
THE
GREAT GATSBY

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emagazine The Great Gatsby special

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The Great Gatsby an emag[plus] special

1. Nicolas Tredell on the role of Jordan Baker, 'the balancing girl', a piece drawing on and extending his talk at the latest *emagazine* conference in October 2011.
   Nicolas is Consultant Editor of Palgrave's Essential Criticism Guides and author of *The Great Gatsby* and *Tender is the Night* in Palgrave's 'Analysing Texts' series. He is also a regular writer for *emagazine*.
2. Ray Cluley on *Gatsby* and Advertising.
   Ray is Course Manager for English Literature at South Downs College.
3. Rebecca Platt on Gatsby, 'The Waste Land' and the Fisher King Legend.
   Rebecca teaches at Bradley Stoke Community School.
4. Tony Cavender on Fitzgerald's Women in *The Great Gatsby*.
   Tony teaches English Literature at South Downs College.
5. Dan Melvin on 'Exploding Romantic Myths: A Post-Colonial Reading'.
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6. Jem Clear on Fitzgerald's storytelling in *The Great Gatsby*.
   Jem teaches A Level English Literature and is an Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Birmingham.

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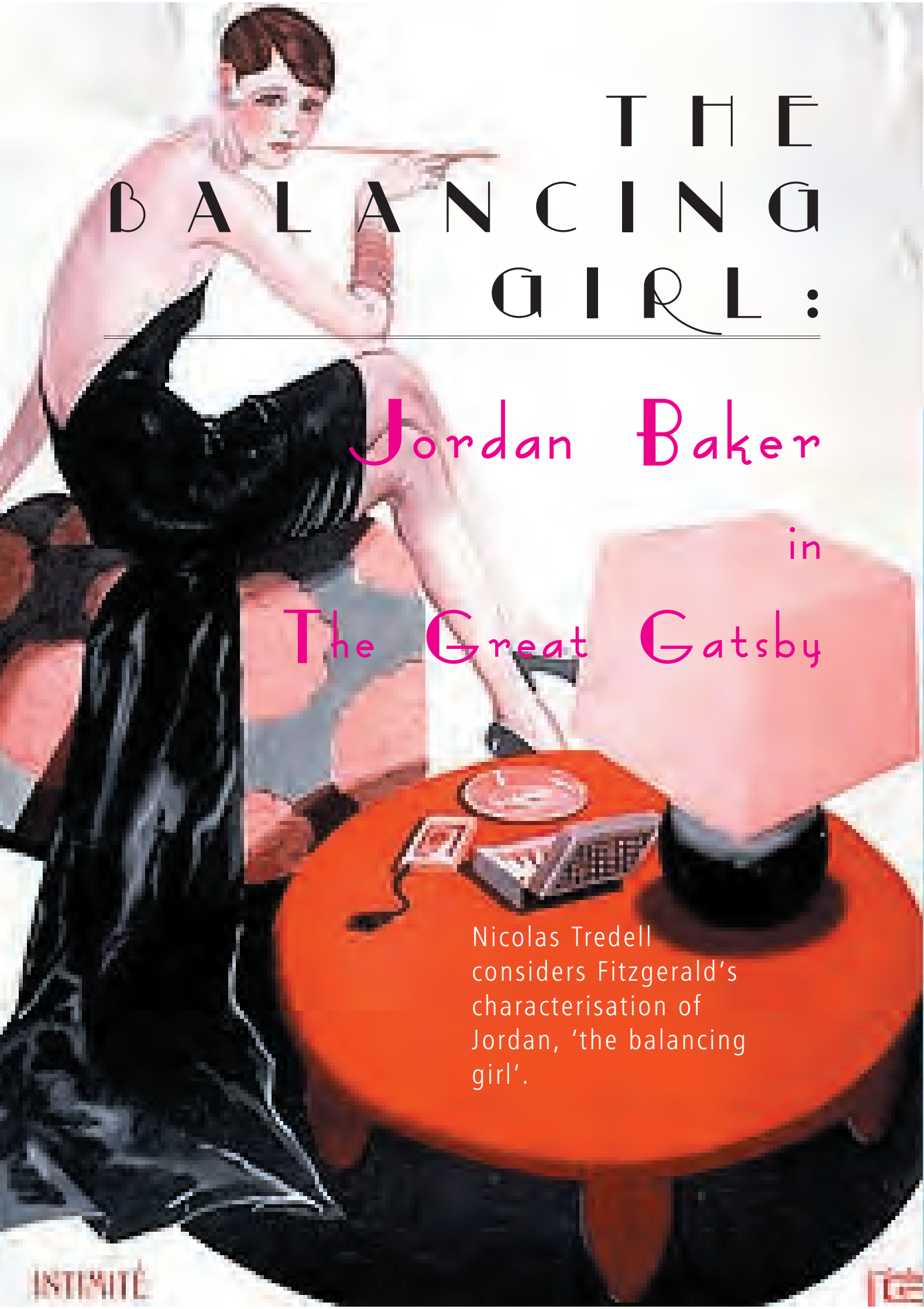


THE BALANCING GIRL:

Jordan Baker in The Great Gatsby

Nicolas Tredell considers Fitzgerald's characterisation of Jordan, 'the balancing girl'.

The Great Gatsby is the 'intricately patterned' novel Fitzgerald wanted to write and Jordan Baker figures significantly in this pattern.* Fitzgerald uses Jordan to develop his narrative by supplying information at key points, especially in Chapter 4; he weaves her into the novel's symbolic structure by linking her with colours (white, grey, gold, green) and with the motifs of the automobile and of driving; and, in his mapping of modern times in *The Great Gatsby*, he presents her as the epitome of the emancipated young American woman.

Fitzgerald's portrayal of Jordan also exemplifies one of the key strengths and subtleties of his narrative technique in *The Great Gatsby*; it gives us Nick Carraway's version of characters and events but also hints how we might see these differently. These hints enable us to interpret Jordan Baker as a more sympathetic and less superficial character than Nick allows. Such an interpretation must acknowledge that Jordan is not a real person but a fictional construction, an element of a complex textual pattern; our knowledge of her is constrained by her part in this pattern and by Fitzgerald's external portrayal of her, through appearance, action and dialogue, rather than through evoking her inner thoughts and feelings. But, by drawing on Fitzgerald's textual hints and applying relevant contextual material, we can challenge Nick's hostile view of Jordan. To do this enhances our sense of the complexity and ambiguity of *The Great Gatsby*.

Jordan's balancing act

When Nick first meets Jordan, he notices that her chin is 'raised a little, as if she were balancing something on it which was quite likely to fall'. This demonstrates one aspect of Fitzgerald's construction of character in *The Great Gatsby*; rather than an extensive account of physical features, he selects a few striking details which can assume a larger significance. This detail assumes such a significance when Nick, shortly afterwards, calls Jordan 'the balancing girl'. This phrase could serve as an image of Jordan throughout the novel; she is a young woman trying to balance four roles with her own desires.

Husband-hunter and flapper

Jordan's first role, the most conventional, is that she is an attractive, single, wealthy, well-connected young woman and any such woman, to adapt Jane Austen, must be in want of a husband. But husband-hunting is not Jordan's main concern in *The Great Gatsby*. If it were, she could easily have caught one – Nick acknowledges that 'she could have married [several men] at a nod of her head'. But for the moment she is living out other roles. One of these is the quintessential role for the emancipated young American woman of the early 1920s: the flapper.

