

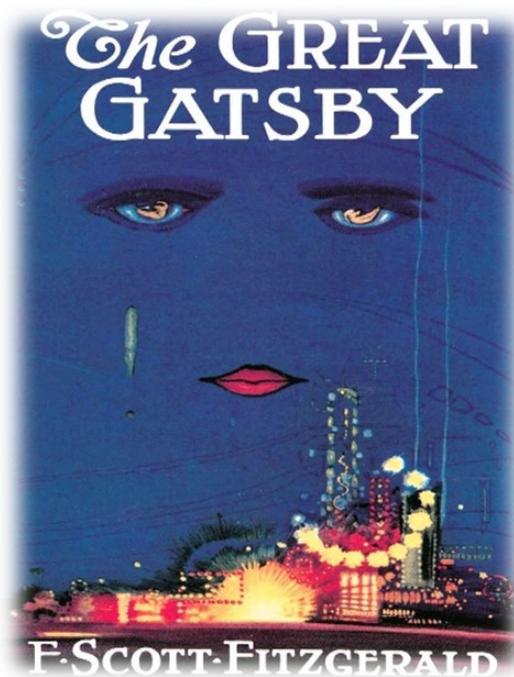
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By Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence
Dr. Andrew Roth

The Great Gatsby: 'Almost 100 and Counting'



Happy New Year – 2022!

It takes a moment to realize that 1922, the Roaring Twenties and The Age of Ruth – the “Big Bam” – Babe Ruth – was a hundred years ago. Almost a century old itself, describing events that occurred during the summer of 1922, F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* was first published in 1925 to modest critical praise and an even more modest reception by the reading public. Although it has subsequently sold millions upon millions of copies, in 1925 it managed a meager 20,000 copies sold, disappointing Fitzgerald who had hoped for a big success freeing him from the grind of writing short fiction for the “slick” commercial

press. Magazines like *The Saturday Evening Post* and others were called the “slicks” because they were the first to be printed on slick, shiny, coated paper.

Although it is frequently called *the* Great American novel – Adam Gopnik wrote in the *New Yorker* in February 2010 that it was one of the three perfect American novels, the other two being *Huckleberry Finn* and *The Catcher in the Rye* [1] – some of Fitzgerald’s contemporaries thought another 1925 novel of the Jazz Age (a phrase Fitzgerald coined) greater.

One suspects with their tongues firmly planted in their cheeks, none other than Edith Wharton thought Anita Loos’ 1925 *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* “the great American novel” and George Santayana thought it “without hesitation the best book on philosophy written by an American.” [2] *The Guardian* had it at #49 on its list of “The 100 Best Novels.” [3] I always found the sanitized 1953 Marilyn Monroe film version a hoot, so, inspired by these comments, I bought the novel’s Kindle version. I must confess, although at times the elliptic style of its “The Illuminating Diary of a Professional Lady” can be annoying, it’s hard to argue with Loos’ proto-feminist heroine Lorelei Lee’s axioms that “I told him I thought that any girl who was a lady would not even think of having such a good time that she did not remember to hang onto her jewelry” and “A kiss on the hand may make you feel very nice, but a diamond and sapphire necklace lasts forever.” [4]

Oh, if only Jay Gatsby, *nee* James Gatz, had been so prescient.

Battling alcoholism and writing his unfinished novel about the business of Hollywood, *The Last Tycoon*, Fitzgerald died in 1940 at 44 thinking himself a failure. He did not live to see his *Gatsby* begin to receive critical respect in the early 1940s when Edmund Wilson included it in an edition of *The Last Tycoon*. Its popularity zoomed when the Council on Books in Wartime distributed 155,000 copies to American troops during World War II thinking that soldiers would be distracted by its mixture of blondes (*cf.* Anita Loos), booze, suggestive sex, gangsters, and violence.

They were.

