francis Scott Fitzgerald’s (1896-1940) final companion before his death. After they met and she confessed to having read none of his novels, Fitzgerald attempted to buy some for her. After visiting several bookstores, he realized they had stopped purchasing his works. On occasion he would ask strangers: “I’m F. Scott Fitzgerald. You’ve read my books. You’ve read *The Great Gatsby*, haven’t you? Remember?” (Graham et al., 1958, p. 202). *The Great Gatsby* was indeed at first a commercial failure, rediscovered in the wake of World War II with the intention to promote American values. By 1960, which is more than thirty years after its original publication, the book was selling 100,000 copies per year. Today it is considered the Great American Novel: it is at this point that “Gatsby comes inevitably to stand for America itself” (Trilling, 1950, p. 251).<sup>1</sup>

Scholarship has received the book as a window on American society in the 1920s. In this sense, “American Dream” and *The Great Gatsby* are indissolubly connected. Gatsby’s dream of Daisy reflects America as a land of hope. But America, in Fitzgerald’s eyes, is also a land that has been corrupted by its own dreamers. Thus, Fitzgerald reverses Henry James’ canonical view of Europe and America by portraying the Old World as one of happy illusions from which the Dutch sailors set sail full of expectations, in contrast to a New World stained by disappointing anticipations. The text has been labeled as the manifesto of the “Jazz Age” and discussed in relation to its religious reference.<sup>2</sup> It has been understood as an answer to “the theory of entropy which was rapidly gaining currency in the early twentieth century” (Steinbrink, 1980, p. 158). John F. Callahan reads it as a complementary human impulse and complexity of human personality visualized in “projections of that sometime struggle, sometime alliance between property and the pursuit of happiness” (1996, p. 380). David

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1 For a throughout historical reconstruction of the book’s commercial success see Goldblatt (2016).

2 See, among others, Burnam (1952), A. E. Dyson (1963), Pearson (1970), and Goldblatt (2016).

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Dempsey refers to the book's failed romance plot as an “esthetic fatalism” upon a belief that “to be disillusioned was a necessary condition for understanding the world” (1946, p. 121). Critics such as Walter Benn Michaels, Jeffrey Louis Decker and more recently Adam Meehan and Joseph Vogel have focused on race and ethnicity marking the xenophobic tendency in continental America, a complex net of racism and nativism. According to Michaels, for example, what truly bothers Tom Buchanan about Gatsby's union with Daisy is that “[f]or Tom (...) Gatsby isn't quite white” (1995, p. 25).<sup>3</sup> Likewise, Vogel reads the novel as a mix of racial anxieties and fears: “the text draws connections between class, race, and power, and renders visible the myths, illusions, ideologies, and consequences of white supremacy” (2015, p. 32). In recent years, the need to explain a character, whose fascination never outdates itself, has compelled scholars to borrow external theories to explain Gatsby from different perspectives. By way of example, Tony Magistrale and Mary Dickerson analyze some of the book's major scenes through Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of “chronotope,” that is the inseparability of space and time in fiction, to highlight Fitzgerald's narrative structure. In like manner, Laura Goldblatt, referring to Ernst Bloch's theory of disappointment and utopianism, suggests that “the novel's tragic take on Gatsby's dreams is the key to its mid-century fame and its continued cultural appeal” (2016, p. 105).

Despite the quantity of scholarly works, critics have generally overlooked the fact that Gatsby, as singular character, does stand outside time. *The Great Gatsby* ultimately challenges its readers to question whether Nick's tautology, “[y]ou can't repeat the past” (p. 70), can possibly be wrong. With this manuscript I intend to offer not much an additional interpretation to the abundant corpus of scholarship, as an alternative one. The word ‘time’ appears 145 times and indeed time is the master theme I aim to analyze. In a Fitzgerald's novel and short story, one for all *Winter Dreams*, one is drawn toward the realization that the best of life is irrevocably past, everything that gave meaning to life is beyond recovery. Pressed by the tyranny of time, Fitzgerald knows that the curve of human experience tends inexorably toward atrophy, dissolution, and ruin. *The Great Gatsby* tells another story. The inexorable progression of time is momentarily suspended in Nick's house. The “defunct mantelpiece clock” (p. 55) is the symbolism Fitzgerald has chosen to describe Gatsby's temporary victory. By using Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of “chronotope” as critical framework, I have enough credit to posit that time and space intersect to create a new significance. Thus, *The Great Gatsby* is not simply a tale of blind desire, but the successful attempt from Gatsby's side to recreate the past, although for a brief moment, refrain time from passing, although at a high price. And when time, inevitably flows once more, Daisy has to die.

