

# Immigration, Glorification, and Forgetting in *The Great Gatsby*

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The famous passages of fiction tend to become more rather than less opaque the closer you look at them. So, too, for the glorious closing lines of *The Great Gatsby*. These lines open things up in a startling way, changing the novel's tone from specificity to a general moralizing, and, as Clara points out, from an often negative understanding of Gatsby's past to a weirdly abstract hagiography. In these lines Fitzgerald undertakes a very quick modulation that sounds plausible but that, like a magic trick, conceals more than it reveals. Clara's essay gets at those things that the ending conceals, its contradictions. As Clara shows, in isolation the passage is compelling, magisterial; in the context of what has gone on before it is highly problematic. And, a lot more interesting.

—Dr. Leonard Diepeveen

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The final passage of F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby* conflicts with the narrator's presentation of Jay Gatsby throughout the novel. While Gatsby unfolds as a criminal, gambler, and adulterer, the final paragraph idealizes Gatsby, imagining him as an American hero, and ignoring earlier references to his criminal past. The narrator, Nick, re-envisions Gatsby as having realized the dream of the self-made man, rising from rags to riches on his own. The novel's closing lines express America's tendency to glorify its own founding, while forgetting the more flawed or

ignominious parts of its history. The final paragraph additionally criticizes American immigration policy in the nineteen-twenties, suggesting that America's founders failed to establish a nation where anyone can thrive.

In the closing lines of *The Great Gatsby*, Nick reimagines Gatsby as a national hero standing in for the struggle of Americans to envision and realize a progressive future. Nick Carraway writes, "And as I sat there brooding on the old, unknown world, I thought of Gatsby's wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of Daisy's dock" (Fitzgerald 180). The green light represents Gatsby's future, a dream so close that he "hardly fail[s] to grasp" it (180). Gatsby's sense of wonder as he gazes at the light recalls Nick's description of American pioneers as they first glimpsed the new world, the "transitory enchanted moment [when] man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent" (180). America is a place where pioneers break from old European aristocracy and begin anew; Gatsby's feeling of proximity to his dreams is comparable to America's self-idealization as a place where any person is free to thrive. Nick explains Gatsby's motivation for moving to West Egg:

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—to-morrow 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 (180).

Gatsby attempts to realize his dream by both recreating and leaving behind the past: he lies about his history, eclipsing his true childhood with a story of wealth and education, in order to be with Daisy as he had been five years previously. The past inspires dreams for the future – Gatsby determinedly attempts to “fix everything the way it was before” (110) – yet Gatsby cannot escape his upbringing as he struggles to achieve his fantasy. His vision of the future requires a recreation of the past, and thus a denial of the truth of his background.

In the final lines, Fitzgerald moves from discussing Gatsby directly to using the pronouns “us” and “we,” expanding Gatsby’s story to encompass his entire readership. He becomes a stand-in for any reader—for all Americans—ambitiously attempting both to escape and to relive the past as they envision their future. Those who are persistent enough fight life’s current, striving to realize their dreams until, “one fine morning” (180), they find themselves unable to escape the past, left with nothing but the empty shells of former dreams. Fitzgerald writes that Gatsby

had come a long way to this blue lawn, and his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was already behind him...where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night (180).

Fitzgerald’s reference here to ‘the republic,’ a term associated with the American constitution, reinforces the idea that this is a distinctly American novel. Gatsby stands

in for those who come “a long way” (180) to America to achieve their dreams, which are often too great and elusive to realize.

The closing paragraph envisions Gatsby as a national hero. Gatsby takes on every American’s ceaseless struggle to set goals and achieve them. At the same time, he represents America’s failure to ever fully realize the ideals that it sets for itself. As Barbara Will notes, “it is in the final, lyrical paragraphs of the novel that Gatsby’s fate takes on mythic dimensions, becoming an allegory for the course of the American nation and for the struggles and dreams of its citizens” (125). The nation is characterized by endless progress, the cause for which Gatsby dies. Gatsby’s “belie[f] in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us” (180) is a belief in a dream that, like America, he has not yet recognized he cannot achieve. He is a hero-figure, standing in and dying for American progress and the impossibility of transforming its ideals into reality.