By the late 1940s, early 1950s there was a full-scale “Gatsby Revival.” It became a staple of college literature courses and even many senior year high school honors English classes. (**Nb.** Full disclosure – in the early 1970s I must have taught it at least a half-dozen times in then Gannon College’s required English courses for freshmen and sophomores). From its revival in the 1950s to the present, it has spawned at least two films, numerous imitations, a literal flood of critical analysis and evaluation, and escaped, so far, the strictures of awakened scolds agitated by its subtle racism, misogyny, and not so subtle antisemitism. It has, as noted, sold millions and millions of copies; with its copyright having expired in January 2021 and the novel now in the public domain, one can anticipate a steady flow of editions and adaptations flowering across the mediaverse. Remembering what Demi Moore did to *The Scarlet Letter*, one cringes at the thought of some revisionist giving us a Gatsby with a happy ending, one in which, say, Wilson shoots Tom Buchanan and Gatsby and Daisy live happily ever after.

Given all of that, what is there left to say about *The Great Gatsby*?

It has become part of the American cultural wallpaper. And, like wallpaper, it is frequently seen but rarely noted. So, what is there to “note” about *The Great Gatsby*? With a twinge of guilt at contributing to the ever metastasizing “Gatsbyiana,” let’s make “note” of three or four things about *Gatsby* the novel

meriting notice: its autobiographical roots, the beauty of its style and structure, its links to *The American Tapestry Project*, and conclude by asking who in this cast of flawed characters one might admire.

True to the most basic advice given to any aspiring writer, Fitzgerald wrote about what he knew. His first novel, *This Side of Paradise*, grew out of his college days at Princeton creating for many the enduring image of American “college life” as a social spree only occasionally interrupted by academic demands. In both *The Beautiful and the Damned*, in which he wrote about New York City café society, the Jazz Age, and East Coast social elites, or *Tender Is the Night*, in which through the story of Dick and Nicole Diver’s deteriorating marriage, he mirrored his own fraught marriage to Zelda Sayre. At first *The Great Gatsby* seems to be different, but upon closer examination it shares the same concerns – the obsession with wealth and social status and the price one pays for loving the wrong person.

Fitzgerald was obsessed with the rich, whom he famously told Ernest Hemingway are different than you and me, to which Hemingway, the steely, realistic, post-romantic allegedly retorted, “Yes, they have more money.” It was an opinion Fitzgerald couldn’t understand. Always the outsider, the son of a bankrupt failure of a father living off his wife’s inheritance, Fitzgerald was dazzled by wealth and the wealthy who surrounded him but of whom he could never be a part. An “almost insider,” Fitzgerald was like the character Barbara Stanwyck played in *Stella Dallas* with her nose against the plate glass window looking at the glittering world just beyond her reach. Named after Francis Scott Key, who wrote “The Star-Spangled Banner,” Fitzgerald was the son of a socially ambitious mother and a dissolute father with roots in America’s colonial elite. Born in St. Paul, Minnesota, Fitzgerald, for one who always thought himself poor, attended elite New England prep schools and then Princeton University, where he became a major figure in the university’s literary and social life. He made lifelong friendships with John Peale Bishop and Edmund Wilson and became a leading member of the socially exclusive Triangle Club.

Then the romantic Fitzgerald, in both the literary and amorous senses of the word, met and fell in love with the love of his life – Ginevra King of Lake Forest, Illinois. She was the 16-year-old daughter of a socially prominent Chicago family; he, the 19-year-old Princeton student scion of a family that was, well, neither wealthy nor prominent. When their slightly less than two-year romance ended in January 1917, fracturing on the sharp edge of Ginevra’s father’s stern rebuke that “poor boys shouldn’t think of marrying rich girls,” Fitzgerald came unwound. He flunked out of Princeton and joined the Army hoping to die in combat in World War I.

He didn’t, but while stationed in Montgomery, Alabama in July 1918 he met Zelda Sayre. Daughter of an Alabama Supreme Court judge, Zelda was the embodiment of aristocratic southern young womanhood. Desperately in love, Fitzgerald vowed to return to marry her as soon as he had earned sufficient resources to satisfy her dubious father. When success proved more elusive than the young romantics imagined, Zelda broke the engagement. Fitzgerald returned to St. Paul, where after an epic drinking binge, he completed his first novel, *This Side of Paradise*, which accomplished two things: it made Fitzgerald both famous and able to afford a wife, which Zelda quickly agreed to become. Thus, it set in motion one of the more disastrous marriages in the history of American literature, but that would be another *Book Note*.

