

AN OPTICAL ILLUSION CALLED *THE GREAT GATSBY***Ernest Lockridge****Emeritus Professor of English, The Ohio State University
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“The only picture was an over-enlarged photograph, apparently a hen sitting on a blurred rock. Looked at from a distance however the hen resolved itself into a bonnet and the countenance of a stout old lady beamed down into the room.” (The Great Gatsby, Chapter 2, p. 33)

I

In a 1924 letter F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote, “My new novel [*The Great Gatsby*] . . . is a new thinking out of the idea of illusion. The business of creating illusion is more to my taste and talent.”¹ The “illusion” turned out to be perhaps altogether too “new,” for after *Gatsby’s* 1925 publication Fitzgerald complained that “of all the reviews, even the most enthusiastic, not one had the slightest idea what the book was about.”² Now, in its ninth decade bathed in an enthusiasm that has buoyed *The Great Gatsby* to the top of the literary food chain, there remains a need to understand the nature of Fitzgerald’s “new thinking out of the idea of illusion,” and how the author goes about “the business of creating” it.

Let me outline briefly *The Great Gatsby's* “story” and “meaning” as both have been generally understood since 1925. An American gangster (Jay Gatsby) moves to within striking distance of his lost love (Daisy Buchanan), now married to a philandering plutocrat (Tom Buchanan) whose current mistress (Myrtle Wilson) is wed to an auto-mechanic. When Daisy learns her ex-lover lives nearby, she asks a friend (Jordan Baker) to solicit Daisy’s distant cousin (Nick Carraway, Gatsby’s next-door neighbor) to arrange a tryst. A liaison between Gatsby and Daisy arouses Tom Buchanan’s jealousy. Driving home in Gatsby’s garish yellow automobile after an argument between husband and lover regarding which of them she truly loves, Daisy strikes Myrtle who has dashed into the road. Unaware of Myrtle’s identity, Daisy “[runs her] over . . . like you’d run over a dog and never even [stops] the car” (187).³ Although Gatsby was merely a passenger, Tom believes him to have been the driver and misinforms Wilson of this. Out for revenge and suspecting Gatsby of being Myrtle’s lover, Wilson murders Gatsby and commits suicide. This love-quadrangle is recounted by Nick Carraway who introduces himself to the reader with the self-administered back-pat that he is “inclined to reserve all

judgements [sic]” ; nevertheless, his preamble to the story fairly bristles with judgmentalism: “abnormal,” “unjust,” “wild,” “plagiaristic,” “scorn, “ “foul” (5-7). In fact Carraway seeds “his” entire narrative with all manner of scornfulness and wild praise, including: “I am one of the few honest people that I have ever known” (64). Even so, Fitzgerald scholarship ranks Carraway among the most reliable first-person narrators in all of Literature, and condemns Daisy as little more than an empty vessel unworthy of Gatsby’s love—a love that is no less than a synecdoche for The American Dream!

The actual novel, however, is cluttered with intractable odds and ends that do not yield readily to the commonly recognized “plot,” or to the thematic pressure of National mythology. There remains an unruliness that will not toe the party line. Examples include: McKee (“I was sitting beside his bed and he was sitting up between the sheets clad in his underwear . . .”) 42; Owl Eyes, whose corrected vision pierces illusion to the truth (49-50, 59-60); Dr. T.J. Eckleberg, that “wild wag of an oculist” whose billboard eyes look out over “the valley of ashes” (27); Klipspringer, Gatsby’s omnipresent “boarder” who bears the name of an antelope with large sensitive ears and is

privy to Gatsby's and Daisy's trysts (99-101); the Buchanan butler with a highly sensitive nose (18-19); Meyer Wolfshiem, Gatsby's gangster overlord and mentor, whose thugs suddenly replace Gatsby's entire household staff shortly before his murder (119-20); Daisy overhearing her husband telling the enraged Wilson that Gatsby owns the death car (187). These and myriad other offbeat particulars linger like jigsaw puzzle pieces that we have not yet assembled. *The Great Gatsby* continues to make readers feel something more than they understand.⁴