## 1 A dream that money can buy

Written in 1925, the novel serves as a bridge between World War I and the Great Depression of the early 1930s. What we have all around is the ‘Fitzgerald theme:’ the glamour of the Jazz Age, the Roaring Twenties, a classed society in which wealth stands for financial and social success.<sup>4</sup>

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3 Ironically, Tom's system of inclusion and exclusion threatens Daisy as well: “[t]his idea is that we're Nordics. I am, and you are, and you are, and - ' After an infinitesimal hesitation he included Daisy with a slight nod” (*The Great Gatsby*, p. 11).

4 Fitzgerald was a gifted writer with a fervid imagination and emotional eloquence, but he was accused of lacking intellectual substance. Edmund Wilson, for instance, writer and literary critic, tried to convince Fitzgerald to write about America's political and social problems (see the Sacco and Vanzetti trial) but Fitzgerald

In this vein, *The Great Gatsby* represents one of the most severe criticism, that literature has afforded so far, of the American dream, a dream that fails as Gatsby dies, and Americans' attitude toward life. The American Dream is a complex utopic structure that in the novel takes the form of "the green light, the orgiastic future" (p. 115). For all those who arrived in America with the promise of future in their pocket, the dream includes the desire for social mobility, the ideal of freedom, and a classless society. "Historically, the American dream is anti-Calvinistic, and believes in the goodness of nature and man" (Bewley, 1954, p. 223). The concept has its roots in the earlier colonial experience and it is understood today as the literary expression of what America represents in the collective imaginary: a land of opportunity: "[i]t is the belief that every man, whatever his origins, may pursue and attain his chosen goals, be they political, monetary, or social" (Pearson, 1970, p. 638). Roger L. Pearson already noted that it meant different for different subjects. For the Puritans it was spiritual fulfillment, for Jean de Crevecoeur and Benjamin Franklin it was the fulfillment springing from the achievements of the self-made man, for Ralph Waldo Emerson it was the possibility of self-reliance. It is correct to say that Fitzgerald's narrative deals with a dream that lacks the optimism of its predecessors. With *Gatsby* Fitzgerald designs the American experience as a system of fluid polarities in which success and failure, illusion and disillusion have no clear borders: "Fitzgerald used his conflicts to explore the origins and fate of the American dream and the related idea of the nation" (Callahan, 1996, p. 374).<sup>5</sup> Gatsby is a truly American character, a firm believer in the American Dream of self-made success: he has, after all, not only invented and self-promoted a whole new person for himself, but has also raised both financially and socially from his initial condition. Nick, who lives across the lawn from Gatsby, knows too well that green is not only the light across the water and Daisy's eyes, green is also the color of money. The American Dream is in fact based as well, if not chiefly, on the belief that it is possible to achieve happiness through material possessions. Inevitably the idealism of the Founding Fathers has mutated into market ideology, thus the constitutional principle "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" has become a choice about what shirts to wear or what cocktails to drink.

Here is where Fitzgerald's novel become a sociological warning. As the sociologist Thorstein Veblen (1857–1929) well explained in *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), consumerism has created a leisure class. It is through ostentation that the logic of leisure can imply economic differentiation: "[c]onspicuous abstention from labor therefore becomes the conventional mark of superior pecuniary achievement and the conventional index of reputability; and conversely, since application to productive labor is a mark of poverty and subjection, it becomes inconsistent with a reputable standing in the community" (2015, p. 30). We know that Daisy and Tom have spent a year in France without a particular reason, drifting here and there playing polo. We are given a detailed description of Gatsby's house, a majestic architecture made of marble steps, Marie Antoinette music rooms, and Restoration salons, filled with champagne, servants, orchestras, and lights. The overall structure has overtones of Babel: "a tower on one side, spanking new under a thin beard of raw ivy" (p. 5) inhabited by people who "never knew each other's names" (p. 27). As the usual party ends, and the orgiastic scene of champagne, Rolls-Royce and gypsies disappear, Nick recalls a "tumultuous scene," "violently shorn of one wheel," an overall "violent confusion of the scene" (p. 35). Each

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had no interest in activism. He argued that he was writing for a new apolitical, generation "dedicated more than the last to the fear of poverty and the worship of success; grown up to find all Gods dead, all wars fought, all faiths in man shaken" (1920, p. 304).

<sup>5</sup> A complete study of Fitzgerald's views and criticism is in the edited essay collection ed. Scott Donaldson (1984).

character flaunts wealth in order to build social status in public opinion. Meanwhile, the carnival of fancy cars, lavish mansions, and convenient marriages, brings the American Dream to the edge of collapse.

