11IB - Summer Reading

The Great Gatsby

F. Scott Fitzgerald helped to define the Jazz Age of the 1920s, and his own lifestyle reflected those of his famous and infamous characters.

Before reading *The Great Gatsby,* research the life of F. Scott Fitzgerald, paying close attention to his relationship with Zelda.

- Find at least one article about F.Scott Fitzgerald's life
- Print and annotate the article
- Be prepared to find similarities in *The Great Gatsby* and Fitzgerald's life

While reading *The Great Gatsby,* **annotate the novel**, focusing specifically on the themes, motifs, and symbols listed below:

- **Theme:** the decline of the American Dream and the hollowness of the upper class
- **Theme:** the importance of Time
- **Motif:** geography and weather should be paid special attention to, especially the relationship of West Egg to East Egg
- **Symbols:** the green light at the end of the dock, the valley of ashes, and the eyes of Doctor T.J. Eckleburg

After reading the novel, research the cover of the novel, an Art Deco piece designed by Francis Cugat.

- Examine the image on your novel carefully, paying close attention to the eyes, the tear, and the bright colors below the voluptuous lips depicting a carnival scene
- Read the article entitled "When F.Scott Fitzgerald Judged Gatsby by its Cover"
    - http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/when-f-scott-fitzgerald-judged-gatsby-by-its-cover-61925763/
    - Annotate specific examples in the text that refer to the cover art

Finally, to further your understanding of *The Great Gatsby,* read the literary criticism provided for you.

- **Annotate** the literary criticism by Long, Le Vot, and Steinbrink
- Be prepared to discuss the criticism in class

Above all, *The Great Gatsby* is a literary masterpiece rich with American history and intriguing characters; therefore, it is my hope you will enjoy your short summer assignment! Please remember to bring your annotated novel as well as your supplementary materials to class the first week of school, and I look forward to hearing your insights!

why the dud-like and impotent pursuit of that future diminishes the American dream of attaining what Anson Hunter in "**The Rich Boy**" tries over and over to get—the girl. (pp. 341-43)

Keath Fraser, "Another Reading of 'The Great Gatsby'," in English Studies in Canada, *Vol. V, No. 3, Fall, 1979, pp. 330-43.*

ROBERT EMMET LONG (essay date 1979)

[*Long is the author of* The Achieving of The Great Gatsby: F. Scott Fitzgerald, 1920-1925, *a thorough examination of Fitzgerald's literary apprenticeship and the influences that led to his masterwork. Also discussed are the manuscript versions of the novel, which reveal its various stages of development. In the following excerpt, Long finds that* Gatsby *is patterned after the traditional fairytale.*]

In its vision of modern emptiness, *The Great Gatsby* is a key document of the twenties, so much so that had it not been written the twenties would actually seem diminished. It is as vivid today (and as "surprising") as when it was written, and has an intense life. Gatsby's vividness has been reinforced on so many different levels of myth and folklore that it is difficult to say which most controls his conception. The woodchopper's son, the young man from the provinces come to the great city, Dick Whittington, Horatio Alger—all stand in the background of his conception. But perhaps as importantly as from any other source, Gatsby comes from the fairy tale; for if the novel has, in Henry James's phrase "the imagination of disaster," it also has the imagination of enchantment. There is a sentence in the manuscript, but not included in the book, that reveals Gatsby. It occurs when he is among Daisy's circle at Louisville. "He was a nobody with an irrevealable past," Fitzgerald comments, "and under the invisible cloak of a uniform he had wandered into a palace." With its palaces and invisible cloaks, Gatsby's imagination has a fairy-tale quality. Almost instinctively, he regards Daisy Fay as a princess, a girl in a white palace, and the spell of the fairy tale, too, marks his ascendency from his midwestern farm to his own palace of a kind at West Egg. Gatsby becomes a kind of fairy-tale prince in disguise, is deprived of his princehood while retaining his princehood in essence, the consciousness of a noble inheritance, of an inner sovereignty belonging to a prince, even though he wears a shepherd's garments.

Fitzgerald refers to Long Island by name very rarely in the novel; it seems disembodied as well as real and is a region of wonder. Carraway's recall of his adolescence at the end is, too, part of the child's perception of life as wonder, as in the fairy tale. And there is a strong demarcation in the novel between good and evil; the Buchanans' world, and the Wilsons', seem somehow bewitched by evil forces, which are beyond containment or control. The evocative energies of the fairy tale help to account, I think, for the helplessness one feels before the enchanted horror of the world Fitzgerald creates in the novel, a world in which the good prince is put to death, and the dark prince reigns. Other American novelists before Fitzgerald drew from the fairy tale; Henry James did so in *The Portrait of a Lady* and other novels. But Fitzgerald is alone in the twenties in drawing from the resources of the fairy tale to create his age, to touch the depths of its irrationality, and at the same time to create one of the most memorable characters in the American fiction of the 1920s.

