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Possessions in The Great Gatsby

I. The Envelope of Circumstances

TWO HUNDRED PAGES INTO *The Portrait of a Lady*, Madame Merle carries on an instructive conversation with Isabel Archer about marriage prospects. Madame Merle, very much a woman of the world, feels sure that there is an "inevitable young man" with a mustache in Isabel's past, but knows that he doesn't really count, whether he has a castle in the Apennines or an ugly brick house on 40th Street.

"I don't care anything about his house," Isabel responds, eliciting from Madame Merle a lecture born of experience.

"When you have lived as long as I, you will see that every human being has his shell, and that you must take the shell into account. By the shell I mean the whole envelope of circumstances. There is no such thing as an isolated man or woman; we are each of us made up of a cluster of appurtenances." Then Madame Merle shifts from these generalizations to the contents of her own closet. "I know that a large part of myself is in the dresses I choose to wear. I have a great respect for *things*! One's self—for other people—is one's expression of one's self; and one's house, one's clothes, the book one reads, the company one keeps—these things are all expressive."

Isabel will have none of it. She is determined to be independent, not enclosed by any shell or envelope. She feels sure that no mere object can express her inmost self. "Nothing that belongs to me is any measure of me; on the contrary, it's a limit, a barrier, and a perfectly arbitrary one," Isabel insists. ". . . My clothes may express the dressmaker, but they don't express me."

Isabel is wrong, of course. And it is because of her headstrong pursuit of absolute freedom that Madame Merle is able to trap her into confinement in the worst possible marriage.

When T. S. Eliot wrote F. Scott Fitzgerald that *The Great Gatsby* seemed to him "the first step that American fiction has taken since Henry

James," he linked the two writers as *social* novelists in whose work the issue is joined between innocence and experience, between those who repudiate artificial limitations and those who recognize and respect the envelope of circumstances, between the individual yearning for independence and the society forever reining him in. Fitzgerald, like James, understood that the pursuit of independence was doomed from the start. Try though they might, Fitzgerald's characters find it impossible to throw off "the cluster of appurtenances" and invent themselves anew. That is the lesson, or one of the lessons, of *The Great Gatsby*.

One's house, one's clothes: they do express one's self, and no one more than Jay Gatsby. It is in good part because of the clothes he wears that Tom Buchanan is able to undermine him as a competitor for Daisy. "'An Oxford man!' [Tom] was incredulous. 'Like hell he is! He wears a pink suit.'" Yes, and for tea a white flannel suit with silver shirt and gold tie. And drives a monstrously long cream-colored car, a veritable "circus wagon," in Tom's damning phrase. And inhabits a huge mansion where he throws lavish, drunken parties "for the world and its mistress." Given an opportunity, Gatsby consistently errs in the direction of ostentation. His clothes, his car, his house, his parties—all brand him as newly rich, unschooled in the social graces and sense of superiority ingrained not only in Tom Buchanan but also in Nick Carraway.

With women, the right clothes and accessories matter even more. In *Tender Is the Night* (1934), for example, the elegant Nicole Diver is fixed in the reader's mind as the woman of the pearls, who wears a "string of creamy pearls" even on the beach. Nicole's wealth and what it can buy are evoked when she goes shopping in Paris with the young actress Rosemary Hoyt.

> With Nicole's help Rosemary bought two dresses and two hats and four pairs of shoes with her money. Nicole bought from a great list that ran two pages, and bought the things in the windows besides. Everything she liked that she couldn't possibly use herself, she bought as a present for a friend. She bought colored beads, folding beach cushions, artificial flowers, honey, a guest bed, bags, scarfs, love birds, miniatures for a doll's house, and three yards of some new cloth the color of prawns. She bought a dozen bathing suits, a rubber alligator, a travelling chess set of gold and ivory, big linen handkerchiefs for Abe, two chamois leather jackets of kingfisher blue and burning bush from Hermes—bought all these things not a bit like a high-class courtesan buying underwear and jewels, which were after all professional equipment and insurance, but with an entirely different point of view. Nicole was the product of

> much ingenuity and toil. For her sake trains began their run at Chicago and traversed the round belly of the continent to California; chicle factories fumed and link belts grew link by link in factories; men mixed toothpaste in vats and drew mouthwash out of copper hogsheads; girls canned tomatoes quickly in August or worked rudely at the Five-and-Tens on Christmas Eve; half-breed Indians toiled on Brazilian coffee plantations and dreamers were muscled out of patent rights in new tractors—these were some of the people who gave a tithe to Nicole and, as the whole system swayed and thundered onward, it lent a feverish bloom to such processes of hers as wholesale buying, like the flush of a fireman's face holding his post before a spreading blaze. She illustrated very simple principles, containing in herself her own doom, but illustrated them so accurately that there was grace in the procedure, and presently Rosemary would try to imitate it.