However, to say with Marius Bewley that “the theme of *Gatsby* is the withering of the American dream” (1954, p. 223) would not be correct. This is merely the most evident one. *Gatsby* is also the story of a man that lives in the past, trapped in a love that was never fully his, and whose desperate illusion enlarges his mad dream to a cosmic dimension. Undeniably, there is an aesthetic fatalism in *Gatsby*, for he is a man who never discovered a sense of balance between frivolity and despair for the inevitable decline of everything.<sup>6</sup>

While *Gatsby* is imprisoned in his past, the others are rather timeless, in a sense that are meant to be prototypes. The protagonists are all Midwestern who moved from the heart of the continent to establish themselves in the East (New York). Critics have debated over the geographic dislocation of the novel’s characters: pioneers’ descendants trying to reverse the flow of history. Of this counter-migration, Jeffrey Steinbrink has remarked: “[t]he journey from West to East, that is, symbolically suggests an attempt to recapture the dream by drawing nearer its source” (1980, p. 160). If this is correct, then, the East stands for the myth of regeneration. In this vein, Nick going back home to the Middle West in Minnesota, following *Gatsby*’s death, cannot be judged as a melancholy retreat from the false promises of the East, but as an attempt meant to “reenter the flow of his own personal history rather than resist it” (1980, p. 167).

Nick Carraway went East to learn business. He comes from a family that embodies the old American economy of the self-made man. His grandfather's brother founded “the wholesale hardware business” (p. 4), thus rooted in him is the idea of life as continua renewal. He enters the business of finance, the American Stock Exchange, and the bond market, Wall Street, with a compelling illusion: “I had that familiar conviction, that life was beginning over again with the summer” (p. 4). He is meant to be a complement to *Gatsby*. Where the latter is dream and imagination, the former is reason and reality.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, as *Gatsby* dies without a warning, it is Nick’s responsibility to summarize in the last two pages the meaning of *Gatsby*’s life and the whole text. Nick is meant to be an objective description of the experience and therefore a reliable judgment of the real American condition. However, he is also an outside watcher who enjoys the society he overlooks: “I was within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life” (p. 24). Charles Samuels, masterfully defines Nick’s status in the novel: “a character, but he is more than that: he is a character engaged in a significant action” (1966, p. 784).

Next to Nick is an orgy of corruption meant to reflect the hedonism and materialism of the 1920s. After a brief introduction, the novel opens with Daisy and Jordan Baker extended full length on a couch and empty cocktails glass in front of them. Daisy is meant to represent a senseless being, beautiful but senseless. Tom, is the archetype of American fortunes: “one of those men who reach such an acute limited excellence at twenty-one that everything afterwards savours of anticlimax” (p. 6). *Gatsby*’s bonds are counterfeit, part of his fortune comes from merchandising illegal liquors, his success then is stained by corruption. From Nick’s point of view, the same can be said for Jordan Baker, who won her first golf tournament by cheating in

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6 On this displacement, Milton R. Stern remarks that “[i]n *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald made out of his life with Zelda and his dream a moral history of the gnawing and murderous disappointment attendant upon discovering that the gorgeousness of America exists not in her glittering actualities, past or present, East or West, but in the fantastic sense of possibilities that drives the imagination of the archetypal American, the eternal pioneer in search of the golden moment dreamed in the past and to be recaptured in the imagined future (1970, p. 165).

7 On the topic see John Henry Raleigh (1957), Steinbrink, (1980).

the game: “[s]he was incurably dishonest” (p. 38). Let alone the countless episodes of adultery: Tom on Daisy, Daisy on Tom, Myrtle Wilson on George Wilson. The pursuit of happiness imprinted in the American Declaration of Independence became, in the end, an empty pursuit of pleasure, decaying of social and moral values, cynicism, and greed. Fitzgerald’s judgment is negative about his characters for they are “careless and confused” (p. 114), and pessimistic about the age because it is split into two classes, the old elite and the new self-made man. No matter how shining Gatsby’s wealth is, it will never buy himself a social niche in East Egg. This is why he dies while the Buchanans live on. Unexpectedly, it is Tom to perceive that they are not alone in this fall: “[c]ivilization’s going to pieces” (p. 10).

## 2 A love that money can buy

Love in wartime 1917 is an experience that obscures boundaries of class in favor of an apparent all-encompassing fluidity and equality. This is the reason why Gatsby, a simple lieutenant, who “has no real right to touch her hand” (p. 95), could date Daisy, “gleaming like silver, safe and proud above the hot struggles of the poor” (p. 95). Gatsby “did extraordinarily well in the war” (p. 96), but once he comes back Daisy is no longer waiting for him. She did not stay true to her false promise. She must have known that it was something “[i]n the meantime, In between time” (p. 61). Gatsby, on the other hand, is a monument against history’s current. His determination made it possible for him to become what he believed he had to become in order to ransom Daisy back: “there was something gorgeous about him, some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life” (p. 3). Yet, his determination is proportional to the fragility of his construction. The love of his life is a summer romance, his study at Oxford is a five-month experience, and the lavish parties in Long Island, in which he does not partake, are not meant to boost his happiness. There is nothing in Gatsby’s life that is more solid than his illusion. That is Daisy. She seems within reach. Fitzgerald made of Gatsby stretching his hand out a visual motif of Gatsby’s longing. Eros and Thanatos come together in a scene of melancholic beauty. As he returns from the war, Gatsby goes back to Louisville and he walks alone the same streets that they had before walked together. While she is still in France with Tom on the wedding trip, he understands the unbearable lightness of his memories:

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 now for his blurred eyes and he knew that he had lost that part of it, the freshest and the best, forever (p. 97).

