

***The Great Gatsby*, the Green Light, and the Metanarrative of Progress**

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Abstract

The last generation of literary criticism of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* is plagued by a general lack of reflection on the myth(s) of Jay Gatsby. The purpose of this paper is to propose that the title character's myth is actually more than just a "myth," that it is, in fact, an entire worldview—one which grows from an American concept of "progress" that continues to this day, and that Mr. Gatsby's worldview thus becomes more immediately relevant to our own progress-centered Western worldview. Only one article, Jeffrey Steinbrink's "'Boats Against the Current': Mortality and the Myth of Renewal in *The Great Gatsby*," specifically addresses Mr. Gatsby's belief as a myth, namely, that he can remake himself. My paper argues that Gatsby's myth or worldview (not so much about perfecting himself, per Steinbrink's argument, as about acquiring Daisy Buchanan) tells him that he can and will "win" Daisy for himself through the sheer force of his cunning and efforts, and that this worldview reflects a larger societal meta-narrative. My thesis is that *The Great Gatsby* can function as a cautionary tale against the folly of pursuing the meta-narrative of progress. First, I review the American version of the modern Enlightenment movement. I explore the nearly 150-year history of its influence on American society before the 1922 world of booming economic progress in which Jay Gatsby lived and died. Second, I examine Gatsby as a character: his vantage point from one side of the bay, his singular pursuit of Daisy (who lives on the other side), and the methods and tactics he employs to bridge the gap and procure his dream, the goal toward which he thinks he is progressing. I then discuss possible reasons for his failure to achieve this goal. Third, I explore how this whole package—his overly grand vision, his tactics and their fallen outcome—serves as a warning against the short-sighted foolishness of pursuing utopian visions of "progress." My paper therefore holds up a new lens through which to clearly see Fitzgerald's cautionary intention and heed its wisdom.

Keywords: Gatsby, Metanarrative, Progress

1. Body of Paper

"He stretched out his arms toward the dark water in a curious way";¹ Francis Scott Fitzgerald thus introduces us to one of American literature's most enduring figures, the enigmatic Jay Gatsby—the title character of his most famous novel, *The Great Gatsby*. The reader sees, in the next sentence, what it is that Gatsby is trying to touch, perhaps even to grasp: a solitary green light.² Literary critics and even movies, such as Baz Luhrmann's 2013 film of the same name, have pointed out the significance of the light as a metaphor for Gatsby's dream, the representation of his pursuit of Daisy Buchanan.³ But few of these have explored the question of how this pursuit ties in to Gatsby's worldview, the metanarrative he is telling himself, and what Fitzgerald in his turn is telling us about that metanarrative. This paper will argue, then, that F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* can function as a cautionary tale against the folly of pursuing the metanarrative of progress. There is one highly relevant strand of philosophical tradition within which *The Great Gatsby* takes place, which we must review before exploring the "progress" material in Fitzgerald's novel and the way that it drives Gatsby's own worldview. It may be that Fitzgerald's literary

warning has something to say to our tendencies, then as now, nearly 100 years later, to believe in some version of the same social/national myth of progress.

As a work of literature, *The Great Gatsby* stands at the apex of a long line of tradition rooted in one of the dominant metanarratives of the Western world: that of the Enlightenment. This philosophical movement began in Europe but made its way to the American colonies and reached its peak in the 1700s. It was driven by the growing belief, among the writers of its day, that the exciting new advances of science, medicine, knowledge and technology would soon convey the world into the light of a utopian future. From its patterns of eschatology, the Enlightenment gave rise to the Western worldview that humanity is destined for continuing moral and social evolution. Yet Enlightenment doctrine continued to shape Western thought far beyond the movement's official end.