Brilliant though it is, this is not Fitzgerald's most famous list. That comes at the beginning of Chapter Four of *Gatsby*, when Nick reconstructs from his jottings on the margins of a July 1922 railroad timetable a roster of those who attended Gatsby's parties. Many of them seem to have been transplanted from their natural habitats in the animal and vegetable kingdoms to Gatsby's blue lawn, where they misbehave among the whisperings and the champagne and the stars. From the menagerie, for example, emerged the Leeches and Dr. Webster Civet who drowned up in Maine and a whole clan named Blackbuck as well as Cecil Roebuck and Edgar Beaver whose hair turned cotton-white one winter afternoon and James B. ("Rot-Gut") Ferret and Francis Bull. Up from the sea swam the Fishguards and S. B. Whitebait who was well over sixty and the Hammerheads and Beluga the tobacco importer and Beluga's girls. Another set of girls bearing the melodious names of flowers sprouted there, as did Newton Orchid who controlled a movie studio and Clarence Endive who came only once and got into a fight and Henry L. Palmetto who killed himself by jumping in front of a subway train and Ernest Lilly and George Duckweed. "All these people came to Gatsby's house in the summer," Nick dryly concludes.

This makes for wonderful entertainment and does not bear too much analysis, but Nicole's shopping list is another matter. For one thing, it was created nearly a decade after the publication of *Gatsby*, at a time when Fitzgerald's political convictions had moved sharply and programmatically to the left. In his "General Plan" for *Tender*, he couched the downfall of his principal character in terms of Marxian class struggle.

> The novel should do this. Show a man who is a natural idealist, a spoiled priest, giving in for various causes to the ideas of the haute bourgeoisie, and in his rise to the top of the social world losing his idealism, his talent and turning to drink and dissipation. Background one in which the leisure class is at their truly most brilliant & glamorous such as Murphys.

Fitzgerald posits this version of Dr. Diver as a man "like myself brought up in a family sunk from haute bourgeoisie to petit bourgeoisie, yet expensively educated." But the protagonist of the "General Plan," which Fitzgerald probably set down in the summer of 1932, is far more politically dedicated than the character he presented two years later, "being in fact a communist-liberal-idealist" who goes so far as to send his son to Soviet Russia to educate him!

In late 1931 and in 1932, Fitzgerald was preoccupied with Marxism. He read, and insisted that Zelda read, a book called *New Russia's Primer*, a watered-down account of the Five-Year Plan written for schoolchildren and circulated by the Book-of-the-Month Club. Living in Baltimore, he organized extensive conversations and briefing sessions with a local communist. He loaned his house for party meetings. In November '32 he spoke at an antiwar meeting at Johns Hopkins, sponsored by the Students Congress Against War, an "international [communist] front organization."

By the time Fitzgerald took Nicole and Rosemary shopping in Paris, he was persuaded that capitalism was a corrupt and dying economic system. Thus it is that his list is divided into two: the first describing what Nicole bought and the second picturing those who toiled and slaved so she could make her purchases. The most extraordinary thing about Nicole's shopping is that she buys indiscriminately. True, she brings a long list with her, and undoubtedly buys a number of things jotted there—like the handkerchiefs for Abe North and the miniatures for the dollhouse, probably—but we have no way of knowing exactly which ones, for Fitzgerald does not reproduce the list. Instead he emphasizes the variousness of her purchases, ranging from the trivial impulse buy of the rubber alligator to such a solid and usable item as the guest bed. Nicole buys not only items on her list but "the things in the windows besides," buys not only for herself but for her friends. She also buys in quantity: a dozen bathing suits, two chamois leather jackets. She buys whatever strikes her fancy. Money is not an issue.

The second half of the passage switches from the items purchased to the various workers who "gave a tithe to Nicole," as if she were a

goddess commanding 10 percent of their earnings. In the process, as David Lodge puts it, Nicole becomes transformed from "the consumer and collector of commodities, objects, things . . . [into] herself a kind of commodity—the final, exquisite, disproportionally expensive and extravagantly wasteful product of industrial capitalism." For her sake, Fitzgerald insists with metaphorical eroticism, trains "traversed the round belly of the continent." For her sake also, shopgirls worked on Christmas Eve and "dreamers"—idealists, Fitzgerald called them in his "General Plan"—"were muscled out" of their inventions by ruthless robber barons like Nicole's grandfather.