The Fitzgeraldian theme of the lost youth blends here with Gatsby’s obsession which in turn blends with the American Dream.<sup>8</sup> It is a late night the first time Nick sees him. Gatsby is watching the green light across the bay at the end of Daisy’s dock: “he stretched out his arms towards the dark water in a curious water” (p. 16). Nick, speaking not only as the narrator but as the writer’s moral testament recognizes in this gesture the beauty of man’s hope in spite of its disappointment. The stretched arms become the image of everyone’s longing for a new happiness, “[i]t eluded us then, but that’s no matter tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther” (p. 115). Indeed, Fitzgerald wrote later in life: “[t]he American story is the history of all aspiration-not just the American dream but the human dream” (Turnbull, 1962, p. 307).

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<sup>8</sup> Fitzgerald’s recurring theme of ‘lost youth’ seemed to Hemingway, who made the cult of manhood his own aesthetics, no more than an obsession: “immature, misunderstood, whining for lost youth death-dance” (Curnutt, 2007, p. 54).

Following the parallelism, Nick registers the fragile state of possibility in which the dream, “transitory enchanted moment” and “for the last time in history,” is soon to vanish. As Gatsby began losing Daisy the moment he first kissed her, in a similar fashion when the colonists took the New World they began polluting the American promise. An aesthetic of disappointment is the narrative’s overtone as a result from the conquest of the Americas.

Entangled with Gatsby’s dream, is a world that Fitzgerald does not hesitate to define “material without being real” (p. 103). That is, a world of appearances. Daisy is its most evident manifestation. As the novel begins Daisy is wearing a white dress, her eyes reflect “the absence of all desire” (p. 10), and she wears it again during an awkward lunch in which she kisses Gatsby as Tom left the room. When Jordan Baker reveals to Nick, thus to the reader as well, the origin of Gatsby’s and Daisy’s story, she recalls that Daisy “dressed in white, and had a little white roadster” (p. 48). Sometime later, it is Gatsby himself to disclose to Nick the episodes of his brief romance with Daisy. When they kissed for the first time, “his heart beat faster and faster as Daisy’s white face came up to his own” (p. 71). In the symbolism of colors, “white traditionally symbolizes purity, and there is no doubt that Fitzgerald wants to underscore the ironic disparity between the ostensible purity of Daisy ... and [her] actual corruption” (Schneider, 1964, p. 14).

Daisy has indeed a double existence. A person on her own and as ideal in Gatsby’s vision of her. In terms of human relationships, she has nothing to offer, a silly thing but “a thing of deathly hollowness” (Bewley, 1954, p. 233). An attentive reader can easily spot the nature of Daisy’s feelings. Not a matter of love but aesthetic pleasure. He bought a palace just to be across the bay from where she lives; more shallowly she likes him because he “always look[s] so cool” (p. 75). While his love is grounded on memories, hers is founded on consumerism and appearances. Even if their re-encounter is wet by her tears, they are not expression of regrets and hopes but another misjudgment of her superficiality. The shirts scene in his house is emblematic of her materialism. Gatsby throws on the table a pile of shirts. He does not show them out of vanity or pride, but with naivety in the presence of some value he cannot consciously grasp. “They’re such beautiful shirts,’ she sobbed, her voice muffled in the thick folds. ‘It makes me sad because I’ve never seen such beautiful shirts before” (p. 59). She is “glad” to see him after five years, but then she “began to cry stormily” (ibid.) at the display of his wealth. It is the sight of his silk and fine flannel shirts that brings down the wall of her indifference. Taken together, the materialism of the age reflects on the personality of the characters. Daisy’s love for Gatsby does not have the same tragedy that pushed him above his destiny. To her, Gatsby is no dream at all, but desire for wealth, embodiment of the glamor that fills her life. For well Gatsby decoded the ghastly secret behind her mortal beauty: her voice, alike her choices, is “full of money” (p. 76).