Since World War II there have been novels published in America that have some claims to seriousness, and yet after one has read them one can hardly remember their characters. Compare with these the power of dramatic projection in ***The Great Gatsby,*** the way in which Jay Gatsby lives in one's imagination, refusing to be dislodged. Such enduring life is the mark of exceptional achievement, can only be the result of a creative conception of astonishing depth and power, which ***The Great Gatsby*** continues to give the impression of being. (pp. 183-84)

Robert Emmet Long, in his The Achieving of "The Great Gatsby:" F. Scott Fitzgerald, 1920-1925, *Bucknell University Press, 1979, 226 p.*

ANDRÉ LE VOT (essay date 1979)

[*In the following excerpt from his* F. Scott Fitzgerald: A Biography, *originally published in France in 1979, Le Vot provides a thematic examination of* The Great Gatsby *and a detailed analysis of the skillful use of color through which Fitzgerald implied the novel's themes.*]

[In his works, Fitzgerald] sometimes identified himself with a prestigious double, found himself by disavowing a mutilating, humiliating lineage, asserted that he was a self-made man in the true sense of the term: the son of his works, who had broken loose from his moorings, burned his ships and striven to outdo himself. At other times Fitzgerald tried to dispel his worst fears by miring his character in impotence and renunciation.

In *Gatsby,* these two antithetical and heretofore alternating attitudes are juxtaposed, confronting each other in a dialectical relationship. No lonter does the author identify with one or the other, shifting with the wind from fair to stormy. For the first time he is not speaking in his own name, in reaction to the events of the moment. He is detached, looking down from above, so distant from his immediate preoccupations that they become mere landmarks in a panorama that embraces his whole era, that stretches to the very horizons of America's history. Fitzgerald does not do this topically and anecdotally, as he did in ***The Beautiful and Damned,*** in which he thought he was meaningfully addressing the problems of his generation, but serenely and objectively, abandoning the half-truths of social realism to reach the symbolic truth of a global vision.

This vision relies for its effectiveness on a coexistence of contrasts, on their simultaneous operation. To register this new depth of field, this dual aim missing from his earlier work, Fitzgerald had to stretch his own limits, to venture into unexplored novelistic terrain. And there he built an intricate palace of echoes and mirrors, a meticulous architectonic complex, all in trompe l'oeil that traps, refracts, fragments, reconstructs a reality in which he is invisible, but which reflects better than all his autobiographical writing the heart of the problems he and his generation faced.

He begins by creating a fundamental split between the character who is watching and judging and the one who dreams and acts. The first task is assigned to Nick Carraway, his narrator. Nick, newly arrived from his native Midwest in the spring of 1922, is skeptical, seemingly blasé but, at bottom, incurably romantic. He is fascinated by New York life and dreams of making his fortune. As an underpaid stockbroker, he comes into contact with the tremendously rich Buchanans, his cousin Daisy and her husband, Tom, whom Nick knew at Yale. They live in a posh mansion in East Egg, Long Island. Nick has rented a rundown cottage across the bay, in West Egg, where he is invited to the wild parties of his flamboyant neighbor, the enigmatic Jay Gatsby. This early experience in the world of the rich excites his caustic wit, toward the Buchanans, especially the proud and brutal Tom, and toward Gatsby, whose absurd lies and pathetic man-of-the-world pose Nick penetrates.

Thus is defined, in the book's first three chapters, the psychology of the man who will recount that summer's events. He has an objective observer's unflagging curiosity and a humorist's quick perception of the ridiculous. He sees himself as detached, cultivated, unprejudiced. In short, he presents a picture of a man with a sense of proportion and prides himself on a faintly amused tolerance for other people's follies. He makes a point of obeying the rules of propriety and is driven by his social inferiority to maintain a constant vigilance. The secrets he discovers or that are entrusted to him confirm his notion of his own importance and moral superiority.

These, however, are mere appearances. This flattering self-portrait is soon wiped away by Nick's constant lack of assurance and his immaturity. His true nature emerges as the story unfolds. Irresolute, timid, manipulated by those around him, he is a Middle Western cousin of those young people of good family who wander through nineteenth-century novels in search of an identity without ever really learning about love. Incapable of realizing his dreams or of loving wholeheartedly, he tries to give substance to his deepest aspirations by living vicariously. In Gatsby he finds a man who, despite his social sins, is richly endowed with all the qualities Nick lacks: creative imagination, tenacity, boldness, passion. Through Gatsby he will achieve a kind of grandiose romantic destiny that his withered soul and middle-class pretensions could never otherwise reach. In Gatsby, whom he'd have invented had he been a novelist, he recognizes the hero he wished to be and never will be. His sense of his own life is submerged, his potentialities flower, the superman's adventure becomes his own.

