Gatsby: False Prophet of the American Dream

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It may do well to preface this paper with some remarks concerning the concept of the American dream. The American dream, or myth, is an ever recurring theme in American literature, dating back to some of the earliest colonial writings. Briefly defined, it is the belief that every man, whatever his origins, may pursue and attain his chosen goals, be they political, monetary, or social. It is the literary expression of the concept of America: the land of opportunity.

This motif has found its voice in such diverse men of letters as William Bradford and Walt Whitman, St. Jean de Crevecoeur and Ralph Waldo Emerson, Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin.

The varying shadow that these men cast serve as testimony to the myriad forms which this theme assumes. To Bradford and his fellow Puritans, the American dream was embodied in spiritual fulfillment; to Jefferson it was the flower of political fulfillment springing from the seed of the perfectability of man; de Crevecoeur and Franklin preached the gospel of the self-made man. Emerson saw the American dream as the opportunity "to ask questions for which man was made." And to Whitman it was "the word Democratic, the word En Masse."

F. Scott Fitzgerald has come to be associated with this concept of the American dream more so than any other writer of the twentieth century. In fact, the American dream has been for Fitzgerald what the theme of the separate peace has been for Ernest Hemingway—the focal point or building block for much, if not all, of his work. However, Fitzgerald's unique expression of the American dream lacks the optimism, the sense of fulfillment, so evident in the expressions of his predecessors.

Cast in the framework of a metaphor, the aforementioned exponents of the American dream were the Old Testament prophets predicting the coming of a golden age, complete with a messiah who was to be the epitome of the word "American." Gatsby is Fitzgerald's answer. To Fitzgerald the long prophesied American dream had its fulfillment in the "orgiastic" post World War I period known as "the Roaring Twenties." He was the self appointed spokesman for the "Jazz Age," a term he takes credit for coining, and he gave it its arch-high priest and prophet, Jay Gatsby, in his novel The Great Gatsby.1
Gatsby is aptly suited for the role of arch-high priest because he is the persona and chief practitioner of the hedonism that marked this period. He is also its unwitting prophet, for his failure and destruction serve as a portent for the eclipse of the American dream, and the passing away of an era. It is with this Prophet image that this paper will chiefly deal.

The suggestion that The Great Gatsby may contain religious implications is not a new idea. Such an interpretation has been thoroughly discussed in an article entitled “The Gospel of Gatsby,” by Bernard Tanner, who sees the novel as a “jazz parody” of the Gospel of St. John dealing with the life of Christ. Gatsby is characterized as an “inverted Christ” in this drama, and the rest of the dramatis personae are neatly fitted in, perhaps too neatly, to this allegorical framework. To wit: Nick Carraway is Nicodemus, the Pharisee; Dan Cody is St. John the Baptist with his femme fatale, Salome, in the guise of Ella Kaye; and Meyer Wolfsheim is St. Peter complete with three denials. These characters, plus others, act out their parts in the gospel, carrying out such events as the marriage feast at Cana, various parables, Judas’s betrayal, and Christ’s crucifixion (English Journal, September 1965).

Still yet another critic, A. E. Dyson, in his article, “The Great Gatsby: Thirty-six Years After,” adopts the opposite extreme, in that he maintains that Dr. T. J. Eckleburg “is the only religious reference” in this novel.1

I can accept neither of these two interpretations. The former is too imaginative, while the latter is too shortsighted. Concerning the approach adopted in “The Gospel of Gatsby,” it appears, for purposes of completeness, that the lobster has been fitted to the shell rather than the shell to the lobster. Tanner’s interpretation is too orthodox and formulistic. You cannot superimpose an equation over this or any novel and come out with a pat answer.

I believe that Fitzgerald is much like Hemingway in his symbolic technique in The Great Gatsby, in that he projects a series of variations in his imagery so as to achieve a cumulative effect. To be sure, as will be later pointed out in this paper, Fitzgerald does, at times, become orthodox and even formulistic to a degree in The Great Gatsby. However, he achieves a totality of expression by introducing motifs that give the reader a slightly differing perspective of Gatsby, while always moving in a specific direction. Hence, Gatsby is no shallow stereotype. Instead, he has depth and complexity.