Does any of this sound familiar?

When Fitzgerald wrote of young James Gatz's broken heart pining for Daisy Buchanan, he wrote from his own broken heart pining for Ginevra King, whom he never forgot, morphing her and Zelda Sayre into the sublimely shallow Daisy Buchanan unworthy of either he or Gatsby's love. And, when he wrote of Gatsby as the archetypal outsider, the archetypal poor boy seeking inclusion via a heroic act of self-reinvention, Fitzgerald wrote of his own self-reinvention from outsider-wannabe to literary lion of the age.

All of which he accomplished by the age of 24.

So, when Gatsby replies to Carraway's admonition that you can't change history, you can't change who you are, you can't repeat the past ("Can't repeat the past? Gatsby cried incredulously, "Why, of course you can!"), it is Fitzgerald speaking for himself. [5] Although, as Fitzgerald's own life proved, Gatsby was wrong and Carraway right, for Fitzgerald, like Gatsby (like all of us?) found himself continuously being dragged back into that history he saw receding before him, for all his life he was dogged by money problems, all of his life he sought approval from a world that seemed gloriously indifferent to either his talent or he and Daisy's travails.

All of his life Fitzgerald oscillated between a whiny need for approval and a faux-gallant flamboyance captured in the epigraph to *The Great Gatsby*: "Then wear the gold hat, if that will move her,/If you can bounce high, bounce for her too/Till she cry 'Lover, gold-hatted high bouncing lover,/ I must have you.'" [6] The epigraph signed "Thomas Park D'Invillers" was, in fact, written by Fitzgerald himself to give the novel a cachet he wasn't certain it possessed. The "her" for whom the poet dances is Ginevra/Zelda/Daisy and that other goddess both Fitzgerald and Gatsby pursued – material success and fame, only to discover too late that it was unworthy of either of them.

If *The Great Gatsby's* autobiographical roots are noteworthy, they are made so by the imaginative elegance of its style and structure and by the beauty of Fitzgerald's prose transmuting the mere dross of experience into art. As Fitzgerald said of Gatsby, so it could also be said of himself that "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 ... it was an extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness" to embrace life's possibilities. [7] It was a romantic readiness to see, in describing the approach to Tom and Daisy's home, not simply a green expanse of grass, but a "lawn (which) started at the beach and ran toward the front door for a quarter of a mile, jumping over sun-dials and brick walks and burning gardens – finally when it reached the house drifting up the side in bright vines as though from the momentum of its run." [8]

Or, when first describing Daisy and her friend Jordan Baker, "A breeze blew through the room, blew curtains in at one end and out the other like pale flags, twisting them up toward the frosted wedding cake of a ceiling – then rippled over the wine-colored rug, making a shadow on it as wind does on the sea. ... The only completely stationary object in the room was an enormous couch on which two young women were buoyed up as upon an anchored balloon. They were both in white and their dresses were rippling and fluttering as if they had just been blown back in after a short flight around the house." [9] Fitzgerald, who with a painter's eye painted with words, could also limn with Dickensian precision life's grimmer

(grimier) vistas, such as the industrial wasteland hosting Wilson's garage "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." [10]

Upon hearing I was re-reading *The Great Gatsby*, a friend asked, "What do you think?" I replied, "The son-of-a-b..." can write!" Just as John Leonard said somewhere about Joan Didion, "just try to rewrite one of her sentences to make it better – it can't be done." So, too, Fitzgerald, who at his best, like all great singers, poets, and writers, sounds like no one but himself. But it is not only his sentences, which admittedly can come perilously close to being over-written but never quite slip over the edge, that mark *The Great Gatsby's* art. Fitzgerald self-consciously wanted to create a work of art that not only told a story to make sense of the experience he sought to share, but he wanted the reader to share in the story's emotional resonance by participating in its creation.

Although flashbacks were not a new narrative tool, Fitzgerald's use of them to create a verbal collage to tell his story created a new narrative pattern. This collage, this montage of images required the reader to engage with the text to connect the dots, somewhat like a pointillist painting wrought large in which the reader/viewer must engage with the overlapping images to reveal the story they tell. Describing events that occurred during the summer of 1922, Fitzgerald did not follow a simple linear pattern beginning at Point A, which in the novel would be the dinner party at the Buchanan's in early June two weeks before, as Daisy points out, "the longest day of the year," and proceeding in a straight line towards the end in late September and Gatsby's funeral. Rather, Fitzgerald tells Gatsby's story in a sequence of extended set pieces. Some of them follow one another chronologically, others are flashbacks or flashforwards and still others what one might call "asides."