As Fitzgerald saw it in 1934, not only was capitalism breathing its last, but so were the children and grandchildren of those who accumulated wealth by exploiting others. Nicole's wholesale buying might lend "a feverish bloom" to the system, but the blaze that would destroy it was spreading out of control. To underscore her recklessness, Fitzgerald differentiates Nicole's spending from that of the "high-class courtesan" in general and of Rosemary in particular. The courtesan might seem extravagant in her expenditures for underwear and jewelry, but these after all represented "professional equipment and insurance," in that order. Nicole's wealth, on the other hand, is so vast that she need indulge in no such pragmatic considerations, a point of contrast made still more vividly with reference to Rosemary.

Like Fitzgerald himself, Rosemary could not help admiring the "grace" with which Nicole exchanged minuscule segments of her fortune for miscellaneous wares in the stores. She even tries to follow Nicole's example, but the effort is beyond her. In order to spend so heedlessly, you had to grow up rich, and Fitzgerald portrays Rosemary as a child of the middle class, spending her own hard-earned money. "With Nicole's help" she buys two dresses, two hats, and four pairs of shoes: something of a splurge for her, but money spent carefully for clothing she will put to use.

Forty pages later the women go shopping again. On this occasion as on the first, Nicole buys both artificial flowers and colored beads, and further demonstrates her profligacy by expending more than a thousand francs on toy soldiers for her son. Rosemary's buying is more purposeful and practical: a diamond for her mother, scarves and cigarette cases for "business associates in California." Fitzgerald describes the pleasure that such shopping afforded Nicole and Rosemary: "It was fun spending money in the sunlight of the foreign city, with healthy bodies under them that sent streams of color up to their faces; with arms and hands, legs and ankles that they stretched out . . . with the confidence of women

lovely to men." The two women are similar in loveliness and enjoyment of the day, quite different in their attitude toward money.

II. Love and Money

Myrtle Wilson's purchases in *The Great Gatsby* make an even more striking contrast to those of Nicole Diver. Married to the pallid proprietor of a gas station in the ash-heaps, Myrtle must cross a vast social divide to reach the territory of the upper class. Her smoldering sensuality enables her to attract Tom Buchanan, and in the small apartment on West 158th Street that Tom rents as a place of assignation, she pitifully attempts to put on airs. But what Myrtle buys and plans to buy during the Sunday party in Chapter Two tellingly reveals her status. She aims for extravagance, but has had no experience with it.

When Myrtle and Tom and Nick Carraway, who has been commandeered by Tom to "meet his girl," reach Grand Central Station, Myrtle buys a copy of the gossip magazine *Town Tattle* at the newsstand and "some cold cream and a small flask of perfume" from the drug store's cosmetics counter. Next she exercises her discrimination by letting several taxicabs go by before selecting a lavender-colored one—not quite a circus wagon, but unseemly in its showy color. Then she stops the cab in order to "get one of those dogs" for the apartment from a sidewalk salesman. This man resembles John D. Rockefeller and is, like him, less than straightforward in his business dealings. He claims that the puppy he fetches from his basket is a male Airedale, and he demands ten dollars for it. In fact the dog is a mongrel bitch, and in a gesture Myrtle must have found wonderfully cavalier, Tom pays the inflated price with a characteristic insult. "Here's your money. Go and buy ten more dogs with it."

Myrtle becomes emboldened in her pretensions amid the surroundings of their hideously overcrowded apartment. Under the inspiration of whiskey, a private interlude with Tom, and her third costume change of the day—this time into "an elaborate afternoon dress of cream-colored chiffon" that rustles as she sweeps across the room—she assumes an "impressive hauteur." Complimented on the dress, Myrtle cocks an eyebrow disdainfully. The dress, she announces, is just a crazy old thing she slips on when she doesn't care how she looks. The eyebrows go up again when the elevator boy is slow in bringing ice. "These people!" she declares. "You have to keep after them all the time." Waxing ever more expansive, Myrtle promises to give Mrs. McKee the dress off her back. She's "got to get another one tomorrow" anyway, as but one item on a shop-

ping list that includes "[a] massage and a wave and a collar for the dog and one of those cute little ashtrays where you touch a spring, and a wreath with a black silk bow" for her mother's grave: "I got to write down a list so I won't forget all the things I got to do." The "I got" idiom betrays Myrtle's origins. The list itself—with its emphasis on ashes and dust—foreshadows her eventual demise.