This identification is similar in many ways to what a reader or movie viewer feels, with the difference that Nick never suspends his critical judgment. Faithful to his character, he maintains his conventional moralist's reserve as long as he can. "Gatsby," he says, represents "everything for which I have an unaffected scorn." He is won over to him only after a long and reluctant revision of his values. What is ridiculous about the man, his affected manner of speaking, his dandyish clothes, his ostentatious acts, all irritate and wound Nick's sense of reserve and sobriety, but they are informed with a dignity that commands respect.

In any case, these are only questions of manners. Nick finds it more difficult to accept the fact that Gatsby is an unscrupulous gangster, the alarming Wolfsheim's right arm. The narrator's respect for the proprieties has not prepared him to associate mystical flights of love with an outlaw's criminal behavior. Yet when he reaches his moral maturity, he takes Gatsby's side. The corrupt means Gatsby uses to achieve his ends have not altered his fundamental integrity, his spiritual intactness. His means reflect the corruption of the times; they are the only ones available to an indigent cavalier seeking his fortune. True corruption, Nick discovered, lies in the hearts of those who despise Gatsby, especially in Tom's.

The complete reversal of Nick's attitude toward Gatsby, from an amused disdain that Tom could share to a wholehearted, militant identification that blames Tom and those like him for his hero's death, this cross-current of judgments and feelings, provided Fitzgerald's talent with a broad compass that he exploited to the fullest. The whole gamut of comic effects comes into operation as the gap between subject and object narrows. Seen from a distance, when Gatsby is simply a ridiculous stranger, he is treated as a caricature. But when Nick shares his feelings, trying to keep his emotions under control, the humor is tender and compassionate, which still allows the narrator to stand off a bit. And when this reserve becomes impossible to maintain, when the subject identifies with the object of his interest and Nick, so to speak, blends with Gatsby, becomes Gatsby—for it is Nick alone, speaking with Gatsby's voice, who tells Gatsby's love story—the tone changes completely. What was at first grotesque is now sublime, mocking rejection has become passionate loyalty, ironic understatement has changed to lyric hyperbole. From then on, Fitzgerald brought to bear all the resources of his evocative and iridescent prose. Here again, the situation lends itself admirably to stylistic variations, modulations of tone, from fervor to nostalgia.

Fitzgerald had already experimented with these various modes in a fragmented, isolated way. In *Gatsby,* for the first time, inspired by his subject, he found a simple, effective technique for joining them, combining them within a single narrative, setting the changes in his narrator to them like the movements of a piece of music. More generally speaking, two modes, satiric and lyric, dominate the book, expressing its two major themes, which contrast with and complement each other. The first records the failure and inadequacies of an unsatisfied, disquiet, disoriented society in search of something in which to invest its unused energy, a society unable to realize its eagerness to live intensely without disorder and violence. Tom, Daisy, Myrtle, Wolfsheim and, in the background, the people who crowd into Gatsby's parties, embody this new world-weariness. The book's second theme celebrates a vision that transfigures the world and gives meaning and direction to these disappointed hopes and unsatisfied yearnings. His conversion accomplished, Nick exalts Gatsby's creative imagination, his "extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness such as I have never found in any other person and which it is not likely I shall ever find again."

Something of the disorganized sterility of Fitzgerald's own recent history is in these scenes of manners. And it is the revival of his creative power, the liberation of his imagination that he was celebrating in exalting a hero who, despite his weaknesses, embodied that power and freedom: "There was something gorgeous about him, some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life, as if he were related to one of those intricate machines that register earthquakes ten thousand miles away."

The aim that emerges from the opposition of two forms of reality, two modes of expression, is not merely abstract or didactic. It is woven into a web of existence that is in itself profoundly meaningful and functional; its extraordinary poetic richness modulates, accompanies, deepens the writer's purpose.

Light and color were used to maximum effect in creating these secret atmospheres that are more climates of the soul than of places or events. Among these, as distinct in their natures and connotations as any other natural duality, the colors yellow and blue are the most significant; it is they that best reflect the fundamental duality of Fitzgerald's imaginary world. They are usually linked in such a way that their contrast underlines the nature of a given situation or moment. Their conjunction seems to be the sign of a fleeting instant of harmony and beauty, whereas their dissociation suggests disorder or latent conflict. There is nothing pat or preestablished about the effects they engender. Blue can be cold or tender or sentimental, yellow ardent or powerful or destructive, and these are just some of the associations that seem obvious. But their "meaning" is never frozen into an allegorical hierarchy. Glowing within a constellation of other symbols, a color can serve as a leitmotiv. For example, Gatsby, whose innermost nature is stamped by the influence of the moon, of water, of night, is associated with blue, the blue of the grass in his lawns and of his servants' uniforms. But the image he shows the world, a false one, is deliberately given a golden, sunlit gleam, as in is luxurious yellow automobile. Tom Buchanan is subject to no such ambiguity: he is determinedly sunny, aggressively sure of his power, a sturdy, straw-haired man of thirty who is first seen in the book standing booted and solid before his French windows as they glint with the gold of the setting sun. Fitzgerald's use of color could be purely descriptive, but rarely did he fail to aim at another reality beneath the surface. If there is one area in Fitzgerald's work in which realism is no more than a facade, it is in his use of color and light.