The first two set pieces, the dinner at the Buchanans' and Tom and Nick's excursion in New York with Myrtle following one another both in the novel and in time sequence, but the description of Gatsby's party has no chronological relationship to what precedes or follows it but is intended to introduce us to Gatsby and to comment indirectly on the surrounding action. Similarly, Gatsby's meeting with Daisy, the ensuing affair, Nick's meeting Wolfsheim with Gatsby in New York where they also encounter Tom Buchanan, the penultimate confrontation between Gatsby and Buchanan, the accident, Wilson shooting Gatsby, Henry Gatz's appearance for the funeral and the story of young James Gatz's meeting Dan Cody and his metamorphosis into Jay Gatsby flash back and forth across the action not in a straight-forward narrative line but in a verbal collage of incident, observation, and counter-incident. Fitzgerald creates a novelized poem, if you will, in which each episode/image impacts what comes before and after, much like in the modernist poetry of Fitzgerald's contemporaries – Pound, Stevens, and Eliot.

It is the interplay between the imagistic set pieces, propelled by the elegance of Fitzgerald's language that gives the novel its emotional power.

Telling a simple story would have reduced it to mere prose.

Regardless of autobiography and style, however, the story of James Gatz's transformation into Jay Gatsby remains almost a hundred years after its composition of, if not *the*, most noteworthy commentaries on the American

experiment. And that commentary rests upon the tension between Fitzgerald's two alter egos. On the one hand, Gatsby personifies Fitzgerald's faith in the American promise of the transformational and liberating power of wealth and material success. On the other, Nick Carraway, the somewhat bland and a bit arch in his fading Calvinist rectitude, shares Fitzgerald's sense that not fulfillment but a lie resides in that promise's ambiguous double-edge. Gatsby, the high bouncing lover, believes in the power of personal liberty and individual self-creation. Carraway, the plodder, after a dalliance with the bond market, recoils at the excess and narcissism of that pursuit retreating into the communally shared values of personal responsibility, hard work, and the mutual support of his hardware store-owning family.

Fitzgerald casts it as the conflict between midwestern (he calls them "western," but the Midwest a hundred years ago was the West) and eastern values. The Midwest symbolizes family, home and communal shared responsibility; the East the *go-go*, get it while you can individual pursuit of wealth and material success. It has been often said that Fitzgerald in *The Great Gatsby* saw – "intuited"? – the contradiction at the heart of the *American Dream*. A phrase, by the way, which had not yet been coined, it first appearing in James Truslow Adams' 1931 *The Epic of America*. [11] It is a theme I have explored before in *Book Notes* and at the Jefferson Educational Society and on WQLN-NPR in my *The American Tapestry Project*.

In the fourth of that project's major threads, "The American Dream: A Nation of 'Hustlers,'" I explore the latent contradictions in Americans' pursuit of material well-being. First, the tension between individual gain and community responsibility; second, the tension between the inferred promise of personal transcendence through material prosperity and that promises frequent shriveling of the spirit; third, the tension between those Americans who work hard (hustle) and those Americans who in the pursuit of personal gain will cut (perhaps more than "cut") a corner to achieve their ends ("hustle," as in *hustler*); and, lastly, the tension between the past one cannot escape and the American belief that one can reinvent oneself by moving on, if not literally as in going to the frontier, which was closing as Fitzgerald wrote, then metaphorically by delving deep into that venerable American invention – the self-help industry and recreating oneself in one's own image free of the past, discarding one's heritage like shedding a skin for a new and better you – Benjamin Franklin, Dale Carnegie and a host of imitators' "Yes I Can" phenomena.

Fitzgerald saw it all.