Such reminders of Myrtle's unfortunate position as Tom's mistress and victim are required to prevent her from becoming a merely comic figure. As it is, Fitzgerald skewers her affectations with obvious relish. On arrival at the apartment house, he writes, Myrtle casts "a regal homecoming glance around the neighborhood." Once inside, she flounces around the place, her voice transformed into "a high mincing shout" and her laughter becoming progressively more artificial. Tom brings her crashing to earth when Mr. McKee, the photographer, comments that he'd "like to do more work" for the wealthy residents of Long Island. With a shout of laughter, Tom proposes that McKee secure a letter of introduction from Myrtle to her husband so that McKee could take photographs of him: "George B. Wilson at the Gasoline Pump," perhaps. Neither Chester McKee nor Myrtle Wilson, it is clear, will gain access to the privileged precincts of East Egg. In fact, when Myrtle goes so far as to repeat Daisy's name, Tom breaks her nose with a slap of his open hand.

Among Myrtle's purchases, the dog of indeterminate breeding best symbolizes her own situation. She is, for Tom, a possession to be played with, fondled, and in due course ignored. "Tom's got some woman in New York," Jordan says by way of breaking the news to Nick, who is bewildered by the locution. "Got some woman?" he repeats blankly. In her politically and grammatically incorrect manner, Mrs. McKee understands the concept perfectly. If Chester hadn't come along at the right time, she tells Myrtle, the "little kyke" who'd been after her for years would "of got me sure." In the same fashion, Myrtle wants to "get" a dog for the apartment. "They're nice to have—a dog."

The connection between Myrtle and the dog as creatures to be kept under restraint is underlined by the collar she plans to buy, and by the expensive leather-and-silver leash her husband discovers on her bureau, arousing his suspicions. During Nick's final meeting with Tom, Fitzgerald twice evokes the dog comparison. According to Tom, who does not know Daisy was driving at the time, Gatsby deserved to die, for he "ran over Myrtle like you'd run over a dog and never even stopped his car." And Tom himself cried like a baby, he bathetically insists, when he went to give up the flat and saw "the box of dog biscuits sitting there

on the sideboard." For the times, Tom was not unusual in regarding women as objects to be possessed—either temporarily, as in the case of Myrtle, or permanently, if like Daisy they warrant such maintenance through their beauty and background and way of presenting themselves to the world.

The disparity between Nicole's extensive two-page guide to the day's shopping and Myrtle's sorry little list—dog collar, ashtray, wreath—nicely measures the social distinction between them. Nicole spends with the abandon of third-generation wealth, whereas Myrtle's planned expenditures, like her manner of speaking, betray her position somewhere in the lower middle class. Her inferior status makes her a convenient conquest for Tom. Traditionally, the male plutocrat slides down the social scale to carry on his affairs, for such relationships require no long-term commitment and can easily be broken off. Tom does not dismiss Myrtle in the course of the novel—indeed he seems to be trying to continue the affair—but there is no question that she would eventually be discarded, like the Santa Barbara chambermaid he was discovered with shortly after his marriage to Daisy, or the woman that caused the trouble in Chicago, or for that matter the office girl Nick relinquishes after her brother begins casting dark looks.

The pattern of the patrician male taking advantage of a female of inferior social standing persists. Tom Buchanan's Santa Barbara episode came to mind when Henry Ford II more or less reenacted it fifty years later. In each case, an auto accident revealed a rich man accompanied by a young woman who was conspicuously not his wife. Asked for a comment, Ford responded, "Never complain, never explain"—a position similar to the one Tom adopts. Once in a while he goes on a spree, he admits, but it doesn't matter, for he always comes back. (Ted Kennedy, Mary Jo Kopechne, and the bridge at Chappaquiddick provide yet another parallel).

Jay Gatsby, son of Henry Gatz before he reimagines himself into a son of God, has risen from much the same stratum as Myrtle Wilson. The limitations of this background finally make it impossible for him to win the enduring love of Daisy Fay Buchanan. And, like Myrtle, he is guilty of a crucial error in judgment. They are alike unwilling or unable to comprehend that it is not money alone that matters, but money combined with secure social position. In the attempt to transcend their status through a show of possessions, they are undone by the lack of cultivation that drives them to buy the wrong things. At that point they fall victim to what Ronald Berman calls "the iron laws of social distinction."