The story's realistic background is merely a prop. Blue is, of course, the color of water, the sky, twilight; whiskey, wheat and straw are golden. But these colors are concurrently literary qualities that draw the deep meaning of their relationships not only from this individual artist's imagination, but also from the collective imagination of a country, a history. (pp. 142-46)

Close to this type of usage is the synesthesia by which a color in ***Gatsby*** is not only seen but felt, touched, tasted, savored in its density and weight. The specific density of yellow is as well a moral factor here as a physical one. In the heroic days of the pioneer settlements west of the Alleghenies, farmers who found it too difficult and costly to haul their crops over the mountains converted their grain into alcohol, which was lighter and less bulky; the alcohol was easily exchanged for gold, or replaced gold in local barter arrangements. Metamorphoses of yellow, its conversion from one form to another, the concentration of its substance that transforms its nature and distorts its original meaning: here we have a new and central metaphor in Fitzgerald's imagination.

The process is clearly perceived in the vegetable kingdom: in it, yellow appears as a ripening and perversion of green. The shoot eventually becomes grain, what is juicy becomes dry, what is flexible hardens from vegetable to semimineral. A bluish sprout turns green, then, as though by combustion, goes yellow. Temporally, blue and green are the colors of growth, yellow that of fructification. On the one hand we have a fluid *span of time,* on the other an *instant,* intense and concentrated. Yellow is a point of culmination, a state, a substance, whereas blue and green are merely hope, surge, change. Realization of green's promise implies loss of substance—sap—and the dynamic and creative thrust of growth. Potentialities shrink in the transmutation; this is an immense reduction of dream to experience.

And experience, the actual series of events, tastes of ashes and death. For wheat's fate is to be reduced to flour, just as a mineral crumbles into dust. Vegetation's opposite is parodied in the Valley of Ashes, on the road from West Egg to New York, which sits like a gigantic memento mori, a Dantesque spectacle of nature ravaged and reduced to dust, a "desolate area of land. This is a valley of ashes—a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens; where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and, finally, with a transcendent effort, of men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air."

Gatsby's whole story and, behind it, that of a grand dream gone awry center on this symbol of contemporary America and its companion vision, on the book's last page, of a Long Island imagined in its primitive splendor, as the first navigators must have seen it. . . . (p. 147)

A new world's green freshness, the green light shining in the night: symbols of hope gone dry in the sun's heat. When wheat is ripe, its stalk, deprived of sap, goes to straw. Straw is sterile, inflammable, dangerous. When Nick takes the train to see the Buchanans on the hottest day of the year, his presence foretells the sun's victory, the conflagration that will disperse the book's characters; "the straw seats hovered on the edge of combustion." He and Gatsby wear straw hats when they go to visit Daisy, an admirable touch in a story that generally ignores men's headgear; nothing else could quite so well have connected the desiccating powers of gold and straw. A quatrain in the epigraph defines Gatsby's relationship with Daisy as that of a "gold-hatted, high-bouncing lover," and Fitzgerald had briefly considered calling his novel *Gold-Hatted Gatsby.* The iconographic and symbolic nature of the detail is reinforced a few pages farther on when women's hats are seen as helmets of metallic thread. A fairy-tale touch is introduced in Gatsby's remark that Daisy's voice is golden; the remark is immediately linked to fable by Nick's evocation of the musical clinking of gold, his vision of a princess in a white palace, "the king's daughter, the golden girl."

These few touches are enough to call up a legendary background. The two rivals, Buchanan and Gatsby, are competing in a tournament, and when they switch cars, it is meaningful because the machins then designate their drivers' real natures. Tom, the knight of the sun, the "sturdy, straw-haired man," takes the wheel of Gatsby's yellow car while Jay, the straw-hatted schlemiel, appropriately drives his adversary's blue convertible coupe. (p. 148)

Almost always, the juxtaposition of blue and yellow signals a state of balance and euphoria. The girls in yellow, for example, sound the trumpets of happiness in Gatsby's blue gardens. (p. 151)