There is a religious design in The Great Gatsby, and it has its basis in Jay Gatsby himself. Nick Carraway, the narrator and interpreter of the novel, describes Gatsby thus:

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 which, if it means anything, means just that—and he must be about His Father’s business, the service of a vast, vulgar, and meretricious beauty.2

It should be noted that Gatsby is "a son of God," however, not the God of divine love, but the God of material love—Mammon. Rather than an "inverted Christ" or God, Gatsby is a perverted God; one who is dedicated to the physi-

1From a letter to Maxwell Perkins, May 1931. Fitzgerald dates the “Jazz Age” from “the suppression of the riots on May Day to the crash of the stock market in 1929—almost exactly one decade.”


Gatsby has come to espouse the gospel of the corrupted American dream. His existence is founded on a lie, a delusion, and he terms this monstrous lie "God's truth" in relating to Nick his past.

His right hand suddenly ordered divine retribution to stand by. "I am the son of some wealthy people in the Middle West—all dead now. I was brought up in America but educated at Oxford, because all my ancestors have been educated there for many years. It is a family tradition" (p. 65).

While Gatsby relates his "past," Nick wonders if "there wasn't something a little sinister about him, after all" (p. 65). Gatsby continues:

"My family all died and I came into a good deal of money."
"After that I lived like a young rajah in all the capitals of Europe—Paris, Venice, Rome,—collecting jewels, chiefly rubies, hunting big game, painting a little, things for myself only, and trying to forget something very sad that had happened to me long ago."4

Gatsby continues his yarn, including in it his war heroics and the decorations and adulation that he allegedly received for his deeds. It is evident, even to Nick, that Gatsby is a self-deluded fraud living in a world of shams. His lie especially reflects his materialism. He is Mammon resurrected by the hedonism of the 1920s.

Fitzgerald introduces a supporting image for the Mammonism of Gatsby in the description of his house which serves, among other things, as the temple of his Philistinism.

The one house on my right was a colossal affair by any standard—it was a factual imitation of some Hotel de Ville in Normandy, with a tower on one side, spanning new under a thin beard of raw ivy, and a marble swimming pool, and more than forty acres of lawn and garden. It was Gatsby's mansion (p. 5).

This description has overtones of Babel with its tower when viewed in the context that it is inhabited by people "who never knew each other's names" (p. 40). Also, "confused and intriguing sounds" emanate from it during Gatsby's parties (p. 51). Fitzgerald has Nick describe one such party as a "bizarre and tumultuous scene" terminating in a "harsh, discordant din of violent confusion" (p. 54).

The beauty of this image of Gatsby's house is that it is a dual one. It seems that Fitzgerald has created a twentieth-century replica—"a factual imitation"—of Milton's Pandemonium. The image is further solidified in that Mammon was its chief architect and builder. The lights that decorate the mansion, the expensiveness of its appointments, the opulence of its library, all contribute to this image.

Fitzgerald appears deliberately to contribute to the God-like image of Gatsby by withholding him from the novel, while surrounding him with an aura of myth. Some believe him to have been a double spy during the war, others that he once killed a man, while some see him as a criminal lord of the underworld, dealing in bootleg liquor, among other things. Our first sight of Gatsby comes late one night when Nick sees him emerge from the shadows of his mansion. Nick conjectures that Gatsby's appearance gave the suggestion that he had "come out to determine what share was his of our local heavens" (p. 21). Gatsby's arm is stretched seaward, and Nick sights along it to the green light at the end of Daisy Buchanan's dock. When Nick looks back to Gatsby, he has disappeared. Gatsby has come and gone as an appari-

4 Ibid., pp. 65-66. In Fitzgerald's "Echoes of the Jazz Age" he discusses just this problem of wandering nouveau riche in Europe. He describes it as "a whole race going hedonistic, deciding on pleasure."
tion, leaving Nick "alone in the unquiet darkness" (p. 22).

A principal image in The Great Gatsby is the valley of ashes, presided over by the ubiquitous Dr. T. J. Eckleburg. This wasteland lies between West Egg and New York City. It is described thus:

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 ash-gray men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air. Occasionally a line of gray cars crawl along an invisible track, gives out a ghastly creak, and comes to rest, and immediately the ash-gray men swarm up with leaden spades and stir up an impenetrable cloud, which screens their obscure operations from your sight.