Nick Carraway’s idealization of Gatsby in the final paragraph conflicts with the Gatsby he describes throughout the novel. From the beginning, Gatsby’s story is obscure. Rumors concerning Gatsby’s past precede Nick’s first encounter with him: various guests at Gatsby’s party claim: “He was a German spy during the war” (44); “[H]e killed a man” (44); “He’s a bootlegger” (62). All of the rumors that aim to explicate Gatsby’s unclear past involve socially unacceptable or criminal behaviour. While most of these rumors prove false, Gatsby’s coming-of-age story and his business in the city do suggest criminal activity.

Gatsby's "gongnegtion" with Meyer Wolfsheim, who is only out of jail because "they can't get him" (73), suggests that illegal activity landed Gatsby his own wealth. Gatsby does not contest Tom's claim that "Gatsby and this Wolfsheim bought up a lot of side-street drug-stores... and sold grain alcohol over the counter" (133), reinforcing the implication that Gatsby became prosperous through criminal activity.

This history involving organized crime, combined with Gatsby's ambiguous descriptions of his childhood and his illicit relationship with Daisy, establishes Gatsby's persona as an elaborately constructed illusion: enchanting at face value, yet built on a foundation of lies and corruption. Caten J. Town argues that the novel's final sentences "are an attempt [for Nick] to order the chaos that he created in his mythologizing of Gatsby, to find another way of making sense of what happened, to immortalize Gatsby" (Town 505). The novel's ending exemplifies the human need to find meaning, even in the mundane and the grotesque. Nick forces himself to find meaning, peace and closure at the end of a story that otherwise may have been horrific.

Gatsby's tendency to lie implies a desire to forget the reality of his past. Nick writes, "[Gatsby's] parents were shiftless and unsuccessful farm people—his imagination had never really accepted them as his parents at all. The truth was that Jay Gatsby of West Egg, Long Island, sprang from his Platonic conception of himself" (98). Gatsby chooses to neglect his family history, inventing a new past, glamorous and picturesque. He hides the reality of his

name, his identity, his history and the underground businesses that built his wealth. Gatsby says to Nick, "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" (65). Gatsby dreams himself to be an old-money member of the American aristocracy, part of a family embedded in tradition. In reality, however, he is an adulterer with wealth earned illegally, who fails to integrate himself naturally into Long Island's aristocratic circle.

The final lines fundamentally connect America's fate to Gatsby's. Despite his wealth, Gatsby cannot make himself part of Daisy's world. The fact that he lives in West Egg, the "less fashionable" neighbourhood, and gazes "across the courtesy bay [where] the white palaces of fashionable East Egg [glitter] on the water" (5) demonstrates his distance from Daisy's circle. Gatsby's working-class upbringing follows him to West Egg just as European aristocracy follows American settlers to the new world. Both Gatsby and the entire American nation fail to transcend their pasts in order to establish their desired futures. Instead of founding a country where anyone can prosper, traditional all-American old-money families like the Buchanans and the Fays bear the past into the new world: they re-establish old aristocratic norms and combine them with American culture to create an environment of decadence that is hostile to newcomers.

Jeffrey Louis Decker argues that one of *The Great Gatsby's* central claims concerns American immigration policy in the nineteen-twenties. He argues that the novel "represents the diminishing moral authority of uplift stories in an age of declining faith in the nation's ability to assimilate new immigrants" (Decker 52). Behind Nick's final interpretation of *Gatsby* as heroic lies a cryptic past involving "the tainted hand of immigrant gangsters" (52). *Gatsby* comes "a long way" (Fitzgerald 180) to reach the Buchanans, but ultimately fails to become one of them. This failure makes him comparable to an immigrant travelling to America with the hope of rising to aristocratic status, but finding it impossible.

The *Great Gatsby's* final passage thus provides a reflection on contemporary American attitudes towards immigration policy, "stag[ing] a national anxiety about the loss of white Anglo-Saxon supremacy in the Twenties" (52). At the same time, it criticizes America's tendency to glorify its founding, erasing historical flaws. Nick neglects to mention *Gatsby's* past at the end of the novel, positing his history as somewhat shameful, so inconsistent with the American dream of the self-made man that it demands the past be forgotten. The novel's final paragraph thus meditates on the nature of forgetting and its place in American culture and history. Nick's perception and presentation of *Gatsby* represent America's tendency to forget its criminal past in order to glorify itself.

Works Cited

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