Under this perspective, it is not Gatsby’s dream to be an illusion; rather, it is Daisy’s soul to be perverted. Due to Tom’s continues extra-marital affairs Daisy’s marriage had become painful. She uses Gatsby as a distraction and a tool to bring Tom back on the domestic track and soothe her own feelings of inadequacy. “Daisy’s affair thus functions as a psychological defense, and as such, it underscores the psychological importance of her dysfunctional marriage” (Tyson, 2006, p. 46). At some indefinite point, Gatsby must have realized that his creative passion had over-dreamed the dream, indeed, “Daisy tumbled short of his dreams” (p. 61). But it is only in the utopian final pages that one realizes Daisy’s fundamental flaws. When Tom, during the confrontation in the New York hotel, reveals the origin of Gatsby’s wealth, Daisy’s withdrawal is immediate: “he [Gatsby] began to talk excitedly to Daisy, denying everything, defending his name (...) But with every word she was drawing further and further into herself”

(p. 86). Implicit in her sudden withdrawal is Fitzgerald's message: the underworld Gatsby belongs to is the reason why Daisy, at last, chose the conventional protection and stratified legacy of Tom Buchanan. That is, as Gatsby's social status is under check, her determination vanishes. Fitzgerald has designed a society in which the sense of happiness depends on money and property, thus not surprisingly, "Daisy's pursuit of happiness in the form of her dangerous, defiant love for Gatsby surrenders to the palpability of a safe, material, unequal propertied union with Tom Buchanan" (Callahan, 1996, p. 382). In this sense, *The Great Gatsby* is a tragedy of social exclusion and class desire. Without a second thought, Daisy discards Gatsby when his social origin renders him useless to her purpose, and then again when his existence threatens her own. Her monstrous moral indifference plays out in the car accident episode. Her carelessness led to Myrtle Wilson's death and that fictionally more dramatic of Gatsby. Daisy not only leaves Gatsby to take the blame for the accident, but also denies any involvement, in the present as much as in the past.

### 3 Repeating the past

Modernity, Jean-Francois Lyotard writes, "does not occur without a shattering of belief, without a discovery of the lack of reality in reality-- a discovery linked to the invention of other realities" (1992, p. 9). Gatsby, that is the quintessence of American modernity in the 1920s, never bothered to determine the hidden boundary at which reality ends and the illusion begins. Reality is a promise. After all, reality in Gatsby's America is a dream in progress.

He is a man trapped in his past, hence, he confesses to Nick to be "trying to forget something very sad that had happened to me long ago" (p. 42). Instinctively, one has to ask why Gatsby could not forget and simply move on as the majority of us does. But then, perhaps, he would no longer be great. No one can weigh the proportion of his responsibility and the heaviness of his memories. Certainly, Steinbrink is correct to define Gatsby's ambition as the attempt "to fight back through time and make a fresh start in order to "correct" history and suspend the steady dissipation of the universe" (1980, p. 164). When Nick urges commonsense whispering that the past cannot be neither repeated nor recalled, Gatsby replies with the urgency of a blind man: "[c]an't repeat the past?" he cried incredulously. 'Why of course you can!' [...] 'I'm going to fix everything just the way it was before,' he said, nodding determinedly" (pp. 70-71). He is a man for whom the unreal is real. What motivates Gatsby is not the desire for material objects but the need for the evanescent and the intangible. He built a Babylonian mansion not to live in it but to live across the dock where Daisy lives, for her to see it. With a psychoanalytic outlook, Gatsby's 'addiction' to Daisy reveals a Freudian repression. The repression of psychological wounds condemns Gatsby to repeatedly reproduce them. Ergo, Gatsby's lonely pursuit of Daisy, his continuous bouncing back into the past, replays the wound she inflicted on him five years before. However, we should give Gatsby more credit. It is not his subconscious to define his passion, instead, it is the very conscious human attempt to govern time.

Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975), a Russian philosopher and literary critic, with his notion of "chronotope," (chronos-topos/time-place) appears especially relevant to explain one of the novel's most relevant scene. As far as definitions go, Bakhtin defines "chronotope" as "a unit of analysis for studying language according to the ratio and characteristics of the temporal and spatial categories represented in that language" (1981, p. 425). Stated otherwise, a chronotope is an analytic tool that can be useful to explain what Bakhtin terms "the dialogic orientation in discourse" (1981, p. 276), that is the text's historical and social context, through the intersection

of space and time conceived as inseparable and interdependent.<sup>9</sup> According to Bakhtin, “a literary work’s artistic unity in relationship to an actual reality is defined by its chronotope” (1981, p. 142). Therefore, we gain full access to the deepest meanings of a fictional text only through the analysis of temporal-spatial expression:

In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope (1981, p. 84).

Here, Bakhtin is highlighting the inevitable interpenetration of time and place in any given literary portrayal.<sup>10</sup> As he recognizes, each depiction of place embeds time, and vice versa, and through their convergence time and place encode a specific worldview. With this in mind, one of the most important yet least critically examined scenes in the novel is the transitional scene in which Gatsby waits, in Nick’s living room, for Daisy to come. Five years have passed by; he made a fortune for her, while she became a wife and a (careless) mother. He is clearly displaced, not for being in someone else’s house but because, he knows, soon a whole body of dichotomies will crush in a single instant: past and present, ideal and real, hope and truth. A doubt creeps inside the edifice of his lifetime project. It is a dream that burns the present. “It’s too late!” (p. 54) he utters. Allegedly, he refers to the afternoon tea but the reader must read in his statement a subconscious fear that it is too late to recall the past. Yet it is not. When Gatsby is reunited with Daisy, history halts. Same as for the Dutch sailors “for a transitory brief moment” Gatsby too is contemplating something he does not understand, but “commensurate to his capacity for wonder” (p. 115).