But above the gray land and the spasms of bleak dust which drift endlessly over it, you perceive, after a moment, the eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg (p. 23).

Several interpretations have been offered as explanations of this scene. Critics have noted the similarities between the eyes of Dr. Eckleburg and Fitzgerald's description of the anonymous Owl Eyes who first appears in Gatsby's library and later at his graveside. It is Owl Eyes who murmurs the eulogy of "The poor son-of-a-bitch" at Gatsby's grave (p. 176). William Goldhurst believes that Dr. Eckleburg's presence in the novel is to "symbolize some implacable deity."5 This has credence, for George Wilson, Myrtle's husband, refers to Dr. Eckleburg as the eyes of God. "God sees everything," Wilson tells Michaelis when commenting on his conversation with Myrtle concerning her infidelity (p. 160).

But what of the valley of ashes itself? There are strong overtones of T. S. Eliot's Waste Land here, and rightfully so, for the world of Gatsby is a spiritual wasteland—materialistic and mortal, and by its very nature doomed to ashes. One critic has noted that Fitzgerald may have had the Valley of Hinnon in mind when he created the valley of ashes.6 Hinnon is the Old Testament name for the city dump outside the walls of Jerusalem. Once fertile, it was defiled by the worship of false gods and turned into ashes by God in his wrath. This analysis resolves the relationship between Dr. Eckleburg, the valley of ashes, and Gatsby. Nick, in reflecting back on Gatsby's legacy, states: "it is what preyed on Gatsby, what foul dust floated in the wake of his dreams that temporarily closed out my interest in the abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men" (p. 2). The valley of ashes is the result of Jay Gatsby's testament, the dust of a corrupted and perverted American dream; and like its biblical counterpart, it has its association with the worshiping of a false god, Mammon, incarnate in his son, Gatsby.

A contributing factor in this assessment of the role of Gatsby is provided by Meyer Wolfsheim, president of "The Swastika Holding Company" and the man who fixed the 1919 World Series. It is an often stated premise that it takes evil to recognize evil. We have just such an instance here. Wolfsheim claims to have "made" Gatsby, and refers to him as a "man of fine breeding" (p. 72). This is quite an indictment coming from a man who wears cuff links from the "finest specimens of human molars" (p. 73).

Gatsby also has a perverted or mistaken sense of what constitutes character. He refers to Meyer Wolfsheim as a

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6Patricia Kane. "Place of Abominations: A Reading of the Valley of Ashes, English Language Notes, I (1964) 291-295.
“smart man,” and he also lauds Jordan Baker as a woman who “wouldn’t do anything that wasn’t all right” (p. 72).

Gatsby’s gospel of hedonism is reflected in his house, wild parties, clothing, roadster, and particularly in his blatant wooing of another man’s wife. Daisy, a rather soiled and cheapened figure, is Gatsby’s ultimate goal in his concept of the American dream. However, he falls victim to his own preachings. He comes to believe himself omniscient—above the restrictions of society and morality. His presumption extends to a belief that he can even transcend the natural boundaries placed upon human beings. He will win back Daisy by recapturing the past.

“Can’t repeat the past?” he [Gatsby] cried incredulously. “Why of course you can!”

“I’m going to fix everything just the way it was before,” he said, nodding determinedly. “She’ll see” (p. 111).

Like Milton’s Mammon in Paradise Lost, Gatsby is going to achieve his ends through sheer materialistic means, through the power that he thinks he commands from his wealth.

For a time, Gatsby’s particular theology bears fruit, in that he is accepted by his followers and Daisy, but ultimately his congregation of party-goers deserts him. Gatsby’s abandonment is summed up by Nick at the funeral when he states, “Nobody came” (p. 175).

It is at the death of Gatsby that Fitzgerald becomes formulistic and orthodox in his symbolism. The rejected and soon to be betrayed Gatsby stands alone under Daisy’s window, keeping a vain vigil over his shattered dream.

He [Gatsby] put his hands in his coat pockets and turned back eagerly to his scrutiny of the house, as though my presence marred the sacredness of the vigil. So I walked away and left him standing there in the moonlight—watching over nothing (p. 146).