Two features make Jordan a flapper. One is her androgynous appearance, which mixes male and female characteristics; in Chapter 1, Nick describes her 'erect carriage, which she accentuated by throwing her body backward at the shoulders like a young cadet' – another striking, carefully chosen detail. Such gender-bending was one of the ways flappers signalled their freedom from conventional female constraints. Jordan's other flapper-like feature is her independent behaviour; though she goes around with Nick she does not seem to need a man and moves easily through the world on her own.

Champion and celebrity

Jordan is no ordinary flapper, however; she is also – her third role – a sporting champion. It may be, as Nick alleges, that she cheats – though he has only hearsay evidence for this. But her sporting prowess seems genuine. At the age of 21, she enjoys the kind of eminence as a top amateur golfer that Tom Buchanan enjoyed as a top football player ten years before. She also shows a sportsperson's self-discipline. On that first evening at the Buchanans, she refuses a cocktail, saying:

'I'm absolutely in training.'

and announces, at ten o'clock:

'Time for this good girl to go to bed'

because she is playing in a golf tournament the next day.

As a sporting champion and a marriageable young woman, Jordan has also become a celebrity – her fourth role. Before Nick learns Jordan's full name, he thinks he has

'seen her, or a picture of her, somewhere before', and, when he discovers she is Jordan Baker, he realises she has appeared in 'many rotogravure pictures'. This confirms her celebrity status; rotogravure was a printing process particularly associated, in the 1920s with photographs of celebrities in newspapers and magazines. By making Jordan a celebrity, Fitzgerald enlarges his novel's mapping of modern times and enriches his characterisation of her.

In the twenty-first century, we live in an intense celebrity culture where the pressures of fame may promote self-destructive and even fatal behaviour – Amy Winehouse is a tragic recent example. Today's celebrity culture was taking off in 1920s America, and Fitzgerald and his wife Zelda, as young celebrities sucked into a maelstrom of publicity, knew all about it. To see Jordan as a celebrity permits a more charitable interpretation of what Nick regards as her hard, selfish behaviour: it could be a survival strategy to cope with the potentially destructive pressures of fame.

Three rebuffs

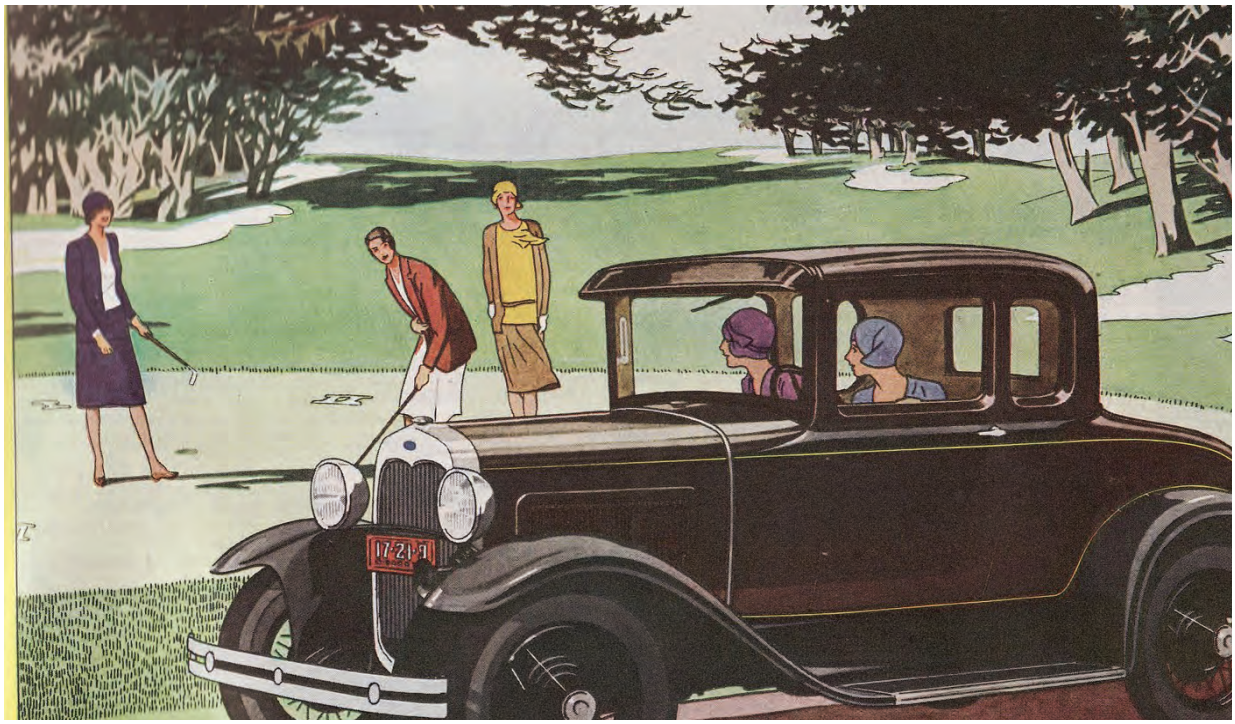
Jordan has to balance these four roles – the husband-hunter, the flapper, the sports champion and the media celebrity – with a more vulnerable aspect of herself. To have developed this aspect too much would have disturbed the proportions of the novel, but by hinting at it, Fitzgerald further enriches his characterisation. The flipside of Jordan's independence is isolation; apart from her aged aunt, the only member of her family the text mentions is her father, who died in 1919. It would be an exaggeration to call Nick a father figure for Jordan, but he is about nine years her senior and she does seem to see him, until her final disillusionment, as a moral mentor, 'rather an honest, straightforward person'. But on the three occasions she makes herself vulnerable to Nick, he rebuffs her.

The first rebuff occurs in Chapter 3 when Jordan is driving Nick and nearly hits a workman. Nick asks what would happen if she met a driver as careless as herself and she replies: 'I hope I never will [...] I hate careless people. That's why I like you'. Nick recognises this as a signal that Jordan is open to an emotionally deeper relationship with him but backs off from any such commitment.

The second rebuff is in Chapter 7. After Tom drives Jordan and Nick back to the Buchanan mansion from Wilson's garage, where Myrtle lies dead, he tells them to wait in the kitchen while he rings for a taxi; Nick accepts Tom's offer of a taxi but refuses to enter the house. When Jordan tries to coax him, he says 'No, thanks'; when she persists he makes no reply but explodes inwardly:

I'd be damned if I'd go in; I'd had enough of all of them for one day, and suddenly that included Jordan too.

Jordan then 'turned abruptly away and ran



up the porch steps into the house'. Her unusually rapid movements suggest her distress at Nick's rebuff.

Jordan suffers her third rebuff in Chapter 8. On the day Gatsby will die, Jordan phones Nick at work and reproaches him: 'You weren't so nice to me last night'. Nick retorts 'How could it have mattered then?' and a silence follows. One way to interpret this silence would be to suggest that Jordan is shocked by Nick's insensitivity to her feelings. She says she still wants to see him, but they cannot agree on a rendezvous and the conversation ends – like their earlier one outside Tom's house – 'abruptly'.

Fitzgerald's balancing act

At Jordan and Nick's last meeting, Jordan makes it clear that she feels Nick rejected her, not vice versa: 'you did throw me over [...] it was a new experience for me, and I felt a little dizzy for a while'. The adjective 'dizzy' links with the early image of Jordan as 'the balancing girl' and shows that Nick, for a time, had the power to throw her off balance; that she is more vulnerable than Nick wants to believe. She has regained her balance now; but she may have lost something in the process.