The sheer exhibitionism of Myrtle's three-dress afternoon prefigures what we are soon to see in Gatsby's clothes closet. Still more than him, she is under the sway of appearances. On successive pages, she describes first how disillusioned she was to discover that her husband had married her in a borrowed suit, and second how thrilled she was to encounter Tom Buchanan on the commuter train in his "dress suit and patent leather shoes." When his white shirt front presses against her arm, she is erotically overcome.

In depicting the unhappy end of Myrtle Wilson and Jay Gatsby, Fitzgerald was painting a broad-brush portrait of his own experience. Near the novel's close, Nick condemns Tom and Daisy as careless people who "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 bitter passage, Fitzgerald is writing about himself as well as the characters. "The whole idea of Gatsby," as he put it, "is the unfairness of a poor young man not being able to marry a girl with money. The theme comes up again and again because I lived it." Lived it with Ginevra King, who serves as the principal model for Daisy, and very nearly again with Zelda Sayre.

In rejecting Scott as a suitor, Ginevra made it painfully clear that there were boundaries he could not cross. Two quotations from Fitzgerald's ledger, recorded after visits to Ginevra's home in Lake Forest, document his disappointment in love. The better known of these, "Poor boys shouldn't think of marrying rich girls," probably came from Ginevra's father. Fitzgerald naturally took the remark to heart, as directed at him. But the second quotation—a rival's offhand "I'm going to take Ginevra home in my electric"—may have hurt just as much, for Scott had no car at all with which to compete for her company. She came from a more exalted social universe, one he could visit but not belong to. In an interview about their relationship more than half a century later, Ginevra maintained that she never regarded young Fitzgerald as marriageable material, never "singled him out as anything special."

On the most banal level, *The Great Gatsby* documents the truism that money can't buy you love, or at least not the tainted money Gatsby acquires in his campaign to take Daisy away from her husband. It would have been difficult for him to compete with Tom's resources, in any event. Nick describes the Buchanans as "enormously wealthy," and Tom himself as a notorious spendthrift. When he and Daisy moved from Lake Forest (the location is significant) to East Egg, for example, he brought along a string of polo ponies. "It was hard to realize that a man in my own generation was wealthy enough to do that," Nick observes.

Part of Gatsby's dream is to turn back the clock and marry Daisy in a conventional wedding, but there too he would have been hard put to equal Tom's extravagance. When Tom married Daisy in June 1919, he brought a hundred guests in four private railway cars. It took an entire floor of the hotel to put them up. As a wedding gift he presented Daisy with "a string of pearls valued at three hundred and fifty thousand dollars"—a tremendously impressive sum in 1919 (or any other time), but nonetheless marked down from "seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars" in *Trimalchio*, the early version of the novel Fitzgerald sent Maxwell Perkins in the fall of 1924. He must have decided that the higher figure was beyond belief.

In tying up the threads, Nick offers a final glimpse of Tom outside a jewelry store on Fifth Avenue. As they part, Tom goes into the store "to buy a pearl necklace" for Daisy or some other conquest, "or perhaps only a pair of cuff buttons," a suggestion that there is something as unsavory about Tom as about Meyer Wolfsheim, the man who fixed the World Series.

Even discounting how much there is of it, Tom's "old money" has a power beyond any that Gatsby can command. His wealth and background win the battle for Daisy, despite his habitual infidelities—an outcome that seems not only grossly unfair but morally wrong, for another point Fitzgerald is making is that if you have enough money and position you can purchase immunity from punishment. Actions have consequences, as we remind our children, but some people can evade those consequences. Gatsby probably avoids prosecution for bootlegging and bond-rigging by distributing his resources on a *quid pro quo* basis, and rather callously applies that principle to his personal life as well. Once he did the police commissioner a favor; now he can break the speed limit. Nick arranges a meeting with Daisy. Gatsby offers him a business connection.

Gatsby's evasions, however, are nothing compared to those of the Buchanans. As Nick reluctantly shakes Tom's hand at the end, he comments that it seemed silly not to; it was like shaking hands with a child. But Tom and Daisy are not children playing innocent games. Daisy commits vehicular manslaughter, then compounds the felony by letting others think Gatsby was driving. In directing Wilson to West Egg, Tom escapes the wrath he knows should be directed at him and becomes an accessory to murder. In a magazine article published the year prior to *Gatsby*, Fitzgerald inveighed against children of privilege who drive automobiles recklessly, knowing that Dad will bribe the authorities should they happen to run over anyone when drunk. And in "The Rich

Boy," published the year after the novel, his protagonist nonchalantly drives lovers to suicide without feeling the slightest stab of guilt. The message in all these cases would seem to be that if you have the right background, you can get away with murder. In *Gatsby* itself, the two characters who fall in love above their station pay with their lives for their presumption, while Tom and Daisy assuage any discomfort they may feel over cold chicken and ale. It is a double standard with a vengeance.