The following afternoon, Gatsby, with the help of his chauffeur, fills his pneumatic mattress and starts for his swimming pool.

Gatsby shouldered the mattress and started for the pool. Once he stopped and shifted it a little, and the chauffeur asked him if he needed help, but he shook his head and in a moment disappeared among the yellowing trees (pp. 161-2).

Shortly thereafter, in the vicinity of four o’clock, the chauffeur hears the shots, fired by an “ashen fantastic figure,” and Gatsby lies dead, a victim of his own absurd aspirations. Wilson is one of those “ash-gray men” who inhabit the valley of ashes. He is a product of that “foul dust” that gathers in the wake of Gatsby’s perverted dream.

The passion and crucifixion imagery is perhaps too unmistakable here; however, it does have its desired effect, because it casts Gatsby in the role of a rejected messianic figure through its Biblical allusion. He had come alive to us, “delivered suddenly from the womb of his purposeless splendor,” only to fail in his mission (p. 79).

Jay Gatsby’s eulogy is spoken by Owl Eyes—“The poor son-of-a-bitch.”

Gatsby was the bastard of a hedonistic age, spawned by it and killed by it. Nick, at one point, surmised: “his imagination had never really accepted... his parents at all.”

The sole monument to the world of

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7Ibid., p. 99. In a short story, “Absolution,” 1924, Rudolph Miller confesses the sin of not believing that he was his parents’ son. When questioned by the priest as to why, he replies “just pride.” Both “Absolution” and “Winter Dreams,” 1922, foreshadow much of what is in The Great Gatsby.
tive: he was quick, sure, competent. This feeling of success is short-lived in the poem, however, just as it was in Flick’s life.

The following stanza is a complete contrast in tone. The tragic waste of a young man’s ability is sharply felt. Flick never carried his ability any farther, nor did he develop any other skill. “He never learned a trade; he just sells gas, checks oil, and changes flats.” The just is an important word. The speaker is again telling us that Flick doesn’t belong here. This time he is belittling the occupation; in stanza two, as already pointed out, he raised Flick above his surroundings. Resigned to his present station in life, Flick satisfies himself with reminding others of his past glory. In light of his present surroundings, these reminders are somewhat ludicrous. They remember anyway what he once did, and that doesn’t seem to matter now, just as it makes no difference to the lug wrench that “his hands are fine and nervous,” these same hands that were once his passport to success. It just doesn’t matter anymore.

This sense of futility reaches its climax in the final stanza as the reader learns that even off the job Flick just hangs around the luncheonette. He is “grease-grey and kind of coiled,” an important choice of images. Grease-grey suggests the mechanic’s grease under which Flick is buried, the symbolic death which he has experienced, while “kind of coiled” suggests a spring, a trap, the act of being entwined in such a coil. Flick Webb is trapped in a world to which he does not belong. He is trapped between the glory of his past, and the futility of his future, somewhere between adolescence (“he sips lemon cokes”) and adulthood (“and smokes thin cigars”). He is even out of touch with the present. “He seldom speaks to Mae.” She is representative of a world of people who have a place in their society; Flick is an alien to such a world. In the luncheonette he “just sits and nods/Beyond her face towards bright applauding tiers/Of Necco Wafer Nibs, and Juju Beads.” Again the word just appears. He doesn’t strive to find his place in the world; he simply satisfies himself with memories of the past, of the crowds cheering him on from the bleachers (the “bright applauding tiers”). The reader is acutely aware of the rest of the image: the crowds, like candy, were rather sweet to him at the time, but rather worthless in the long run. Here sit the rows of candy as a mockery of that past. It is a tragic realization that Flick has been cut off in the prime of his life. And beyond the basketball court, is it not also tragic that so many of our youth today face this same fate?

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Gatsby’s ministry is “that huge incoherent failure of a house” that he left behind. And his epitaph on this monument is an obscene word, scribbled in chalk, by some neighborhood boy.

As a prophet of the American dream, Gatsby fails—miserably—a victim of his own warped idealism and false set of values. The American dream is not to be a reality, in that it no longer exists, except in the minds of men like Gatsby, whom it destroys in their espousal and relentless pursuit of it. The American dream is, in reality, a nightmare.