We can make a final link, in conclusion, to one of Nick's first impressions of Jordan - with her 'chin raised a little, as if she were trying to balance something on it which was quite likely to fall' – and suggest that the object Jordan is trying to balance throughout the novel is, metaphorically, herself; she is engaged in the difficult, demanding and sometimes emotionally dangerous task of juggling the different roles and desires we have identified. To see her in this way suggests how Fitzgerald achieves his own balancing act with Jordan in *The Great Gatsby*; how he succeeds both in weaving her into the intricate pattern of the novel and in creating a rich, complex and contradictory fictional character who seems, by his masterly sleight of hand, to come alive.

Nicolas is Consultant Editor of Palgrave's Essential Criticism Guides and author of 'The Great Gatsby and Tender is the Night' *in Palgrave's 'Analysing Texts' series. He is also a regular writer for emagazine.*

Notes

* In July 1922, thinking about his third novel, Fitzgerald wrote to his editor at Scribner's, Maxwell Perkins: 'I want to write something new – something extraordinary and beautiful and simple + intricately patterned'.

The Great Gatsby: the advertisement of the man

Ray Cluley considers The Great Gatsby a text that shows how consumerism corrupts the American Dream. Here he looks at how appearances and the advertising culture of the time contribute both to this corruption and more specifically to the rise and demise of one man: Jay Gatsby.

Appearances and advertising are inextricably linked. Gatsby's very distinctive smile illustrates this early in the text, a smile that

concentrated on you with an irresistible prejudice in your favour…believed in you as you would like to believe in yourself, and assured you that it had precisely the impression of you that, at your best, you hoped to convey.

Here Gatsby is both salesman and product, and his smile his advertisement. His appeal is in making those around him feel appealing, and making the customer feel valued was a sure way of persuading them to value, and therefore buy, the product advertised – something Fitzgerald, with his own background in advertising, would have understood. Even the novel's title is a strikingly alliterative modified-noun, *The Great Gatsby* advertising the man long before we meet him.

A Self-Made Man

Advertising sells us our dreams, shows us what we *think* we want, and it's one dream in particular that this text focuses on: the American one. Whilst the American Dream means different things to different people, for many in the 1920s and 30s the dream meant belonging to the right class. This is certainly true for Gatsby, eager to attract the attention of Daisy, and money plays a crucial role in achieving this; you could buy this particular American Dream, or so the advertising culture would have you believe. Gatsby personifies the success myth that advertising promotes, quite literally making a name for himself (creating Gatsby from Gatz) and amassing a fortune to accompany his new identity. But his new identity lacks substance.

'You resemble the advertisement of the man.'

Daisy tells him more than once, the repetition emphasising her point. She may not know the real Gatsby, but she knows a false one

when she sees him. Not that it stops her buying into a dream of her own, albeit only for a little while.

Advertising in the twenties and thirties (and even now, for that matter) suggested satisfaction could be achieved simply by being among the right people, or wearing the right clothes. The popular parties thrown by Gatsby are clearly a reflection of this; occasions where 'men and girls came and went like moths among the whisperings and the champagne and the stars', the simile highlighting the attraction money can have. Gatsby's clothes reflect this too, particularly his 'silver shirt, and gold-coloured tie'. The well-known proud display of his shirts grants them a symbolic status, with the syndetic listing of

shirts with stripes and scrolls and plaids in coral and apple-green and lavender and faint orange, with monograms of Indian blue

indicating the wealth he was previously without. The shirts are 'piled like bricks', and this simile shows how Gatsby builds his identity via his appearance. But what you see isn't exactly what you get.

Gatsby has created this new identity for Daisy, though he was already 'extravagantly ambitious' prior to meeting her. To him Daisy represents not only a desirable woman but also a desirable class: 'Her voice is full of money' he observes, and it lures him like a Siren's song. Indeed, she deliberately manipulates her voice to draw people close, Nick telling us that

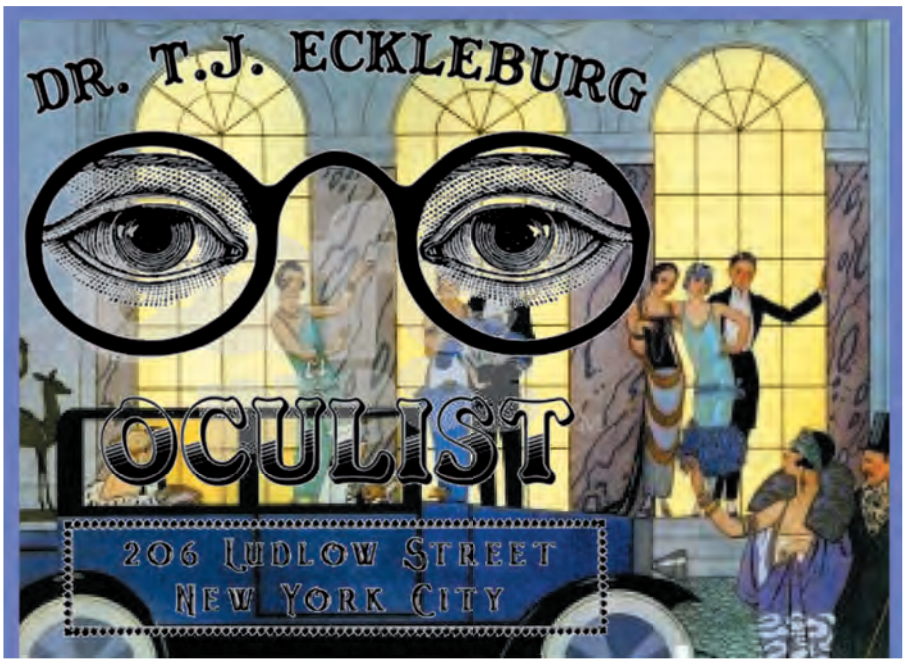
Daisy's murmur was only to make people lean toward her.

To Gatsby she represents success and he is motivated not only by a dream to be part of her life but by a dream to be part of her lifestyle.

Yet Daisy, the creator of dreams, also has a great capacity to destroy them. She personifies the idea, despite her white dresses, that America in the nineteen-twenties was no longer a virginally innocent, promising land but was in fact corrupted by wealth. She has a look that promises those she looks at 'that there was no one in the world she so much wanted to see', but it differs to Gatsby's smile in that it values the receiver in relation to her rather than to themselves. As an advertisement it focuses very much on selling the product rather than satisfying the consumer.

Alternative Realities

During a drive with Nick, Gatsby reveals something of his life because, he claims, 'I don't want you to get a wrong idea of me'. It's a comment thick with irony for that's precisely what Gatsby *does* want, not only of Nick but of everyone else. In order to sell himself as Jay Gatsby he has a number of 'autobiographical' stories, advertisements of the man he wishes to seem, and Nick is forced to suppress



'incredulous laughter'. He compares Gatsby's stories to 'skimming hastily through a dozen magazines', and yet…

And yet Gatsby has a number of items as evidence. He has a medal, and he has a photograph, and they're enough to convince Nick 'it was all true'. As a reader, though, we are somewhat doubtful; it seems likely that however genuine these articles may be, they are little more than props to support the fictions hidden between them. There's a conflict between the real and the illusory here, and thanks to Gatsby's evidence and Nick's not-so-reliable narration, we're not sure what to believe. Our first experience of one of Gatsby's parties introduces us to Owl-eyes inspecting the books of Gatsby's library. They're 'absolutely real' he tells Nick with amazement, having expected the opposite. He hurriedly replaces a volume in fear the entire library will collapse, an action that suggests it wouldn't stand up to prolonged or intensive scrutiny. Gatsby himself is much the same.