II

“The business of creating illusion” in *The Great Gatsby* begins and ends with Fitzgerald's first-person narrator, the brilliantly named but clueless Nick Carraway whose vision is chronically out of focus. When Gatsby speaks in barely articulate formulations such as “It's pretty isn't it, old sport” and “Look here, old sport . . . , what's your opinion of me, anyhow?” Carraway describes such verbal chaff as “elegant sentences.” When Gatsby produces a photograph of himself “with a cricket bat in his hand” to cap a preposterous account of his life, an account that is obviously “plagiaristic and marred by obvious

suppressions” (6), Carraway leaps to the conclusion, “Then it was all true!”(69-71) “The truth was that Jay Gatsby of West Egg, Long Island, sprang from his Platonic conception of himself. He was a son of God—a phrase if it means anything, means just that”—thus Carraway’s preamble to yet another version of Gatsby’s life, an account Carraway concludes by asserting, “I’ve put it down here with the idea of exploding those first wild rumors of [Gatsby’s] antecedents” (104-7). But to pronounce someone “a son of God” is to perpetrate the wildest of “wild rumors” concerning anyone’s “antecedents.” Carraway’s assertion that Gatsby is “related to one of those intricate machines that register earthquakes ten thousand miles away” describes Carraway, himself, who is consistently blind to what is lying under his nose (6). His name, a punning-sleight-of-hand, both conceals and reveals this narrator’s flawed vision: “Carraway” gets *“carried away.”*”

Carraway misses everything of significance in the story he tells. He has absolutely *no* “privileged glimpses into the human heart,” including his own (7). He suppresses or remains unaware of his own nature—for example, his disdain for women, and the latent homosexuality (here, McKee is key) which transmutes the “young

ruffian” Gatsby into Carraway’s love-of-his-life. It is love alone which explains why Carraway exempts the “gorgeous” Gatsby “who [represents] everything for which [Carraway has] an unaffected scorn” from the net of opprobrium Carraway casts over most of the novel’s landscape (16). Carraway tells us that his tomboyish girlfriend “Jordan Baker instinctively [avoids] clever, shrewd men” (63). Of Daisy’s husband Tom, Carraway remarks that “there is no confusion like the confusion of a simple mind” (131), not realizing that he, himself, is the poster boy for simple-minded confusion. Carraway fails to recognize his story’s very *plot*, the skein of cause-and-effect that results in the hit-and-run homicide of Myrtle Wilson, the murder of Myrtle’s husband, and of Gatsby who is discovered shot dead and floating on an unpunctured air-mattress, an oddity our narrator characteristically lets pass without comment. At almost every turn, Carraway “[distorts reality] beyond [the] eyes’ power of correction” (185).

Carraway quite accurately describes himself as “slow-thinking,” and admits that he has “no sight into Daisy’s heart.” Clearly he is blind to why Daisy invites him over at the novel’s outset. To make her

husband Tom jealous, Daisy engineers a strategic flirtation with Carraway--or, more likely, knowing already that Gatsby and Carraway are neighbors, she means to use Carraway as a go-between. Daisy Buchanan only *seems* to float through the novel like a glittering wraith behind the Sirens' song of her voice (13-14, 82). To Carraway, she is delicate, passive, unworldly, "gleaming like silver, safe and proud above the hot struggles of the poor" (157). "What'll we plan?" she vamps . "What do people plan?" (16) But Daisy's "helplessness" is theater to mask her ruthless purpose to defeat Myrtle Wilson, a dangerous rival from the hot land of the poor who is invading Daisy's hitherto secure world of ease and enormous wealth. Unseen by Carraway, Daisy drives *The Great Gatsby's* hidden plot.

Note that Daisy instigates the confrontation between Gatsby and her husband, Tom. She flaunts her relationship with Gatsby. She insists that they take the "show" to New York. "Let's all go to town . . . ,' *demanded Daisy insistently*" (emphasis added). Daisy determines who rides with whom and in whose car (125-8). Daisy's command to Tom that he open the whiskey pushes him to bring things "out in the open at last." The she-loves-me-she-loves-me-not petal-pulling-match

between Tom and Gatsby culminates in Daisy choosing her husband over her love-blind dupe. “[Daisy turns] to her husband,” who assures her, “I’m going to take better care of you from now on” (136-40).