He saw that neither Dan Cody's gold miner's greed nor Tom Buchanan's inherited sense of worth can sustain the larger community; he saw that rather than transcend oneself, material success can just as easily draw one deeper into a solipsistic devouring of one's soul causing one to lose sight of who one is; he saw that those who work hard are at the mercy of those who cut corners, either benignly like the coupon-clipping Buchanan or more aggressively like Gatsby, the bootlegger and shady financier, and Wolfsheim who fixed the World Series because he saw an opportunity; and Fitzgerald saw that James Gatz could not escape being James Gatz by becoming Jay Gatsby because wherever you go, there you are.

We continue to read *The Great Gatsby* a hundred years after its first appearance not for the glitzy and, let's face it, overly melodramatic love story, not for the prototypical "*E-entertainment*," *People* magazine foray into the lifestyles

of the rich and famous, but for that first glimpse into the divide between America's essentialist imaginings and its existential reality.

We tell ourselves we're Jeffersonians living on small farms and in small towns caring for ourselves and our neighbors, but we live in Alexander Hamilton's world of high finance, sharp operators, big cities, and individuals "on the make." Or, to be fair to Hamilton, to the dark underside of the vision Hamilton did not see and Jefferson always feared. Fitzgerald gives memorable expression to multiple facets of that vision's underside: its witting and unwitting racism and misogyny; its fear of the other and anti-immigrant bias; its worship of what was once called "filthy lucre" and godless mammon; its nascent worship of celebrity and those who would cut corners.

What is Fitzgerald's solution?

He doesn't offer one; in fact, his gloomy if eloquent ending implies Americans have botched their chance, have botched the great opportunity presented by the Dutch sailor's vision "who held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder." [12] Gatsby believed in that vision: "Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter – tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther. ... And one fine morning – So, we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past." [12]

Fitzgerald's vision is ultimately pagan. He sees life as an endlessly repeated cycle that humans are doomed, despite their best efforts and dreams, to endlessly repeat.

I think he's wrong.

He himself hints at the solution. First, although he tried, he did not tell the story of America as truthfully as possible; for example, perhaps misled by his unwitting Eurocentrism, he did not mention that that vast continent the Dutch sailor saw was not empty. You can only go forward by beginning with seeing the past fully and completely. If not, it will, as Gatsby learned and Carraway and Fitzgerald sense, come back to undo you. For as Fitzgerald's great contemporary, William Faulkner, said, "The past isn't dead. It's not even past." Jay Gatsby's great lesson is that you can't build a life upon a lie. You need to be yourself; you need to be true to yourself. As a million self-help clichés say – you need to own your own "stuff."

More importantly, Fitzgerald seems to intuit that the answer lies in some odd amalgam of Nick Carraway, Jordan Baker, and Meyer Wolfsheim's virtues. Carraway carries within himself America's foundational values of liberty and personal freedom tempered by responsibility for home, family, community. They're not as dramatic as Gatsby nor as temptingly elegant as Tom and Daisy, but they are the bedrock upon which societies are built. That Carraway himself seems ineffectual and dull is part of the challenge. Confronted by all the glitz, he doubts himself and the decidedly non-glitzy demands of community building, whose work is done far away from the bright lights in the long, hard labor of getting up every day when no one is looking and doing what needs doing whether you want to or not.

It is also like Jordan Baker. She is not the most admirable of people; nonetheless, she knows who she is, she is comfortable in her own skin, and she doesn't seek to

be anyone else but herself. As she says, she dislikes careless people; that is people who do not respect themselves and not respecting themselves do not respect others. Lastly, it's like Meyer Wolfsheim, another character of dubious virtue, who nonetheless knows the one thing upon which community is built. As he says, "Let us learn to show our friendship for a man when he is alive and not after he is dead." [13] In short, life is for the living and to live it well, we need to learn to care for one another by treating one another as we would have others treat us.

Maybe, in the end, *The Great Gatsby* isn't about Gatsby at all, but about Nick Carraway and all the other decidedly non-glitzy, non-celebrity people who hold society together. All the people Fitzgerald's father wasn't.

And, then again, maybe not.



-- Andrew Roth, Ph.D.
Scholar-in-Residence
The Jefferson Educational Society
roth@jeserie.org

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End Notes

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12. Fitzgerald, **The Great Gatsby**, p. 154.
13. Ibid., p. 147.

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