This conflict between the illusory and the real, and its potential for destruction, is illustrated via other characters in the text as well. Myrtle, for example, seeks to escape her life in the valley of ashes and manages this in part by living a double life. Her affair with Tom began with her noticing his appearance,

He had on a dress suit and patent leather shoes, and I couldn't keep my eyes off him

and significantly she tells us 'I had to pretend to be looking at the advertisement over his head'. Tom, having successfully sold himself and the life he seems to offer, begins an affair with Myrtle which allows her to buy into dreams of social status and romance. She marks this by changing her appearance; 'With the influence of the dress her personality had also undergone a change' Nick observes. Myrtle is a different person with Tom, or tries to be, which in turn allows him to pretend his life is different. When the real world threatens to intrude upon his

newly constructed one he reacts violently; Myrtle persists in reminding him of Daisy so

Tom Buchanan broke her nose with his open hand.

Indeed, whenever reality clashes against illusion in this novel the result is violently destructive; in particular, Gatsby's constructed identity is 'broken up like glass' against the reality Tom confronts him with.

Fitzgerald illustrates the violent repercussions of a conflict between the real and the illusory most successfully, though, via Myrtle's death. Mistaking Gatsby for Tom due to his car (one of the symbols of his wealth), Myrtle runs into the path of the vehicle and is killed.

The Ultimate Price

Fitzgerald's novel explores the price attached to the American Dream, presenting it as an ideal which money, in fact, cannot buy. He prepares us for this early with the billboard eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg, put in place to promote a practice only to fade beneath the sun and rain as the business adds its ashes to others in the valley. 'God sees

everything,' Wilson later says of the eyes which, combined with the reply 'That's an advertisement', serves as a suitable comment on the importance of advertising in the novel. Advertising may be society's 'green light', granting people the go ahead to buy into the false dreams that motivate them, but they certainly pay a high price for it in *The Great Gatsby*. It is Jay Gatsby, though, who pays the ultimate price. In acquiring and spending his riches, Gatsby becomes not only his own advertisement and product but his own dream, a dream from which he is awoken abruptly by a reality he had refused to acknowledge.

Ray Cluley is Course Manager for English Literature at South Downs College.

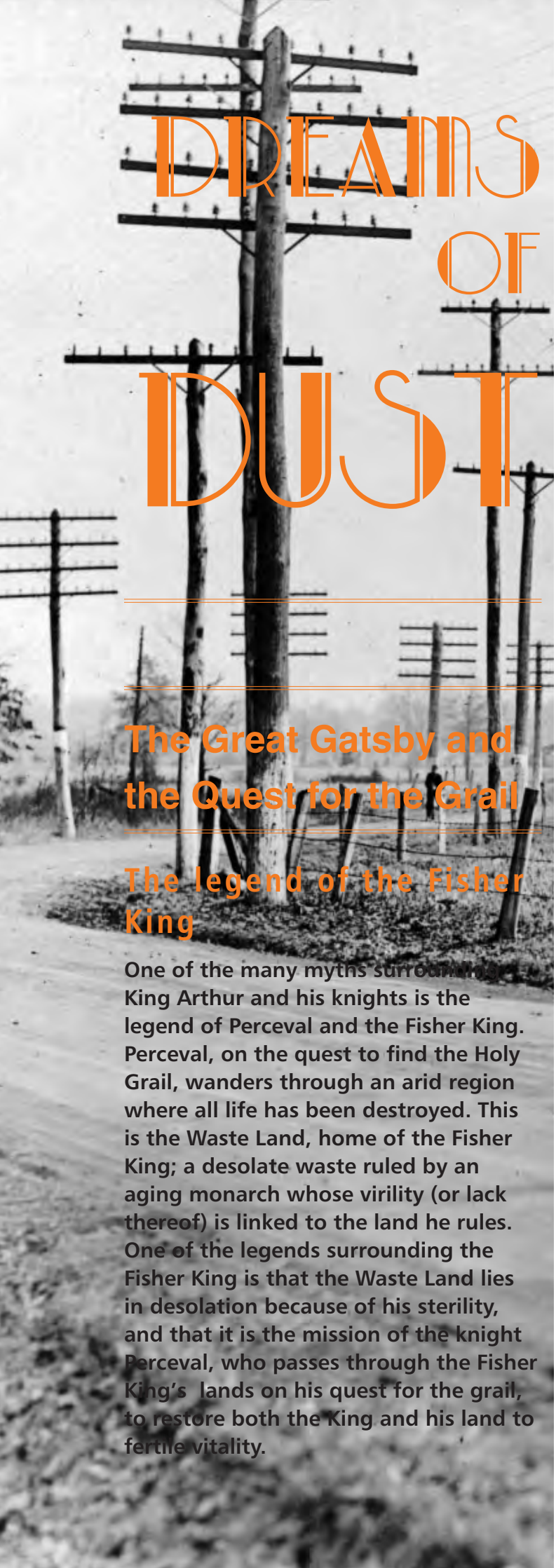
Further reading:

Harold Bloom (ed): *The Great Gatsby*

Leslie A. Fielder: *Love And Death In The American Novel*

Ernest Lockridge (ed), *Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Great Gatsby: A Collection of Critical Essays*

Roland Marchand: *Advertising The American Dream: Making Way For Modernity, 1920-1940*



DREAMS OF DUST

The Great Gatsby and the Quest for the Grail

The legend of the Fisher King

One of the many myths surrounding King Arthur and his knights is the legend of Perceval and the Fisher King. Perceval, on the quest to find the Holy Grail, wanders through an arid region where all life has been destroyed. This is the Waste Land, home of the Fisher King; a desolate waste ruled by an aging monarch whose virility (or lack thereof) is linked to the land he rules. One of the legends surrounding the Fisher King is that the Waste Land lies in desolation because of his sterility, and that it is the mission of the knight Perceval, who passes through the Fisher King's lands on his quest for the grail, to restore both the King and his land to fertile vitality.

The image of the Waste Land and its ruler has been used by many writers to symbolise the desolation they faced. In his poem 'The Waste Land', T. S. Eliot describes an 'arid plane', where the sterile Fisher King sits, waiting for rejuvenation. Fitzgerald's admiration of Eliot's poem is seen in his novel *The Great Gatsby* where he evokes the 'dust' of 'The Waste Land' in his own 'valley of ashes'. Eliot used the Waste Land's arid image to symbolise the sterility of a fragmented post-war Europe; Fitzgerald used the 'foul dust' of its planes to symbolise the empty desolation of America itself in the 1920s; a place of glittering surfaces and affected manners that thinly veiled an immoral land of desolate dust and ashes underneath.

The Waste Land 1: The Valley of Ashes

Before focusing on who takes on the role of Perceval in Fitzgerald's novel, it is necessary to look at the realm he must pass through; namely that of the Waste Land, the Fisher King's domain. On one level, in *The Great Gatsby*, this desolate kingdom is symbolised by the literal 'valley of ashes'. Described as a 'desolate area of land' this is a sterile environment where no life grows; instead the fertility of the land is grotesquely parodied by 'ashes [that] grow like wheat'. The valley, wedged between the glamour of the city and the glitter of East and West Egg is symbolic of the reality of America, a land of 'ash-grey' men who haunt this 'desolate area of land'. They are the dark shadows of the 'blazing' lights of Gatsby's house, already 'crumbling' into the 'vast carelessness' of America.

The resident of this 'grey land' is George Wilson who could be seen to symbolise the sick Fisher King. George's cuckolding by Tom is symbolic of the Fisher King's loss of virility. The 'vitality' that his wife Myrtle symbolises frequently deserts him, leaving him in an atmosphere of infertile desolation.