So finally even Nick Carraway, who was Daisy Fay's cousin and Jordan Baker's lover and Tom Buchanan's classmate at Yale, concludes that Gatsby was all right, that he was worth "the whole damn bunch put together." The commendation means a great deal coming from Nick, who is something of a snob and who disapproved of Gatsby from the beginning, largely because of his impudence in breaching class barriers. Gatsby met Daisy, Nick tells us, only through the "colossal accident" of the war. Knowing he did not belong in her world, he "took what he could get, ravenously and unscrupulously . . . took [Daisy] because he had no real right to touch her hand." Gatsby's later idealization of Daisy and their love redeems him, however, and he dies protecting her by his silence. He no more deserves to be shot than Myrtle deserves to be struck by a speeding car. Get mixed up with the Buchanans, and you end up dead.

III. Peasant and Plutocrat

In "The Crack-Up," written in 1936, Fitzgerald ruefully recounted the reluctance of Zelda Sayre to marry him just after World War I, when his prospects as a husband and provider looked mighty bleak. To win her over, he rewrote *This Side of Paradise* and got it accepted, but the experience changed him. Thereafter he cherished "an abiding distrust, an animosity, toward the leisure class—not the conviction of the revolutionist but the smoldering hatred of the peasant. In the years since then I have never been able to stop wondering where my friends' money came from, nor to stop thinking that at one time a sort of *droit du seigneur* might have been exercised to give one of them my girl." Here Fitzgerald drew a line of demarcation between the idealistic revolutionist out to change the world and the jealous peasant afraid of losing his lover to a rival with more money. Marxian doctrine led logically to both positions, inspiring the revolutionary spirit through its insistence that capitalism must inevitably give way to communism, and arousing a fierce jealousy in those emotionally wounded by their lack of financial resources. In a

famous passage, Marx spelled out what wealth could do to alter reality. "I am ugly, but I can buy the most beautiful woman for myself. Consequently I am not ugly, for the effect of my ugliness, its power to repel, is annulled by money. . . . Does not my money, therefore, transform all my incapacities into their opposites?"

As early as his revision of *This Side of Paradise* in 1919, written when Zelda was keeping him at a distance, Fitzgerald gave Amory Blaine a speech that closely parallels Marx's. "I am sick of a system," Amory says, "where the richest man gets the most beautiful girl if he wants her." Near the end of that novel, Amory praises socialism during a long conversation with a captain of industry who gives him a ride back to Princeton, but his argument lacks conviction. For one thing, he admits to a certain self-interest in proposing a socialistic system, "being very poor at present." Moreover, as a group he "detests" poor people, and asserts that it "is essentially cleaner to be corrupt and rich than it is to be innocent and poor." Amory's lack of political sophistication is palpable throughout. In fact, the discussion was tacked on at the behest of Fitzgerald's publishers, who thought he should end the book with some kind of significant statement. Basically, as Malcolm Cowley has observed, Amory (like Fitzgerald) was out to shock his elders, not change the world.

Commentators often stress Fitzgerald's ambivalence toward the moneyed classes—"distrusting the rich, yet working for money with which to share their mobility and the grace that some of them brought into their lives," as he himself expressed it. Yet over the course of his career Fitzgerald's admiration for the rich faded and his criticism of their way of life intensified. What began as a merely personal complaint assumed a more general political importance. Amory Blaine's unpersuasive maunderings about socialism eventually led to the attack on capitalism powerfully dramatized in *Tender Is the Night*.

John Dos Passos, who was creating his own fictional indictment of capitalism in *U.S.A.*, hailed Fitzgerald for the "whole conception" of *Tender*. The novel, he wrote Fitzgerald, revealed "the collapse of one of the great afterthewar imperial illusions. The way you first lay in the pretty picture and then start digging under the surface is immense—and gives you a kind of junction of your two types of writing that ought to be damned useful in the future: the SatEvePost wishfulfillment stuff as a top layer and the real investigation of living organism underneath." That double vision gave *Tender* an "enormous" power, Dos Passos felt, but for a more doctrinaire communist like Philip Rahv it was merely a

source of annoyance. Rahv saw clearly enough that the book represented "a fearful indictment of the moneyed aristocracy" and that Fitzgerald was chronicling "the collapse of his class." But he also thought that the author was "still in love with his characters" and discerned "a certain grace even in their last contortions." Rahv was afraid that the careless reader might float on the surface and fail to gauge "the horror underneath."