It is chiefly the American tributary of this great philosophical river that concerns us, since *The Great Gatsby* is an American novel written from within the American history of this movement. The fact that the Enlightenment coincided chronologically, and partially geographically, with the birth of the United States should give us food for thought. In a Northwestern University lecture, visiting professor N. T. Wright observed that the American Founding Fathers—in commissioning the printing of money and stamping it with the phrase NOVUS ORDO SECLORUM, Latin for "New Order of the Ages"—thus imprinted into our very currency their belief that, through the fledgling American nation, a whole new era was coming into being.⁴ Of course, early Americans sometimes differed over how, practically, to inaugurate this new era. For Enlightenment rationalism to succeed, so it was thought, the modernizing world had to purge itself of ancient superstitions, including belief in what was beginning to be commonly called "the supernatural."⁵

Even after Enlightenment philosophy began to wane in academic circles, its effects continued at a popular level in the United States. The country's unique geographic setting encouraged a quasi-Enlightenment attitude in which the great frontier—the "unsettled" lands to the west—beckoned Americans high and low to migrate to, explore, and put down roots in these new lands, to pursue new opportunities for living and prospering. Industrialization, like Manifest Destiny, generated a "can-do" spirit that fueled America's drive to make bigger buildings, faster transportation, more effective machinery, and more practical fuel sources. This can-do outlook eventually became known as "progress." With time, the desire to "make progress" in building infrastructure shifted in focus to the need to "make progress" in creating better living conditions for those many Americans who were disenfranchised by the Age of Industry (who were left out in the cold, metaphorically and literally, while a handful of opportunists got rich at their expense) and so this need gave birth to the Progressive Movement. Progressivism was characterized by Victorian moral values, by a social-gospel ethic that focused on bettering society, and by a move to limit or altogether ban alcohol consumption.

Enter Jay Gatsby. Here is the Jazz Age's self-made man. The reader discovers, later in Fitzgerald's book, that James Gatz (before he became Gatsby) apprenticed under the mentorship of Dan Cody, the copper-mining millionaire who exposed Gatz/Gatsby to the ways and workings of high society: how to dress, how to speak, how to make business connections and money.

When narrator Nick Carraway describes the enormous mansion of his next-door neighbor in West Egg, the reader might assume its owner must have everything he could ever want. Yet when Nick beholds Gatsby for the first time, Fitzgerald's strange figure seems anything but content: "He stretched out his arms toward the dark water in a curious way, and, far as I was from him, I could have sworn he was trembling."⁶ Nick instinctively follows the direction of Gatsby's outstretched arms, across the bay, to "a single green light, minute and far away".⁷ Though it is distant, the light *is* visible, and perhaps one day it will be near enough for Gatsby to reach out and grab. He just needs to figure out how to do so. He needs a strategy to bridge the gap between himself and the green light that is his former love, Daisy Buchanan.

This scene, short though it is, provides us with an excellent analogy for understanding Gatsby's metanarrative. Gatsby is the pursuer. Reaching out signifies active pursuit, and the green light signifies a goal; it represents the object of his pursuit. It is not entirely clear from Fitzgerald's text just how much of this correlation Gatsby is himself aware of, but it is probably very little, given the man's evident lack of self-examination.

We might map out the ideological components of Gatsby's worldview in the following way: Gatsby is the seeker; the green light (or Daisy) is the goal; the strategies are methods that the seeker employs to procure his goal; and his belief in his abilities to bridge the gap, to cross the bay, to transform past memory into future reality, drives the whole picture. Gatsby's subsequent efforts to snatch Daisy's heart away from Tom make up the trial-and-error filler of strategies and techniques that his outstretched hand uses to reach out and take hold of that green light. This is Gatsby's worldview, his myth, his character-shaping story of progress. The metanarrative that Gatsby tells himself is that he can, through these various strategies, acquire Daisy for himself.

One can take any scene between Nick's first encounter with Gatsby and the latter's death and see how it works through the light of Gatsby's reaching-across-the-waters analogy. For example, the reader discovers that he has

moved to West Egg in order to be near Daisy.⁸ We also learn that he has purchased his sprawling mansion and all of his fine commodities primarily in order to impress her.⁹ He throws lavish summer parties in order to get her attention—or at least to network with someone who knows and can get in touch with her.¹⁰ Gatsby coordinates with Nick Carraway to arrange his re-union meeting with Daisy.¹¹ Gatsby employs this string of strategies in order to shorten the gulf, the literal and metaphorical bay that separates him from her.

Even Gatsby's schedule is itself one of his strategies. It arranges his time in such a way as to maximize his opportunities to "improve" himself. We should not be surprised to discover its striking similarities to the daily routine of Benjamin Franklin, who inhabits the same tradition of self-improving progress as Gatsby. In his *Autobiography*, Franklin meticulously maps out his schedule hour by hour, from morning prayer to setting his goals for the day, from carrying out the workload to supertime, from the hours of leisure to those for sleeping.¹² In a similar manner, Gatsby outlines his daily activities—including work, exercise, and study—as well as a list of "general resolves" that he intends to fulfill.¹³ He, like Franklin, conscientiously orders his day-to-day life so as to better himself.