The discovery that his wife 'had some sort of life apart from him' causes George to be 'physically sick' as he is described as a 'worn-out' man. This image of George being faded and ill highlights his symbolic sterility; like the other 'ash-grey' men he too is 'crumbling' into nothingness.

The Waste Land 2: America

On another level, however, the Waste Land could be seen to symbolise not just the 'valley of ashes' but America itself. Gone is the 'fresh, green breast of the new world', replaced by the juxtaposed image of the 'shining dust' of the modern world. The image of 'dust' is used throughout the novel to symbolise this new Waste Land. It is a world of insubstantiality; 'a new world, material without being real' where the glittering façade of the 'artificial world' covers a vast emptiness where 'its inhabitants' move 'from nothing to nothing'. It is a world of insubstantial people, beliefs and morals. This world of 'nothing', this gaping void that is covered only by a gauzy 'fairy's wing', is the world inhabited by Tom and Daisy Buchanan. They symbolise the 'basic insincerity' of the desolated Waste Land; they 'smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together'. In this Waste Land it is the powerful physical presence of Tom that, paradoxically, embodies the role of the Fisher King. He becomes the guardian of this American Waste Land by continuing its desolation. This is seen by the conversion of Myrtle's 'intense vitality' into empty 'affected gestures'. In his company he warps her solid feelings into empty gestures. It is his symbolic representation of the reality of the 'unreality', the paradoxical solid world of nothingness, that destroys people like Gatsby who break 'up like glass against' it.

Perceval's Quest

Although, at first, it appears that Nick places Gatsby in role of Perceval (by declaring that he had 'committed himself to the following of a grail') it is in fact our humble narrator who steps into the role of Perceval. He symbolically takes up the quest to heal the desolate Waste Land of America to find the 'grail' of substance and 'moral attention' in a world full of immoral 'foul dust'. This quest to find a magical reality of solid virtues is symbolised for Nick by the term 'wonder'. Throughout his time in the East he keeps searching for an experience of wonder, a place that holds the mystery and beauty of America, but the desolation of the Waste Land thwarts him at every turn. When visiting the 'valley of ashes' for the first time he cannot believe it is utterly devoid of all beauty and romantic wonder:

It had occurred to me that this shadow of a garage must be a blind, and that sumptuous and romantic apartments were concealed overhead, when the proprietor himself appeared in the door of an office.

He looks for substance behind the shadow, a reality of beauty beneath the dust, but all he is greeted with is George, the symbolic representative of this sterile landscape. In his approach towards New York, Nick believes that he senses 'its first wild promise of all the mystery and the beauty in the world'. He is looking for the life of America, but all it contains is death; 'A dead man passed us in a hearse'.

Nick remains an outsider to the scenes laid before him, being both 'within and without', and it is because of this that he learns the truth of the Waste Land; that is a 'new world, material without being real'. He sees the contradictory 'shining dust' of its 'meretricious beauty' and that its inhabitants are 'an indefinite procession of shadows' moving 'from nothing to nothing'. Like the 'ash-grey' men of the valley Nick finally

sees the desolate void behind the glittering façade, and realises that 'what had amused me then turned septic on the air now'. It is as if, rather than healing the wounds of the land, Nick is more afraid that he will become infected by them.

Does Nick ever manage to succeed in his symbolic quest and find his grail of moral substance in an insubstantial 'unreal city'? At the end of the novel he seems to be no nearer his goal of finding someone, or somewhere, worthy of 'wonder'. After Gatsby's death, when the East becomes an area haunted by its pervading sense of nothingness, a place where 'no one knows' anyone and 'no one cares', Nick heads home to the West. He goes back to a place of identity, substance and longevity, where 'dwellings are still called through the decades by a family's name', and leaves the quest seemingly unfulfilled and the Waste Land a desolate 'distorted' nightmare under the 'dark fields of the republic'.

Rebecca Platt teaches A Level English Literature at Bradley Stoke Community School in Bristol.

WOMEN BEHAVING BADLY:

MALE VIEWPOINTS AND FEMALE VOICES IN THE GREAT GATSBY

'Girls just wanna have fun' sang Cyndi Lauper in 1983. This certainly seems to have been the case sixty years earlier for the young women known as 'flappers' in the 1920s. Freed by the trauma of the First World War from the codes both of behaviour and of dress of their mothers' generation, they were out to assert themselves and to enjoy themselves. The character Lucille in Chapter 3 of *The Great Gatsby* could act as their spokesperson: 'I never care what I do, so I always have a good time'. Fitzgerald's novel displays an ambiguous attitude towards this greater freedom for women, suggesting that in becoming more carefree (free from restraint and oppression) women had also become more care*less* (with no regard for others and even for their own dignity and reputation). Nick Carraway presents the male viewpoint but the women also speak for themselves.

Gatsby's parties are full of women having fun and behaving badly. Nick describes

a great number of single girls dancing individualistically or relieving the orchestra for a moment of the burden of the banjo or the traps

He refers to

a rowdy little girl who gave way upon the slightest provocation to uncontrollable laughter

Girls were swooning backward playfully into men's arms, even into groups, knowing that some one would arrest their falls

One 'young lady' is clearly presented by Nick as an object of pity and ridicule:

She had drunk a quantity of champagne, and during the course of her song she had decided, ineptly, that everything was very, very sad…The tears coursed down her cheeks – not freely, however, for when they came into contact with her heavily beaded eyelashes they assumed an inky colour, and pursued the rest of their way in slow black rivulets. A humorous suggestion was made that she sing the notes on her face…

But it is not just young women who show themselves up when worse for drink:

Most of the remaining women were now having fights with men said to be their husbands.

Two of these wives, reluctant to go home, have to be 'lifted, kicking, into the night' by their husbands. Then there is Miss Baedeker of whom another woman remarks, 'When she's had five or six cocktails she always starts screaming like that'. While Nick passes no overt judgment on this uninhibited behaviour, Tom Buchanan's characterisation of the party-goers as a 'menagerie' seems not unjustified.

At first glance, all of the three main female characters appear to be presented negatively. Daisy is superficial and affected, Jordan cool and aloof, Myrtle coarse and vulgar. But closer examination reveals a more complex picture.

Daisy speaks in a melodramatic fashion – 'I'm p-paralysed with happiness'. 'Passionately', 'ecstatically' are modifiers employed by Nick to describe her manner. He detects a falseness in this:

The instant her voice broke off, ceasing to compel my attention, my belief, I felt the basic insincerity of what she had said.

She is a distant but sentimental mother, cooing 'Bless-ed, prec-ious' over Pammy before handing her back to her nurse. Her life appears pointless and without direction

'What shall we plan?' She turned to me helplessly. 'What do people plan?'

Worst of all, she deserts Gatsby after the fatal hit-and-run and disappears from the novel. She is included with Tom in Nick's final damning judgment:

They were careless people, Tom and Daisy – they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness.

But is Nick right to make no distinction between Tom and Daisy? Daisy is, after all,

married to a brutal, unfaithful, ignorant and narrow-minded bully. Her life is empty and shallow. Her one attempt to break out of it – her relationship with Gatsby – is thwarted by a combination of her family, the First World War and delayed communication. Nick's is not the only account of Daisy's character and behaviour. Fitzgerald gives us Jordan Baker's account of events at the time of Daisy's wedding to Tom Buchanan and of Daisy's distraught reaction to receiving a fatefully belated letter from Gatsby: 'She began to cry –she cried and cried'. This, among other things, guides the reader towards an understanding of Daisy's bright, artificial manner as a mask for her feelings of loss and despair.