As Gatsby is sitting before Daisy, five years after their last encounter, “[h]is head leaned back so far that it rested against the face of a defunct mantelpiece clock” (p. 55). Symbolically, he finally rests his head, the place where memories are created, under a broken clock. If the clock does not function, neither does time: the “[a]ctual contact between head and defunct clock, then, suggests a conscious suspension of time in which Gatsby has conquered the passage of time itself” (Magistrale et al., 1989, p. 122). Not only time has stopped, but the next scene suggests that time has been annihilated, the segment containing every fragment between ‘before and now’ has been erased in an accidental fall: “the clock took this moment to tilt dangerously at the pressure of his head, whereupon he turned and caught it with trembling fingers and set it back in place” (55). The image of the falling clock is a powerful one. Mikhail Bakhtin defines as “materialized history” (1981, p. 247) a status where “time becomes, in effect, palpable and visible” (1981, p. 250). Time’s momentary defeat is rendered by the clock’s silence, and Gatsby’s personal interpretation of the past is portrayed by the clock’s fall. He could have destroyed the past if he had forgotten, as he could have destroyed the clock if he had wanted to, that is if he had not caught it in its fall. Instead, he caught it in its fall because he remembers

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9 Bakhtin refers that the origin of the term chronotope is due to mathematics and was introduced "as part of Einstein's Theory of Relativity. (...) we are borrowing for literary criticism almost as a metaphor (almost, but not entirely). What counts for us is the fact that it expresses the inseparability of space and time (time as the fourth dimension of space). We understand the chronotope as a formally constitutive category of literature" (1981, p. 84).

10 To give a brief example, if I mention the Industrial Revolution our mind goes to the factories and chimneys (space) during the nineteenth century (time). Furthermore, the association of this time and place will conjure up for us the images of gas lamps, cities rising, miners, locomotives, class struggle and so on. The symbolic value a particular time and place acquire through their connection, and the perspective this imparts, are the preconditions of translating a lived experience to an artistic illustration.



all. Nick's remark completes the metaphor: "I think we all believed for a moment that it had smashed in pieces on the floor" (p. 56). Time cannot be smashed but Gatsby, "with trembling fingers," took ownership of it by waiting, by not forgetting, by loving. Thus, Fitzgerald concedes to his most celebrated character, his reward. Gatsby, almost unseen, takes back the past. "They had forgotten me," Nick refers to the reader as he leaves Gatsby's house, "they looked back at me, remotely, possessed by intense life" (p. 62). Insofar as Gatsby grasps the dream, he stands outside time, within the wonder of the Dutch sailors' eyes, back into the past.

Gatsby's tragedy assumes a cosmic dimension because his desire goes well beyond Daisy's transient nature. He aims at returning to the original point where his life started and to do so he needs to bend history, to alter reality to the measure of his will. "What more colossal hubris can 'a son of God' commit, than to tinker with the temporal order of the universe! To fix time and reinstate thus the past in the present (as though the interim were unreckoned and life has passed unlocked) to wipe the slate clean and begin anew—that is Gatsby's illusion" (Stallman, 1955, p. 4). However, as the fingers that have caught the falling clock were trembling, so time cannot be held for too long.

The time of deception had been mounting since the beginning of their re-encounter. Gatsby's imagination and hope had allowed him to create a world of his own making, "[a] universe of ineffable gaudiness spun itself out in his brain while the clock ticked on the washstand" (p. 63). But it is a world that ultimately defies the reality of time itself. Thus, it is Daisy to set time in motion once more and reallocate Gatsby within the human structure of time, defined and restricted by the perimeters that life inflicts on it.

The day they first met five years later, as they stand by one of the windows of Gatsby's mansion, he tells Daisy about the green light at the end of her dock. She cannot possibly know that the light embodies Gatsby's sense of future. In truth, a projection of Gatsby's wishes, a desperate promise of life that of recapturing the past against the current of time. But now that Daisy is with him, the green light loses its symbolic purpose: "[n]ow it was again a green light on a dock. His count of enchanted objects had diminished by one" (p. 60). Nick is the only witness of Gatsby's struggle against disenchantment: "[t]here 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" (p. 61). Where is that immense beauty? Gatsby must have asked himself. He had known her, and fallen in love with her, five years before the novel opens. During that long interval, he created a mythological image of Daisy in accordance with his memory and in line with his dream. Regrettably, the woman standing next to him does not rise to the level of his expectations. "And she doesn't understand," he said. "She used to be able to understand. We'd sit for hours" (p. 70), Gatsby complains to Nick. The transient moment that allowed him to recover the past is already behind him, and as time retakes its run, the heaviness of disillusion begins to creep into Gatsby's response to life.