This special image of juxtaposed blue and gold occurs again and again in flashes of gold on windows in the blue twilight. What is important here is the relationship of values rather than specific differences in pigmentation. Blue's tendency . . . is to darken, yellow's to brighten. Even when the two related colors pull away from each other, the blue toward a dull black and the yellow toward shining white, as they do in ***Tender Is the Night,*** the effects of their association are unchanged. The verb "to bloom," frequently used in conjunction with them, reveals the secret nature of colors that glow only at night, against a shadowy background, but are dried and withered by sunlight. This is why it is important to see yellow, the sun's prevailing color, apart from the sun's other two attributes, its heat and light. It reaches all its varnished intensity, its gleaming clarity, only when it is shielded from the light around it, contrasted with dark blue or displayed like a jewel against the velvety blackness of night. Daytime yellow is intolerably strident.

Removed from this night-colored casket, which demarcates it and serves as a foil for it, yellow glares, grows hostile. Its light burns and cracks what it touches, becomes the color of disintegration and chaos. It is beneficial only at a distance. A spectator must also stand off from it, in creative shadow; if he nears the light, it bursts into flame. The tyranny of the senses overwhelms the fervor of contemplation. But if proper precautions are taken, then yellow, resplendent in the darkness, becomes the emblem of a mystical vision. In "**Absolution**" Fitzgerald came closest to formulating an aesthetic—even an ethic—of yellow, merging it with the festival spirit, but carefully distinguishing its sacred and profane aspects. He speaks in the voice of the priest urging Rudolph to visit an amusement park:

> Go to one at night and stand a little way off from it in a dark place—under dark trees. You'll see a big wheel made of lights turning in the air . . . and everything will twinkle. But it won't remind you of anything, you see. It will all just hang out there in the night like a colored balloon—like a big yellow lantern on a pole."
>
> Father Schwartz frowned as he suddenly thought of something. "But don't get up close," he warned Rudolph, "because if you do you'll only feel the heat and the sweat and the life."

This may have been the lesson Gatsby learns. Hadn't Nick told him that his brilliantly lighted house resembled a fairground? At his parties he always remains aloof from his guests, never joining in their games, their dancing; he stands alone in the moonlight on the top step of the marble stairs leading to his door. This separation in space reflects a distancing in time as well. Removed from the present, he lives in memory a love reduced to its essence, for it too is sheltered from "the heat and the sweat and the life."

A whole connotative system is thus erected in climates and seasons of the spirit. A thorough study could bring out the isomorphism of yellow, the sun, heat, dryness and shrillness, for example, in contrast with their opposites, blue, the moon, coolness, moisture and depth. The qualities of day and night, of dawn and dusk, summer and winter are subject to the attraction of these magnetic poles dissociated from their alternation in time, making their influence felt not only in clock and calendar time but in interior space. In the last resort, the countless elements in these two constellations can only be identified by what is most immediately visible in them, the yellowness or blueness of their brightest stars, which thus take on the status of ultimate, indivisible meanings, of the grand, antithetical system that pervades Fitzgerald's universe. Finally, yellow and blue become primary elements, essential qualities toward which gravitate the material and spiritual principles on which the specific character of Fitzgerald's work is based. They can rightly be considered the monads of his imaginary cosmos. (pp. 151-52)

André Le Vot, in his F. Scott Fitzgerald: A Biography, *translated by William Byron, Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1983, 393 p.*

JEFFREY STEINBRINK (essay date 1980)

[*In the following excerpt, Steinbrink discusses Fitzgerald's artistic intent in* The Great Gatsby, *which he believes attempts to reconcile the past and present while maintaining hope for the future.*]

Fitzgerald wrote the bulk of *The Great Gatsby* in 1924, when he was twenty-eight. It might be described as an attempt to explore the relationship between the past and the present in the hope of discovering a sense of balance between giddiness and despair capable of sustaining a man without delusion as he enters life's long decline. It is many other things as well, of course, but among its main concerns is how to face "the promise of . . . loneliness . . . , a thinning briefcase of enthusiasm, thinning hair" as we drive "on toward death through the cooling twilight." ***The Great Gatsby*** exhorts those of us who would be reconciled with the future to see the past truly, to acknowledge its irrecoverability, and to chasten our expectations in view of our slight stature in the world of time and our ever-diminishing store of vitality.