Nick criticises Jordan for being a 'rotten driver': 'Either you ought to be more careful, or you oughtn't to drive at all'. She says that other drivers are more careful and will keep out of her way: 'It takes two to make an accident'. Nick presents her as talking about this 'lightly'. Jordan is a liar and a cheat, haughty and reserved. Nick says she is 'incurably dishonest'. In the aftermath of Myrtles's death he also suggests that she's selfishly just thinking of herself, responding to her reproach, 'You weren't so nice to me last night', with a harsh 'How could it have mattered then?' To Nick, Jordan appears hard and self-sufficient. However, as with Daisy, this appearance can be seen as self-protection. Jordan is competing in the traditionally male world of sport, asserting an independence and freedom that is not possible for Daisy. This assertion requires toughness and resilience. That Nick misreads Jordan's character is suggested by their final face-to-face conversation, in which she accuses him of being 'another bad driver'. Jordan has come off worse from this 'accident', having revealed an emotional vulnerability that Nick does not suspect and still denies.

Myrtle Wilson is presented as being badly-spoken, lacking in taste, self-seeking. She is cruel and dismissive towards her husband, whom she married only because she thought he was a 'gentleman'. She is described by Nick as 'walking through her husband as though he were a ghost'. She is fond of celebrity magazines, the twenties' equivalent of *Hello* and *OK*. She is held up for the reader's ridicule and contempt through her pretentious and snobbish manners which

are belied by the errors in her speech: she declares,

I had a woman up here last week to look at my feet, and when she gave me the bill you'd of thought she had my appendicitus out.

She's an easy target for the Yale-educated Nick (and his Yale-educated creator). Yet ultimately Myrtle is a pathetic figure, desperate to escape her confined circumstances, married to a husband who is clearly not up to satisfying her desires (in more ways than one). References to dust and ashes, to Wilson's 'pale', 'anaemic' appearance, present a kind of living death. In Wilson's garage 'white ashen dust [veils] everything ….except [Myrtle]'. She is visibly bursting with life, with 'an immediately perceptible vitality'. Her clothes strain to contain her. In Tom she sees her one chance to fulfil her social and sexual ambitions.

Nick's critical view of the women in the novel is clear but is complicated by his unreliability as a narrator and by what he chooses not to tell us about himself. He seems to shy away from close relationships generally, but particularly those with women. He refers to two relationships apart from that with Jordan Baker; he does not name either woman and appears to have felt no deep attachment to them. His strongest feelings are reserved for Gatsby and there is a hint that Nick's sexuality might be questioned. His physical attraction to Jordan Baker is obvious from several references to her 'slender golden arm' and 'golden shoulder', but might be attributed more to her somewhat boyish physique: she is

a slender, small-breasted girl, with an erect carriage, which she accentuated by throwing her body backward at the shoulders like a young cadet.

There is also the curious ending of Chapter 2 where it is not clear if Nick is recalling a drunken dream or an actual event:

I was sitting beside his bed and [Mr McKee] was sitting up between the sheets, clad in his underwear…

Maybe it is just that Nick's Puritan morality is offended by the 'careless' partying girls and Daisy, Jordan and Myrtle. His viewpoint dominates the novel and tries to determine that of the reader; if, however, we listen to the voices of the women themselves, a moralistic stance becomes harder to take.

If the reader is attentive to the subtext and reads between the lines then he or she may pick up despair behind Daisy's cry, 'What'll we do with ourselves this afternoon… and the day after that, and the next thirty years?'; hurt behind the masculine bravado of Jordan's 'I don't give a damn about you now'; and anguished longing behind Myrtle's 'You can't live forever; you can't live forever.' The women in *The Great Gatsby* are desperate to live. Their voices, variously raucous, plaintive and coolly assertive, escape Nick's narrative control and create towards 'careless' women an ambiguity of attitude that is typical of the novel as a whole.

Tony Cavender teaches English Literature at South Downs College

Exploding romantic myths: a post-colonial reading of The Great Gatsby

Dan Melvin offers a very different reading of Fitzgerald's classic American novel.

Have we been asking the wrong question about *The Great Gatsby* all along? Namely, does his 'romantic readiness', this much-vaunted 'gift for hope' – synonymous apparently with the 'original' settlers' sense of 'wonder' at 'discovering' a new nation – exonerate Gatsby from the sort of moral censure that one might feel he deserves? Carraway, the novel's priggish, Midwestern narrator, certainly thinks so as he – equivocally but unmistakably – avers that Gatsby is 'exempt' from his 'scorn'.

It is invariably tempting to conflate narrator and author, to 'trust the teller,' when trying to determine the meaning of a tale; this is, however, invariably a mistake. Needless to say Fitzgerald is not Carraway. Fitzgerald knows that the lexis of discovery that he employs is laced with corruption; it becomes an ironic discourse, satirically inserted by the author not to absolve Gatsby or uphold a romantic myth of the discovery of a 'first' America, but rather to undermine him and such notions of discovery by associating both with the colonial aspirations of the 'original' settlers themselves.

If one examines two references: the allusion to Columbus' egg in Chapter 1 and the oft-cited lyrical denouement in which Carraway invokes the Dutch sailors' vision of a 'first' America, it will become apparent that Fitzgerald patterns his text with cultural-historical references loaded with irony, not as a way of romanticising the myth of Gatsby and the myth of America, as is commonly assumed.

The language of discovery that seems to encourage us to believe in the innocence and wonder of the first settlers isn't itself an innocent discourse; shrouding and consuming this language is the notion of inauthenticity. Nothing in *The Great Gatsby* can be accepted without scrutiny. This is intentional: Fitzgerald wanted to write a novel devastatingly ironic about a period of time, the Roaring Twenties, for which there could be no romantic redemption. He wants us to see, also, that the idea of a 'first' America, laden with 'wonder,' is sentimental fancy: Gatsby is representative of the twenties but also representative of the myth of the birth of America. It will become clear that more than a note of fraudulence hangs over Gatsby, Columbus and the Dutch sailors. Fitzgerald, by carefully rendering ironic the language of the pathfinder, forces us

to notice this in order that we deconstruct any idealistic notions we might have about Gatsby and the myth of the discovery of America.

Fitzgerald begins the novel by establishing its insincerity. One need only investigate the preface by one Thomas Parke D'Invilliers, an apt ditty encapsulating Gatsby's rise and fall. Parke D'Invilliers, however, is no obscure Keats, located in some dusty corner of Fitzgerald's private library; Parke D'Invilliers does not exist at all. Fitzgerald invents him in order to – insist on the text's disingenuousness even before the story has begun. This is not the only insincere textual marker: Gatsby's name and the rumours that abound about him have been well documented by critics; that Gatsby is not who he seems is well known. However, there is a textual insincerity cultivated by Fitzgerald that goes deeper than character and casts doubt on the authenticity of the origins of America itself.

In Chapter 1 Nick Carraway, after telling us what he thinks about Gatsby and a little about his background, describes East and West Egg on Long Island Sound, where the bulk of the novel takes place. In a parenthetical aside he fleshes out the description by saying (of the Eggs): 'like the egg in the Columbus story, they are both crushed flat at the contact end.. Seemingly insignificant, this is the first time in the text that Fitzgerald alludes to the discovery of America. He does not do this, however, to celebrate a time-honoured myth but rather to help us to deconstruct it. Fitzgerald must have appreciated the notion of Columbus discovering America as perhaps the greatest and most popular fallacy pertaining to American history. Firstly, it is surely a Eurocentric assumption that Columbus discovered America; the indigenous Indians might (rightly) contend otherwise. Secondly, Columbus was not even the first European explorer to discover it: Leif Ericson led a Norse expedition some years prior to Columbus – Columbus' voyage merely first established a lasting European contact with America. Thirdly, Columbus' intentions upon embarking on his proposed voyage to the East Indies cannot be seen merely as exploratory or even (as he claimed) missionary; in the pay of the Spanish crown, Columbus' voyage must be seen in the emerging context of a profit-making and exploitative colonial project. (In this instance Spain hoped to gain an advantage over European rivals in the newly available Eastern spice trade.)