Both schedules are strategies for personalized versions of the same myth, the same broad metanarrative that tells one's self or community that the right amount of personal striving and effort will get him/her/them ever closer to the light, either of a golden human utopia or a perfect prize possession like Daisy Buchanan. Gatsby's schedule comprises part of his quest to acquire Daisy by making himself presentable to her. His actions and habits constitute the methods and techniques that he utilizes, pulling himself incrementally closer to his green-light goal.

Initially, it seems as though it may work, as Daisy and Gatsby resume their relationship. This is part of Fitzgerald's genius; he knows how to set up the illusion that Happily-Ever-After might just come true. Nick Carraway cautions his friend that the past is unrepeatably. A disbelieving Gatsby—fixing his gaze and stretching his arms ahead, only ahead, without regard for what has happened before—optimistically replies, "Can't repeat the past? Why of course you can!"¹⁴ If that were too vague, he clarifies his meaning: "I'll fix everything just the way it was before. She'll see."¹⁵ At this point we can see clearly into Gatsby's personal narrative: he thinks of himself as living in a story within which he intends to remake the past (his glorious former life with Daisy) in the present or very near-future. To this extent, he shares the metanarrative of Enlightenment Americans who believed they were going to create a "new order of the ages" from the spirit and memory of previous golden eras.

But Gatsby's loyalty to the past is selective. He favors his past relationship with Daisy and opposes Tom's ongoing relationship—even to the point of denying that past by saying that she never loved Tom and by pressing her to admit the same,¹⁶ as if saying so could actually undo everything that had happened in their absence. Tragically, Gatsby thinks he can reshape the past and the future; he does not realize that these will shape him, that they are *already* shaping him. In his article, "'Boats Against the Current': Mortality and the Myth of Renewal in *The Great Gatsby*," Jeffrey Steinbrink maintains that Gatsby's struggle "is the tension between the incessant diminution of energy in an entropic universe in the perennial thrust of human expectations which gives life meaning."¹⁷ Gatsby makes the mistake of thinking he is above these forces and, therefore, that he can control them. To this end, Daisy's casual remark to Gatsby may arguably be her most profound: "Oh, you want too much!"¹⁸

Fitzgerald wants us to see that Gatsby's inability to adjust to and incorporate the realities of the present (such as Tom and Daisy's marriage) into his narrative effectively damns that narrative to fail. He wants to harness time itself and make it serve his purposes, just as the Enlightenment dream attempted to harness a re-contextualized version of the ancient Epicurean dualities in order to advance Enlightenment purposes, while the movement carved the world into its own self-serving compartments. Gatsby himself becomes the flaw in time, as his pushing Daisy to deny time's value¹⁹ conflates the categories of past and present.

Daisy, like other goals of progress, was an impossible catch. The aftermath of Myrtle Wilson's death made it clear that Daisy was never actually going to leave Tom in the end. Tom-plus-Daisy was a reality that Gatsby's dream could not overcome. It lurked in the blind spots of his metanarrative, perhaps only revealing its horrible self in the last moments of Gatsby's life: a rude awakening to a gray and frightening realism,²⁰ one that is, in its own right, just as stone-cold as the bullet George Wilson imminently delivered to Gatsby's heart.²¹

We can now link the title character's worldview to Fitzgerald's cautionary usage of that worldview. Nick Carraway's reflective ending indicates that Gatsby's failed narrative functions as a cautionary metaphor for, or as a tale against, the progressive or utopian spirit of Fitzgerald's own day: "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..."²² Fitzgerald's narrator switches perspective from the third person singular to the first-person plural: "us," "we," and "our." This signals a shift from discussing the limitations of a literary figure to thinking about how these limitations in fact apply to "all of us."