And that would be that, were it not for the ongoing existence of Tom’s mistress, Myrtle Wilson. Whereupon lo! Myrtle dashes in front of Daisy who, making no effort to brake, runs her inconvenient rival down and drives off, a hit-and-run homicide even though Daisy, a non-drinker(82), has Gatsby to testify that Myrtle was at fault (151-2). Carraway makes no inference that Daisy knows Myrtle’s identity, despite “the fact that [Tom] had [a mistress] was insisted upon wherever he was known. His acquaintances resented the fact that he turned up at popular restaurants with her and, leaving her at a table, sauntered about, chatting with whomsoever he knew” (28). Additionally, the Buchanan *butler* who answers whenever Myrtle brazenly phones the Buchanan house doubles as the Buchanan *chauffeur*. “Ferdie,” says Daisy, her tone smacking of intimacy. “His name is Ferdie,” and Carraway wonders out loud whether gasoline, like the silver polish, affects Ferdie’s delicate nose, for it is Ferdie who frequently brings Tom’s car to Myrtle’s husband, would sniff out

Myrtle's identity, and inform his own irresistible "mistress" (18-19, 90). Such details form a seamless web of clues that the ferociously self-protective Daisy *knows* Myrtle in the headlights; therefore, the killing is no mere accident, it is *murder*. The "slow-thinking" Carraway *is blind even to the possibility that there has been one*.

Daisy makes no effort to warn the now-superfluous but still dangerously persistent Gatsby that Myrtle Wilson's husband, on a rampage to avenge his wife's death, is heading over to Gatsby's mansion to murder him (187). Meanwhile, lurking backstage is Gatsby's mentor, Godfather Wolfshiem who "made [Gatsby]" (179) and can just as well *unmake* him. Gatsby has unforgivably violated Wolfshiem's prohibition against chasing after a married woman (77), in consequence of which Tom Buchanan is now sticking his big, powerful nose into and endangering a major criminal caper that Wolfshiem has afoot (141). Wolfshiem's gangster-cronies invade Gatsby's household, and the new chauffeur, "one of Wolfshiem's protégées," supposedly does not think "anything about" the shots that kill his boss (169). Carraway dutifully reports such matters as though they were unconnected, discrete objects scattered randomly about the

landscape and not a two-pronged attack on Gatsby's life. Like Doctor Watson and Colonel Hastings, the clueless narrators of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Dame Agatha Christie, Fitzgerald's own earnest, plodding narrator deftly manages, wherever humanly possible, to mislead the reader by plausibly missing the point, thus "[throwing] dust into [the reader's] eyes"(187).

In *The Great Gatsby*, as in the Great World, no Sherlock Holmes or Hercule Poirot steps from behind the curtain to redirect our sight. That "wild wag of an oculist" F.S. Fitzgerald has abandoned this "valley of ashes," leaving us on our own in his "new thinking out of the idea of illusion," a compact yet monumental work of art that is, in its author's words, "something new, something extraordinary and beautiful and *simple* and intricately patterned."⁵

III

The Great Gatsby reveals F.Scott Fitzgerald to be a wolf in sheep's clothing, an extreme realist disguised as a romantic. His great novel embodies a great human predicament and forces us to experience it, unmediated: that it is not possible with utter certainty to *see. Anything. Gatsby* embodies the optical illusion that we can

truly *see* somebody's thoughts and motives, or our own, or what a glance means, or what occurred when we were not there, or what is truly occurring when we are. Like Carraway whose terrible vision makes him exactly like us we do not see that we do not see.

Critical analysis aside, *The Great Gatsby* immediately convinces even the casual reader that nothing in it is capricious, or accidental to Fitzgerald's overall design. As with Mona Lisa, *Eroica*, Falling Water, *Hamlet*, the Parthenon, a David Copperfield illusion, we are able to experience a complex work of art without seeing –or *having to see*–the underlying pattern, the Figure in the Carpet, the magician's legerdemain.

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Notes

1. Letter to Moran Tudery, 1924.
2. Letter to Edmund Wilson, 1923
3. All page references are to: F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, ed. Matthew J. Bruccoli (New York: Collier Books, 1992).

4. Cf. Ernest Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast* (New York: Scribner's, 1964), p. 75.

5. Letter to Maxwell Perkins, 1922.

For a detailed version of this argument: Ernest Lockridge, "F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Trompe l'Oeil* and *The Great Gatsby's* Buried Plot," *The Journal of Narrative Technique* (Vol. Seventeen, Number Two, Spring, 1987), 163-83. Also: www.ernestlockridge.net.