Finally, the reference to 'the egg in the Columbus story, crushed flat at the contact end' is not merely symbolic description: it underlines entirely the idea that nothing in the novel can be accepted at face value, even – and perhaps especially – the Columbus legend. Columbus, when told by detractors that his 'discovery' of America was no great accomplishment, challenged his audience to make an egg stand up on its tip; when none succeeded, Columbus flattened the tip of the egg himself and managed the task. A humorous anecdote, no doubt: Hogarth depicts nothing less in his painting Columbus Breaking the Egg. If, however, the image is re-interpreted in the light of Columbus' discovery being inauthentic and even cynically colonial, one begins to imagine a man of unprecedented wit and charm with an ability to manipulate the truth. In short, one imagines Gatsby. If this parallel is explored to its end, the reader of *The Great Gatsby* makes his own (shocking) discovery: bootlegger-trickster Gatsby, whose darker motives are hidden by a social grace and romantic idealism, has his genesis in Christopher Columbus, the man apparently responsible for the discovery of America.

Columbus' 'discovery' paved the way for the Dutch sailors' arrival in New York along the Hudson in 1609. Fitzgerald invokes the moment in the novel's famous conclusion, where Gatsby gazing at the green light at the end of Daisy's dock merges with:

the old island … that flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes – a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby's house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of human dreams

It is generally assumed that Gatsby takes the blame for Myrtle Wilson's death, effectively writing his own suicide note, because of his Old World romantic idealism about Daisy; this vision – albeit a mistaken one – gains in nobility if one forges together Gatsby's chivalry with the 'wonder' the Dutch sailors presumably felt when first confronted by the 'fresh, green breast of the new world.' It perhaps even exempts him from the sort of moral degradation that characterised the age.

The language in the passage casts the landscape, metaphorically, as virginal woman ('fresh, green breast') pandering breathlessly to 'the last and greatest of human dreams.' In this light, the Dutch sailors (and Gatsby) have awed this landscape/woman, who positively deliquesces before the magnitude of their grand 'dreams.' If chivalrous, there surely exists a moral duty for the sailors and Gatsby towards the landscape/woman. While Gatsby acts with foolish, misplaced chivalry towards Daisy, the Dutch (who were colonising the shores of New York in the early-mid seventeenth century) had very little interest in respecting the maidenhead of the landscape: colonies were established, trade routes opened and natural resources pillaged.

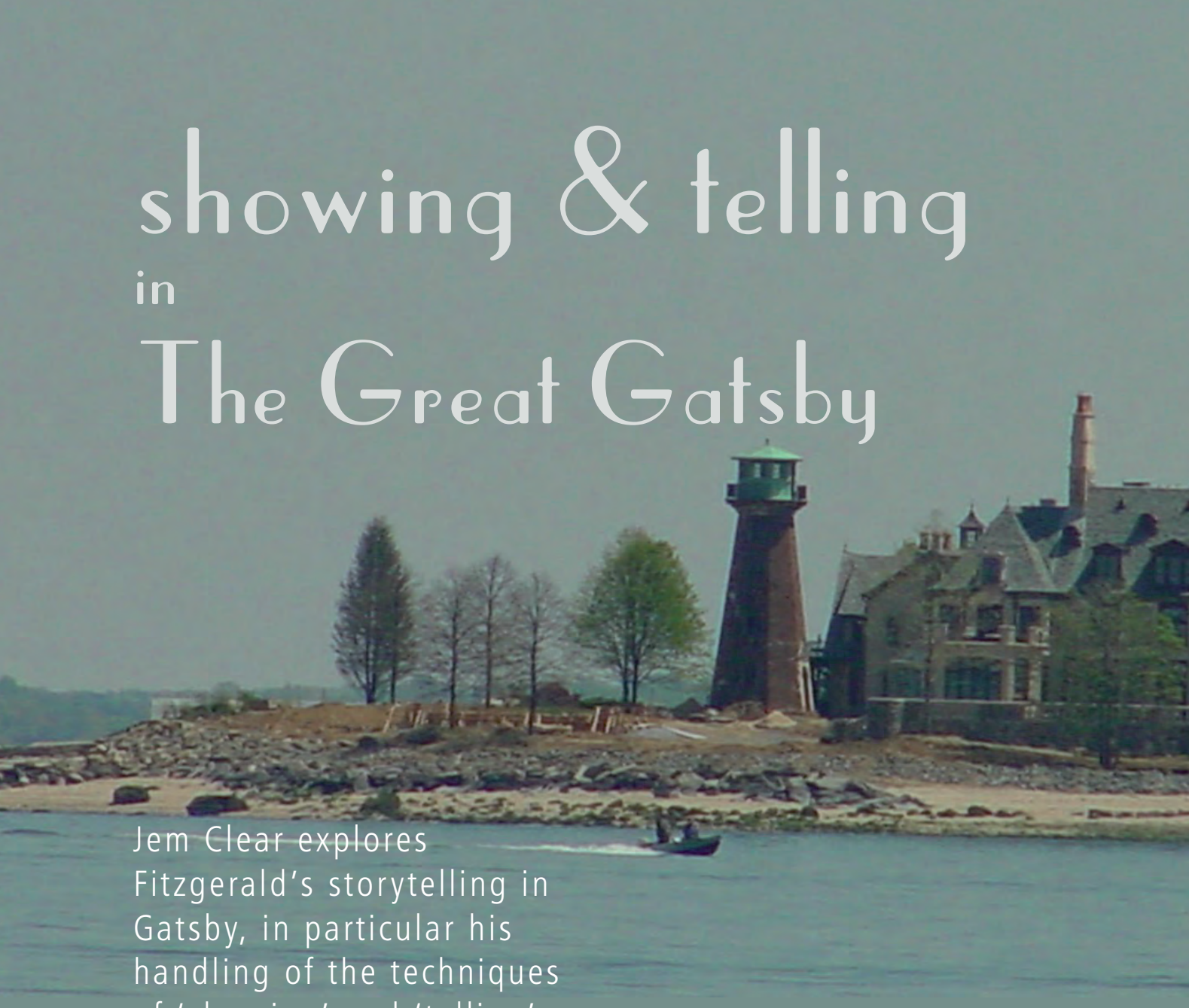
The language in the passage then, reinterpreted, becomes the language of the colonial: the 'fresh, green breast' is virginal woman, 'flower[ing],' only in time to be taken. The landscape 'panders' – the word itself has sexual connotations – 'in whispers' – again, sexual – before 'the last and greatest of human dreams.' Recast, this last phrase must now be read in an ominously ironic way: the last and greatest of human dreams actually amount to little more than the colonial desire to take. Arguably even Gatsby's so-called chivalry towards Daisy lacks innocence in the light (or indeed shade) of such a revelation. Gatsby realises as early as Chapter 7 that: 'her voice [Daisy's] is full of money', yet he sacrifices his life for her anyway. If Gatsby and the Dutch sailors share a 'dream' that is in fact corrupt, then Gatsby sacrifices himself at the altar of money, nothing more.

It is perhaps appropriate then to conclude by quoting in full D'Invilliers' poem which prefaces the novel and explains Gatsby's story; the name is, after all, a Dutch one.