Scene this one that closely recalls another one five years before, Gatsby not wanting to kiss Daisy so he could go on fantasizing about her as the mind of God: "[h]e knew that when he kissed this girl and forever wed his unutterable visions to her perishable breath, his mind would never romp again like the mind of God" (p. 71). At different stages of his life, Gatsby has tried to treasure the restless waiting for the future knowing that no reality could possibly match the beauty of his expectation.

On a hot August afternoon, in a Plaza Hotel suite, the confrontation between Tom, Daisy and Gatsby takes place. And the ruin of his illusion is complete. Gatsby does not want Daisy to deny her present, he wants her to deny her past: "[j]ust tell him the truth - that you never loved him - and it's all wiped out for ever" (p. 84). And this she cannot do. "She hesitated. (...) 'Oh,

you want too much!' she cried to Gatsby" (p. 84). Daisy Buchanan as she exists (wife and mother) is not what Gatsby is seeking; he wants the eighteen years girl of five years before, dressed in white. It is Gatsby's need that Daisy and he maintain a firm grasp on their past; he cannot possibly accept that she loved Tom once, since recognizing this would be an acknowledgment of the existence of time and history beyond his control. "Gatsby's world is one in which there can be no voice but Gatsby's--no version of history other than his own" (Magistrale et al., 1989, p. 124). Consequently, Gatsby's narcissistic inability to comprehend her attachment to her husband and Daisy's hesitation are the breaking point at which Gatsby's illusion is revealed to him. As awoken from a spell, the universe of frozen images ultimately begins to melt. Indeed, no one but him can obliterate the past. Fitzgerald, masterly uncovers Gatsby's revelation with an imperceptible eye movement: "Gatsby's eyes opened and closed" (p. 84).

As Gatsby closes his eyes another defeat has just taken place. "It is not what Gatsby was, but what had hold of him that was his downfall" (Burnam, 1968, p. 11). What had hold of him was Daisy and when she rejects the order he had designed for them, Gatsby is also deserted by his dream. Fitzgerald does not hesitate to punish his hero: "he must have felt that he had lost the old warm world, paid a high price for living too long with a single dream" (p. 103). The world without Daisy is described by a series of objective correlatives. The sky becomes unfamiliar, the leaves frightening, a rose seemingly grotesque. It was his dream to confer sense to reality. Now that the dream has gone he sees what she really is, a small-minded, ruthless individual, grotesque as a rose. Of course, Fitzgerald punishes Daisy as well. A woman that has made material possessions the symbol of security and good life has become a possession herself. She could have been an ideal in Gatsby's world but she chose to be another object in Tom's material world.

Reality has finally caught up with Gatsby's imagination. After the car accident he is waiting for a phone-call from Daisy. But he no longer cares: "I have an idea that Gatsby himself didn't believe it would come, and perhaps he no longer cared" (p. 103). Otherwise stated, Gatsby's dream of Daisy is perfect only until when it is not tangible. The moment Daisy reappears, Gatsby surrenders his Platonic dreams; love becomes a corruptible reality, disappointment sets in and Daisy has to die. Fitzgerald pursues Daisy's death first in Gatsby's idea of her ("he no longer cared") and then by killing Gatsby. In fact, Gatsby's physical death is merely a fictional demystification, a formality so to speak. Gatsby is purified by his death and enlarged to the status of literature. Daisy, on the other hand, after his death loses any residual beauty and significance: she "hadn't sent a message or a flower" (p. 111). She exists as long as he wants her to, indeed, she simply vanished early that afternoon.

Gatsby no longer cared, yet he is not ready to capitulate. Not even after Daisy's last denial, Gatsby is capable of surrendering to reality and he would have gone hoping for an irreversible future were it not for the gun that killed him.

Barbara Will, notes that there is a "discrepancy between the novel's elegiac conclusion and the larger narrative in which Gatsby figures as troubling and suspect, as liminal and unknowable" (2005, p. 138). Chris Fitter writes that the ending of Gatsby represents Fitzgerald's "misty melancholia" for pre-capitalist ideal that the text has, up to this point, worked hard to demystify (1998, p. 14). There is surely a lingering melancholia in Nick watching Gatsby watching at the green light. They were both in World War I. Their sense of loss and incapacity to commit can be reconducted to the 'lost generation:' "[d]isenchanting observers remarked everywhere (...) that the perennial fruits of the American experience were frustration and disappointment"

(Steinbrink, 1980, p. 156).<sup>11</sup> The war had shown that the optimism of the forefathers was displaced for to die were not only men but also the ideals they carried. In this regard, Gatsby's death serves to espouse the damaged face of the American Dream. In Goldblatt's words, the dream is not fatal because it destroys people but "because implicit in it is a kind of failure that is specified precisely by the terms of its hopefulness" (2016, p. 120). Gatsby's dream was hopeless because the Daisy of his imagination never existed. He had created a Platonic ideal of beauty, and perhaps love, that the materialism of the age, and the one that comes with the territory, destroyed without mercy. His was a dream against the grain.