We are brought to this understanding, however, only when we realize and accept the unlikelihood of regeneration or renewal in an entropic universe. Repeatedly in ***The Great Gatsby*** Fitzgerald allows us (and perhaps himself as well) to entertain the hope that it is possible to make a "fresh start"—to undo the calamities of the past or to relive its quintessential moments. The geographic dislocation of all the important characters in the novel is in itself suggestive of this hope; each, like Fitzgerald himself, is a midwesterner gone east, a descendant of the pioneers trying to reverse the flow of history. (p. 159)

The notion that the flow of history can be arrested, perhaps even reversed, recurs in ***The Great Gatsby*** as a consequence of the universal human capacity for regret and the concomitant tendency to wish for something better. Nick Carraway has come East not simply to learn the bond business, but because his wartime experiences have left him restless in his midwestern hometown and because he wishes to make a clean break in his relationship with a woman whom he likes but has no intention of marrying. The predominant traits of Nick's character—patience, honesty, and levelheadedness—derive from his sure senses of history and social position, and yet in the chronology of the story he is first to succumb to the idea that life is subject to continual renewal. . . . The fresh start Nick seeks in the East represents not so much a rejection of his heritage as a declaration of its inadequacy to satisfy the rather ambiguous yearnings of the post-war generation. Stimulated by his contact with the teeming city and the novelty of his circumstances of West Egg, Nick gives in to a most compelling illusion. "I had that familiar conviction," he says, "that life was beginning over again with the summer." . . . (p. 160)

Tom and Daisy Buchanan, their marriage in pieces, have similarly come East, determined to settle after several years of "drift[ing] here and there unrestfully wherever people played polo and were rich together." . . . "'I'd be a God damned fool to live anywhere else,'" says Tom, whose foolishness is hardly a consequence of geography. Tom is a classic manifestation of entropic theory in human form. Nick describes him as "one of those men who reach such an acute limited excellence at twenty-one that everything afterward savors of anti-climax." . . . Tom's single consolation may well be his muddled perception that he is not alone in his fall. "'Civilization,'" he says, "'[is] going to pieces'." . . . Daisy lives with a perpetual illusion of recreation, transparent even to herself; she supposes that the meaning of life can be restored or revived by proper superficial ministrations, as rhinestones are added to an old gown. Thus she instigates senseless and enervating trips to the city, speaks thrillingly of dismal and mundane topics, and is charmed by Jay Gatsby's devotion without fully comprehending its meaning.

Even Jordan Baker, hard, cool, and perhaps the most resolutely cynical of Fitzgerald's characters, gives lip service to the regeneration myth. To Daisy's theatrical but heartfelt question, "'What'll we do with ourselves this afternoon . . . , and the day after that, and the next thirty years?''' Jordan responds, '' 'Don't be morbid. . . . Life starts all over again when it gets crisp in the fall'.'' . . . Her remark neatly complements Nick's earlier acknowledgement of a sense of rebirth with the coming of summer, but Nick discovers (as Jordan apparently does not) that while these illusions may give momentary comfort, to surrender to the myth of rejuvenation is to deny both the nature of reality and the chance for a modicum of contentment. Jordan, of course, surrender to nothing and so is unlikely to be much affected by her misconceptions.

The same cannot be said of the Great Gatsby himself. Like Nick, Daisy, Tom, and Jordan, Gatsby has emigrated from the heart of the continent to establish himself in the East, and like them he is anxious to believe that the possibilities of life do not diminish with time; unlike them, however, he adopts the myth of regeneration as the single sustaining principle of his existence. Gatsby's past is punctuated by a series of seeming fresh starts: As a young boy he jotted Franklinesque resolutions in his copy of *Hopalong Cassidy,* proving to his father's satisfaction that he '' 'was bound to get ahead.' '' As a seventeen-year-old combing the beaches of Lake Superior he readied himself for the future by fashioning a wholly new identity. As a protegé of Dan Cody he acquired the experience which began turning his romantic musings into hard realities. As an army officer he assumed a manner in keeping with the deference paid him by society and took Daisy Fay as a kind of emotional hostage. After the war he did what he thought necessary to become what he had let Daisy believe he was, and to ransom her back.

Gatsby's accomplishments are a credit to his energy, enthusiasm, and singlemindedness, his sheer determination at all costs to stem the flow of history's current. "There was something gorgeous about him," Nick says, "some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life . . .—it was an extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness such as I have never found in any other person and which it is not likely I shall ever find again." . . . His gift for hope, as it turns out, is Gatsby's curse as well as his blessing, since it insulates him from the rational and experiential restraints which might otherwise temper the intensity of his ambition. Having managed so well at apparent self-creation and recreation, he allows his sensitivity to life's promises to blur into a belief in its limitless possibilities; ultimately he longs to conquer the passage of time itself. History is a very real force to Gatsby—in fact, almost a tangible commodity—and his patient, arduous assault upon it sometimes seems likely to succeed. (pp. 160-62)

The act of self-generation, a marvelous exercise of will in the face of the force of history, established the terms of Gatsby's life and set the tone of his subsequent behavior. He learned early that detachment, disingenuousness, chicanery, and nerve often rendered even the most imposing circumstances malleable; especially under the protective mantle of his army lieutenancy he found himself capable of taking from the world almost anything he wanted, virtually without penalty. In taking Daisy, however, he allowed his detachment to slip, and once more he entered the world of time—of human ties, memories, and decay. (p. 162)