Privately, too, Fitzgerald's solidifying political convictions created tensions. In the fall of 1935, for example, he told a newspaperman that he was "torn between a belief that he should lend his friendship and pen to the [communist] cause in which he believed, and his friendship, love and association with delightful people whom he recognized as 'idlers' in the social sense of the word."

The Great Gatsby is not as Marxist as the "General Plan" for *Tender Is the Night*. It is highly unlikely that Fitzgerald had read any Marx when he wrote *Gatsby*, yet his political thinking had come a long way since *This Side of Paradise*. As many critics have noted, one of Fitzgerald's strengths is that he is so keenly in touch with the social and cultural events of his time. Too often, however, they have concentrated on his awareness of popular music, say, or automobiles, or football players, and he certainly was *au courant* with all of these. The tendency, in other words, has been to regard Fitzgerald as an intellectual lightweight, a stereotype that became fixed in the consciousness of the American public and one derived in good part from the patronizing commentary of his fellow Princetonian Edmund Wilson. This view does not take sufficient account of Fitzgerald's sensitivity to and fascination with the ideas coursing through his times. He was hardly a practicing intellectual—few great novelists are—but he was listening and reading and thinking about the wider world, and increasingly so as he matured from the callow undergraduate Wilson could not forget to what he called "a writer only" in "The Crack-Up," a phrase that diminished that stunning achievement. To sum up, there is a good deal more than romantic wonder in his fiction. It is hardly surprising that in his great novel of 1925, Fitzgerald intuitively grasped and illustrated basic Marxian precepts.

In a perceptive essay, Ross Posnock has shown "how deeply Marx's critique [of capitalism] is assimilated into [*Gatsby*'s] imaginative life." In particular, Posnock focuses on two ideas that are pervasive in the novel: the overall process of *reification*, and its consequent expression in *commodity fetishism*. In effect, Fitzgerald goes one step beyond Henry James in *The Portrait of a Lady*. James believed that we were necessarily

defined by the things we surround ourselves with. A generation later, Fitzgerald understood that we were at risk of becoming commodities ourselves.

Reification, as Marx's disciple Georg Lukács explained it, "requires that a society learn to satisfy all its needs in terms of commodity exchange." But commodities take on a mystical life of their own as they are converted from mere "products of men's hands" into "independent beings endowed with life." This is what Marx meant by commodity fetishism. But he went further: The worker himself became a thing to be bought and used, like the objects produced by his labor. And further yet: under capitalism not only the worker but everything—and everybody—was "transformed into a commercial commodity." People became objects to be bought and sold, with their attractiveness as purchases depending largely on their presentation of themselves.

In *Gatsby*, Daisy represents the most desirable object of all. She is invariably associated with the things that surround her, her car and her house particularly, and most of all her voice. Fitzgerald's evocation of that voice constitutes a tour de force. Everyone remembers Gatsby's remark that her voice is "full of money," but that judgment comes only after several brilliant descriptions and demonstrations of its power. When we first meet Daisy at the Buchanans' dinner party, Nick speaks of her "low, thrilling voice" with its promise that "she had done gay, exciting things just a while since and that there were gay, exciting things hovering in the next hour." Men found it hard to forget. Daisy rarely "says" things. She "murmurs" or "whispers" instead, compelling the listener forward for her breathless message. Often, she speaks flirtatiously. When she comes to tea at Nick's, she asks him, "Is this absolutely where you live, my dearest one?" with an "exhilarating ripple" in her voice, and then "low" in his ear, "Are you in love with me? . . . Or why did I have to come alone?" After Gatsby appears, Nick is moved to reflect that even on that romantic afternoon there "must have been moments . . . when Daisy tumbled short of his dreams." Daisy herself perhaps, but not her voice. As Nick watches, Daisy says something "low" in Gatsby's car and he turns toward her with a rush of emotion. That voice, Nick decides, couldn't be overdreamed. With "its fluctuating, feverish warmth," it was "a deathless song."