'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!'

Dan Melvin teaches English at Salesian College, Farnborough.

showing & telling in The Great Gatsby



Jem Clear explores Fitzgerald's storytelling in Gatsby, in particular his handling of the techniques of 'showing' and 'telling'.

In this video-saturated world of ours, an often repeated piece of advice given to eager but inexperienced new authors of fiction is: 'Show – don't tell.' This distinction between showing and telling can be traced back in European literary theory to Aristotle, from whom modern critics take the Greek terminology: mimesis denotes the dramatic (mimetic or 'showing') mode in which a story is acted out by performers before an audience which directly observes character and action, while diegesis on the other hand labels the storytelling (diegetic or 'telling') mode in which a narrator recounts the tale.

One way to approach any written narrative is to imagine writers having a sort of 'show/tell' control with which they can increase and decrease the levels of mimesis or diegesis. A text which begins 'Once upon a time there lived a king who had a beautiful daughter' has the control turned to full-on diegesis. The characteristics of this kind of 'telling' text are evident even in this fragment: two characters are introduced very quickly without any attempt to reveal the nature of the king or his daughter. We are told that the daughter is 'beautiful' but experienced readers will not exclaim 'Whoa! Is she

really beautiful? Who says so? I'm not so sure – let me judge for myself.' Most of us learn from our earliest reading the conventions of diegetic narrative, which license the storyteller to dictate to us what is and what is not in their created fictional world. For a contrasting example of a fully mimetic literary text we could take any drama script, such as *Othello*, in which the characters' speech and action are not filtered or framed by a narrator.

All novelists make stylistic decisions which control the three-way relationship between the Story (the underlying events and characters), the Author/Narrator (the teller of the story) and the Reader, but in *The Great Gatsby* Fitzgerald's handling of mimetic and diegetic features is particularly interesting. If a writer wants to turn up the 'show' level, one obvious ploy is to add dialogue using direct speech so that we can see and hear the characters interacting in their own voices. This device is very prominent in the climactic showdown of Chapter 7 as Tom and Gatsby compete for possession of Daisy. Nick as our narrator is an embarrassed bystander at this confrontation but that is essential to allow Fitzgerald to give us every utterance, in full, rendered in direct speech – almost a drama script. Even when novelists use direct speech for mimetic effect, there is still potential for the narrator to indulge in a bit of 'telling' through the speech tags (that is, the 'she said', 'he mumbled apologetically' phrases) and the passages of prose between the utterances. But in this section the speech tags are kept to a minimum, with many utterances given no identifying tag or just a neutral 'said Gatsby' or 'she said'. Other speech verbs and adverbs simply describe the externally observable features of the characters' speech: '…she murmured', '…demanded Tom suddenly', '…she interrupted', '…he repeated'. The dialogue is interspersed with descriptive sentences which function like stage directions, indicating for example that a waiter enters with more drinks, that Gatsby walks to stand by Daisy, that she fumbled to light a cigarette. These writing tricks make us feel as if we are watching the scene unfold on screen or stage, leaving us to form our own judgements about the characters and situation.

Although Chapter 7 is predominantly mimetic in style, there are significant touches of diegetic telling. After Tom rants about people 'nowadays' who sneer at family life and then 'they'll throw everything overboard and have intermarriage between black and white', Nick adds 'Flushed with his impassioned gibberish, he saw himself standing alone on the last barrier of civilization.' Nick considers Tom an odious man and calling his speech 'gibberish' is clearly an evaluative comment from the narrator, a gesture to shape the reader's response. Fitzgerald also has Nick tell us about Tom's state of mind at this moment. In doing so, Nick goes beyond the role of unobtrusive camcorder – but we probably accept his assertion regarding Tom's inner beliefs.

The mimetic mode, because it mimics a dramatic enactment of the story, will adapt easily into the visual medium of film. Conversely, when Fitzgerald is 'telling' the story such

a translation will be more problematic. If we look at the opening minutes of the 1974 Redford/Farrow movie version of the novel, we see Nick inexpertly manoeuvring a small motorboat across the Sound to the Buchanan mansion. And most significantly we hear a voiceover of the actor reciting snippets from the first few pages of Fitzgerald's text. The problem for the film director is how to represent those pages where Nick recounts his feelings on arriving on the East coast, his previous scant acquaintance with the Buchanans back in Chicago, and his reflections on his own moral disposition. This passage is heavily diegetic up until the paragraph that begins 'And so it happened that on a warm windy evening I drove over to East Egg to see two old friends whom I scarcely knew at all', and that is precisely the point at which the movie can effectively begin. The voiceover device is the cinematic equivalent of the diegetic storytelling mode in literature: it's not visual and the voice of the storyteller is made the primary focus.

The specific features of Nick's narration at the beginning which establish the telling rather than the showing style are identifiable at different levels: for example, at the level of vocabulary Nick uses a range of verbs which denote his own inner emotional states or mental processes: 'I'm inclined', 'I understood', 'I realized', 'I am still a little afraid', 'I forget', 'I wanted', 'I supposed', 'I thought'. At the grammatical level, the text contains several statements in the present tense which constitute generalised observations about abstractions, such as 'Reserving judgements is a matter of infinite hope.' At a broader discourse level Nick uses hypothetical constructions, figurative language in the form of similes and heavy reference to abstract ideas and concepts. Here is a sentence illustrating all those features:

If personality is an unbroken series of successful gestures, then 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.

I defy any filmmaker to adapt that piece of text into compelling cinema.

Part of Fitzgerald's skill as a novelist is in knowing when to adjust the mimetic or diegetic levels. Much has been written about this novel's manipulation of the underlying 'real-time' story, and in the initial pages we have a fine example of foreshadowing when Nick tells us that 'Gatsby turned out all right at the end' and that there was some mysterious 'foul dust' which 'floated in the wake of his dreams'. This is told to us before it is shown. After the melodramatic showing mode of the confrontation scene in the Plaza Hotel of Chapter 7, we are plunged into a heavily diegetic four pages in Chapter 8 when Nick recounts the details of Gatsby's love affair with Daisy five years earlier. The chapter starts by showing us Nick, unable to sleep, walking over to join a depressed Gatsby, the two of them lighting up a cigarette and settling to talk. Then with the marker phrase 'but he wanted to talk about Daisy' at the end of a paragraph, Fitzgerald shifts into Nick's storyteller mode. This whole section is actually based on an eye-witness account from Gatsby which Nick retells. He tells us what is inside Gatsby's head and heart: 'It excited him, too, that many men had loved her.', 'But he didn't despise himself…', 'He felt married to her, that was all.' Using a device usually reserved for omniscient narrators, Nick tells us about Daisy's emotions and thoughts – 'And all the time something within her was crying for a decision' – even though neither he, nor his informant Gatsby, is qualified to make such an assertion. Using a fictional narrator who is also an articulate writer allows Fitzgerald to enrich the narration in ways which a more directly mimetic mode would not:

Gatsby was overwhelmingly aware of the youth and mystery that wealth imprisons and preserves, of the freshness of many clothes, and of Daisy, gleaming like silver, safe and proud above the hot struggles of the poor.

The paradoxical imagery of entrapment and security, and the tang of social critique in that reference to the poor are special effects that Nick is able to deliver as the self-aware teller of someone else's story.

The Great Gatsby is a short novel, beautifully crafted, and much of its allure lies in the complex shifts in narrative mode. Fitzgerald's masterpiece demonstrates just how effective it can be when an author mixes showing and telling.

Jem Clear teaches A Level Literature and is an Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Birmingham.