His affair with Daisy becomes the definitive circumstance of Gatsby's past. In a sense it is the *only* circumstance, all others—his experiences in the war, his five-months' study at Oxford, his "gonnegtion" with Meyer Wolfsheim, his lavish Long Island parties—seeming to him significant or relevant only insofar as they related to his regaining her love. Gatsby realizes the intensity of his commitment to this past only when he returns from the war to visit Louisville, Daisy's hometown, after she has wed Tom Buchanan. He finds amid the familiar walks and houses no vestige of the happiness he had known there and he understands that his memories lie buried in time as well as space. . . . That this longing persists, undiminished, is suggested by Gatsby's striking a similar attitude when Nick first sees him, peering across the bay toward Daisy's green light, five years later. (p. 163)

Because he believes in the myth of regeneration and misapprehends the nature of history in an entropic cosmos, Gatsby becomes a victim of his past. He tells Nick that he has drifted about since the war '' 'trying to forget something very sad that happened to me long ago'," . . . but in truth he has not only kept alive his memory of losing Daisy but devoted all his energies to getting her back. As his sympathy for his extraordinary neighbor grows Nick comes gradually to appreciate the scope and sincerity of Gatsby's single passion. "He talked a lot about the past," Nick says, "and I gathered that he wanted to recover something, some idea of himself perhaps, that had gone into loving Daisy. His life had been confused and disordered since then, but if he could once return to a certain starting place and go over it all slowly, he could find out what that thing was." . . . To "return to a certain starting place" is precisely Gatsby's ambition—to fight back through time and make a fresh start in order to "correct" history and suspend the steady dissipation of the universe. (pp. 163-64)

Although this truth comes to Nick slowly as the threads of the story gradually unravel in his hands he is nevertheless awestruck by the proportions of Gatsby's ambition, the quality of his hope, and the degree of his confusion. "He wanted nothing less of Daisy," Nick marvels, "than that she should go to Tom and say: 'I never loved you.' After she had obliterated four years with that sentence they could decide upon the more practical measures to be taken. One of them was that, after she was free, they were to go back to Louisville and be married from her house—just as if it were five years ago." . . . The custodian of common sense and of historical consciousness, Nick urges moderation. '' 'I wouldn't ask too much of her,' '' he says. '' 'You can't repeat the past.' '' '' 'Can't repeat the past?' '' Gatsby cries incredulously. '' 'Why of course you can . . . ! I'm going to fix everything just the way it was before. . . . She'll see'." . . . Here, then, is an open acknowledgement of Gatsby's presumption—of his "greatness" and his error. He will "fix" the past just as Wolfsheim fixed the 1919 World Series, by manipulating people and circumstances to suit his necessities. Gatsby, says [David W.] Noble, "would bring Daisy back to 1917. He would obliterate her marriage and her motherhood. He would restore her virginity." It is the supreme test of his Platonic will and of his faith in the human capacity for renewal, a test which he can only fail.

The scene of that failure is the confrontation between Gatsby and Tom Buchanan which takes place in a Plaza Hotel suite on a hot August afternoon. There Gatsby, who assures Daisy that her unhappy relationship with Tom is '' 'all over now,' '' insists that '' 'It doesn't matter any more. Tell him the truth,' '' he urges, '' '—that you never loved him—and it's all wiped out forever'." . . . Here, however, the irreversibility of human experience asserts itself as Tom—brutish and self-indulgent and sure of his instincts—breaks Daisy's spirit of rebellion by showing that it rests on a lie. '' 'Oh, you want too much!' '' she cries to Gatsby. '' 'I love you now—isn't that enough? I can't help what's past . . . I did love him once but I loved you too'." . . .

That Daisy "can't help what's past" marks the end of Gatsby's hopes for the future, since it is precisely that help which he had expected of her. Nick, who is as prepared to accept Daisy's limitations as Gatsby is determined to deny them, observes that after her admission ". . . only the dead dream fought on as the afternoon slipped away, trying to touch what was no longer tangible. . . ." . . . (pp. 164-65)

Gatsby's dream, the exercise of his Platonic will, obscures his vision of the world as it is and clouds his understanding of the historical process. It becomes Nick's responsibility, in telling Gatsby's story, to see that process truly and to reconcile to it the events of the summer of 1922. He is, in fact, driven toward this integrative view of past and present both by his penchant for honesty and by a sense of the connectedness of time which is part of his inheritance as a Carraway. Unlike Gatsby, Nick accepts the circumstance of being rooted in space and time, acknowledging both the limitations and the reassurances which those roots provide. Speaking of his home at the end of the book—no longer "the ragged edge of the universe" but "my Middle West"—Nick says, "I am part of that, a little solemn with the feel of those long winters, a little complacent from growing up in the Carraway house in a city where dwellings are still called through decades by a family's name." . . . (p. 167)