With Gatsby's death, virtually killed by Tom Buchanan, Fitzgerald is suggesting that there is something inherently destructive in the American world. Nick offers a crucial insight into that world in which Daisy and Tom are fully immersed: "[t]hey were careless people, Tom and Daisy - they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money" (p. 114). Bewley recognizes a corrupt spiritual element: "[i]n the end the most that can be said is that The Great Gatsby is a dramatic affirmation in fictional terms of the American spirit in the midst of an American world that denies the soul" (1954, p. 243).

A mattress moves irregularly in an empty swimming pool, "[t]he touch of a cluster of leaves revolved it slowly, tracing, like the leg of transit, a thin red circle in the water" (p. 103). The leaves' rotation recalls the hands of the clock that finally retake their turn, regularly and inevitably, as a reminder in front of Gatsby's body. Time can now move on once more. A few workmen, unnamed laborers, carry the body. Gatsby's funeral rite is in tune with the great martyrs of love in Western literature. Madame Bovary, Anna Karenina, and before them the young Werther and Jacopo Ortis. Suicide, of course, all the same only a few attended the ceremony. Equally anonymous is Gatsby's last farewell: "[n]obody came" (p. 111). Gatsby's undeserving ending, the whole indifference before his burial, maintains overtones of Wagnerian epic mysticism: it is Fitzgerald raising him up above the rubble of the American Dream.

## 4 Conclusion

From the historical perspective, from the side of the writer, prevails the belief of history as a regressive process. Contemporaneity has become a distorted wasteland. Walter Benjamin's reading of Klee's *Angelus Novus* is of relevance here. The storm of progress propels us into the future, but we have turned our back on it. As we walk backward facing the past, all around is debris and ruins of our own making. Likewise, the universe portrayed by Fitzgerald is populated by "boats against the current" (p. 115). In an endless shifting between the anchoring past and the disappearing future, we, as the citizens of modernity, are like boats that propel themselves forward, while the current (our actions) pushes us back toward our starting place. Irving Howe, writing on mass society during the 1950s and the condition of American fiction, observes that "true subject: the recurrent search—in America, almost a national obsession—for personal identity and freedom" (1969, p. 137). But he forgot to mention what was found in the ashes of the American Dream. America discovered nihilism at last. As David W. Noble has put it, Fitzgerald knew "that the myth of the American Adam and the American Eden was bankrupt,

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<sup>11</sup> It was Gertrude Stein (1874-1946) to coin the term later popularized by Ernest Hemingway in the epigraph for *The Sun Also Rises* (1926): "You are all a lost generation." The term refers to those American expatriates, artists, writers living in Paris in the 1920s. Common denominator is the sense of loss of identity, religious belief, secular institutions (Government, University, etc.) all undermined by the aftermath of World War I.

had indeed always been morally indefensible, even though he was unable to find another faith to live by” (1968, p. 152).

However, the novel offers multiple layers of interpretations. Fitzgerald wrote *The Great Gatsby* in 1924 when he was twenty-eight, before he could know his own later disappointments with money, love, and writing. Ergo, it is almost as if *The Great Gatsby* predicts Fitzgerald’s own later nostalgia for a time when he, like Gatsby, had dreams. The novel ends with Gatsby’s death. As Fitzgerald writes the last pages, he uses a favorite technique of his: an elegiac eloquence that both summarizes and enlarges the story’s meaning. One of the multiple messages is not that the past cannot be recovered but that the past can be recovered only for a brief moment. Those who engage in the task must make sure to have a dream big enough to withstand the challenge of time. However, a paradox sets in: a dream so big must *ipso facto* be bigger than reality and therefore fated to disappointment once reality is met. Accordingly, “Gatsby is great for having paid life the compliment of believing its promise” (Samuels, 1966, p. 788). Gatsby, a descendant of the European sailors, believes in the promise of life, he believes to an extent to replace the real with the cult of an idea. But desire by definition cannot be gratified. As it happens, Gatsby is killed, fictional formality, but the real victim is Daisy. She falls short of his dream, thus with the dream gone, it is Daisy, the dream’s physical embodiment, to vanish from the world he had created for her. D. H. Lawrence, in praise of the novel, called “the trembling instability of the balance” (1968, p. 528) the ability to put previously opposed ideas into relationship. Fitzgerald’s last statement in *Gatsby* is that happiness is the pursuit of balance between resistance, “boats against the current,” and surrender to the flow of life: “borne back ceaselessly into the past” (p. 115). In doing so Gatsby becomes Prometheus, the tragedy of his life is the tragedy of a man who never surrendered.

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