Actually, Nick Carraway has been dropping hints along the way. Half a page above his final comments, one element in particular stands out. Pondering "a fresh, green breast of the new world"²³ alludes backward in time to the

Dutch sailors' view of the New World. In his article "Carraway's Complaint," George Monteiro argues that "Gatsby embodies a twentieth-century version of [the Dutch sailors'] dream."²⁴ George Monteiro compares Nick's imagery to that found in Washington Irving's vivid commentary on Christopher Columbus's voyage.²⁵ This imagery relates Gatsby's metanarrative to the community-shaping story that European colonizers, explorers, and settlers were going to create, within the "New World" itself, a kind of New Europe, as evidenced by the geographic labels New Spain, New France, New England, or the Dutch settlers' own designation: New Amsterdam—which of course became New York, the city of Gatsby.

F. Scott Fitzgerald evidently knew better than to buy into this myth. His words, "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past,"²⁶ reflect on the way that a collective group's worldview drives the group back to the past to find social/national glory and to reclaim that glory for its future, once again, by the sheer force of its own efforts.

But these words may be more than mere reflection; they may also function as a warning to society. One can appreciate a retrospective use of this warning through the homology of Gatsby to 1920s America. Just as Gatsby's dream had to bite George Wilson's bullet, so too the "Roaring Twenties" had to crash against the cold, hard reality of the Great Depression. *The Great Gatsby's* warning thus becomes prophetic, anticipating (through the death of its title character) the end of America's dreams for prosperity less than five years after the novel's publication.

In Fitzgerald-speak, the problem is both that the current of time itself is running against us and that those who try to achieve their utopian goals are much larger in their own imaginations than they actually are in life. Perception, in these cases, does not create reality. Scott Fitzgerald and Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Chris Hedges might have been friends had they been contemporaries. Hedges, author of *When Atheism Becomes Religion*, notes, within a similar vein of thought:

The greatest danger that besets us does not come from believers or atheists; it comes from those who, under the guise of religion, science or reason, imagine that we can free ourselves from the limitations of human nature and perfect the human species.²⁷

As human beings, we exist within time; we cannot master it because we are not outside of it. Hedges observes, "Our self is elusive. It is not fixed. It is subject to forces often beyond our control. To be human is to be captive to these forces, forces we cannot always name or understand."²⁸ This is the purchase that Fitzgerald's cautionary tale has on our so-called "progressive" metanarratives today. It challenges our Western worldview that whispers or sometimes shouts—through movies, music, literature, advertising and politics—that the human spirit must triumph over any adversity, and it calls us back to the reality of living within our constraints and shortcomings.

2. Endnotes

1. F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (1925, New York: Scribner, 2004), 20.
2. *Ibid.*, 21.
3. *The Great Gatsby*, dir. Baz Luhrmann, perf. Leonardo DiCaprio, Tobey Maguire, Carey Mulligan (Warner Bros. Pictures, Warner Home Video, 2013).
4. Gary Morson and N. T. Wright, "What Gods Do We Believe in Now?" A Northwestern University—VERITAS Forum Lecture, www.youtube.com.
5. For instance, Thomas Jefferson wanted to edit all miraculous elements out of the Bible to make it a rational code for moral living, as Mark Beliles notes in *Thomas Jefferson's Abridgement of the Words of Jesus of Nazareth* (Charlottesville, VA: Beliles, 1993), 14. In another approach to Enlightenment rationality, Benjamin Franklin tried systematically to make himself morally perfect, as he recounts in his *Autobiography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 66-69. Franklin's angle led him to make a list or schedule of his daily routines in order to manage his progress toward moral perfection, 70-71.
6. Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, 20-21.
7. *Ibid.*, 21.
8. *Ibid.*, 78.
9. *Ibid.*, 90-92.
10. *Ibid.*, 50.
11. *Ibid.*, 82.
12. Franklin, *Autobiography*, 71.
13. Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, 173.

14. Ibid., 110.
15. Ibid.
16. Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, 130.
17. Jeffrey Steinbrink, " 'Boats Against the Current': Mortality and the Myth of Renewal in *The Great Gatsby*," in *Twentieth Century Literature* 26.2 (1980): 168.
18. Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, 132.
19. Ibid., 131-32.
20. Ibid., 161.
21. Ibid., 162.
22. Ibid., 180.
23. Ibid.
24. George Monteiro, "Carraway's Complaint," in *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 2004), 175.
25. Ibid., 172-75.
26. Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, 180.
27. Chris Hedges, *When Atheism Becomes Religion* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008), 9-10.
28. Ibid., 159.