Nick returns to that home after Gatsby's death, reversing the tendency toward eastern migration with which the story began and indicating an intention to take up life where he had left it—to reenter the flow of his own personal history rather than resist it. In doing so he seems to many to be admitting defeat and withdrawing from the uncertainties of the present into the security of the past. Having had his glimpse of life's futility, proponents of this reading assert, Nick shrinks from further involvement and seeks a kind of non-life near the ancestral hearth. Finally to regard Nick in this way, however, seems to place him ultimately in the camp of the Buchanans, whose relationship with the world at large has deteriorated to a series of retreats, escapes, and evasions. Nick has neither the callousness nor the moral opacity to behave with the vast carelessness of Tom and Daisy, and to reduce him to their stature is to deny the genuine sympathy, even love, with which he tells Gatsby's story.

The telling of that story itself is perhaps the best evidence that Nick refuses simply to withdraw from the experiences of the summer but seeks rather to learn from them. Certainly his capacity for optimism—together with his adolescent restlessness—has been greatly diminished by his having been so privileged a witness of Gatsby's fall. He returns to Minnesota a somber, sadder, and more modest man than he left. And yet for him to retire from life altogether would amount to an ultimate repudiation of Gatsby and his fragile, fated dream. Nick is determined, rather, to demonstrate Gatsby's greatness as well as his monumental foolishness, and in telling the story to examine the interplay of vision and restraint, of timeless imagination and historical reality, in the hope of striking a proper balance between the two. He sees that it is the tension between the incessant diminution of energy in an entropic universe and the perennial thrust of human expectations which gives life meaning.

It is on this note of accommodation, of very modest dreams in light of the sobering realities of history, that *The Great Gatsby* ends. Looking simultaneously back over the story he has told and forward to the future, Nick acknowledges with gratitude man's gift for hope while he accepts with equanimity the disillusionment which that gift often precipitates:

> Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter—tomorrow we will run faster, stretch our arms farther. . . . And one fine morning—
>
> So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past. . . .

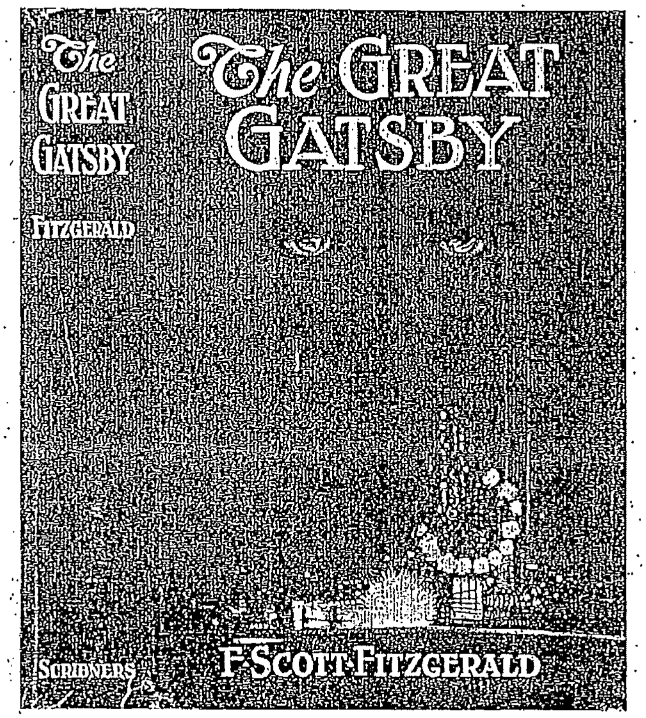
And so we must, apparently, for according to Fitzgerald man lives successfully only in a state of equilibrium between resistance to the current and surrender to its flow. He must accommodate the lessons of his past to his visions of the future, giving it to neither, in order to stand poised for happiness or disappointment in the present. (pp. 167-68)

Jeffrey Steinbrink, "'Boats against the Current': Mortality and the Myth of Renewal in 'The Great Gatsby'," in Twentieth Century Literature, *Vol. 26, No. 2, Summer, 1980, pp. 157-70.*

WARREN BENNETT (essay date 1980)

[In the following excerpt, Bennett discusses Fitzgerald's use of eye imagery in The Great Gatsby. *He maintains that the novel's pattern of ocular imagery was prefigured in several of Fitzgerald's earlier works and that this imagery was later refined and employed as an important aspect of* Gatsby.*]*

The billboard advertisement of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg in Fitzgerald's ***The Great Gatsby*** and its emphasis on Eckleburg's eyes has been the subject of a prodigious amount of interpre-



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