On her next appearance, at one of Gatsby's parties, Daisy's voice plays "murmurous tricks in her throat." If Nick wants to kiss her anytime during the evening, she whispers, she'll be glad to arrange it. At the end of the party Daisy begins to sing with the music. This passage, which Fitzgerald added in revising the galley proofs of *Trimalchio*, is the most

poetic evocation of all. Daisy's "husky, rhythmic whisper," he writes, brought out "a meaning in each word that it had never had before and would never have again. When the melody rose her voice broke up sweetly, following it, in a way contralto voices have, and each change tipped out a little of her warm human magic upon the air." Only after these extensive preliminaries does Fitzgerald introduce Gatsby's revelation about Daisy's voice. It's "an indiscreet voice," Nick comments. "It's full of . . ." He hesitates, enabling Gatsby to fill in the blank with, "Her voice is full of money." Nick immediately sees that Gatsby is right and leaps from the now totally commodified voice—for Marx, money was the most magical commodity of all—to the physical origins that made it possible: "High in a white palace the king's daughter, the golden girl . . ."

Daisy's voice can arouse real emotion in others even when what she has to say is calculated or artificial. She herself is most deeply moved by Gatsby's spectacular display of his many expensive shirts. From the cabinets in his bedroom, Gatsby tosses them onto the table—"shirts of sheer linen and thick silk and fine flannel . . . shirts with stripes and scrolls and plaids in coral and apple green and lavender and faint orange with monograms of Indian blue." This "near orgy of commodity celebration" is too much for Daisy, who sobs into the folds of his beautiful shirts.

"In an age of violent emotions, objects become as expressive as the people who live among them," the novelist Charles Baxter has commented, and with this scene in mind. "There is a subtle anthropomorphism on almost every page of *The Great Gatsby*, as befits a novel about idolatry and consumerism." In the world of the novel, it works both ways: As inanimate objects take on human characteristics, people are reduced to commodities.

The culture of consumption on exhibit in *The Great Gatsby* was made possible by the growth of a leisure class in early-twentieth-century America. As the novel demonstrates, this development subverted the foundations of the Protestant ethic, replacing the values of hard work and thrifty abstinence with a show of luxury and idleness. The principal interpreter of the phenomenon was Fitzgerald's fellow midwesterner, the perceptive and satirical Thorstein Veblen. Born in Wisconsin to Norwegian immigrant parents, Veblen pursued a rather undistinguished career in academia—his Stanford students didn't cotton to his dryly ironic style—before finding his niche at New York's New School for Social Research in 1919. There his career prospered. Radical journals disseminated his ideas, Veblen clubs sprang up around the nation, and he achieved widespread fame as the prophet of his time. Fitzgerald may not have read Veblen, but he was certainly aware of him. For his review

of H. L. Mencken's *Prejudices: Second Series* in 1921, Fitzgerald commented that he was overwhelmed by the honor of commenting on the Sage of Baltimore's work. "It seems cruel," he wrote, "that the privilege could not have gone to Thorstein Veblen" . . . or to others more worthy of the honor than himself.

Much the best known of Veblen's three major works is *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899). The groundbreaking book provided a sound overview of the emergence of a leisure class, but gained much of its popularity by virtue of the author's sarcastic commentary on that class. Veblen advanced three basic ideas under the chapter headings of "Pecuniary Emulation," "Conspicuous Leisure," and (in a phrase that quickly became part of the language) "Conspicuous Consumption." All three are vividly illustrated in the pages of *The Great Gatsby*.

In an industrial society, Veblen pointed out, accumulated property replaced the "trophies of predatory exploit" as a sign of potency. In order to establish his worth and earn the esteem of others, one had to achieve economic success—and show it. The competition to rival the very rich required acquisition of material goods in order to create "an invidious comparison" between oneself and those less successful. Veblen called this process "pecuniary emulation," and judged it to have become the primary motive for the accumulation of wealth. In every modern industrial economy, wealth and its display played a part in determining social status. But the part was larger in the United States, where affluence could more easily surmount traditional barriers of birth and class. As Veblen summarized the point, "[T]he outcome of modern industrial development has been to intensify emulation and the jealousy that goes with emulation, and to focus the emulation and the jealousy on the possession and enjoyment of material goods."

According to this theory, one might suppose that Jay Gatsby could capture his dream through his extraordinary success in gaining wealth and putting it on display. But Veblen added an important caveat, that inherited wealth was "even more honorific" than that acquired through one's own efforts. Only those who inherited money could live a life of leisure naturally and comfortably, for they inherited gentility along with their wealth, and "with the inheritance of gentility goes the inheritance of obligatory leisure." If you were born into this new leisure class, you were obliged to abstain "from productive work" as evidence of your status, for, in Veblen's words, "esteem is awarded only on evidence." Nick comes from a genteel background, but the family money has evaporated and he must find a socially approved occupation—the bond busi-

ness—to support himself. Gatsby has all the money he could possibly need, and ostentatiously presents it for public view, but has not acquired the manners and social stature that come with inherited wealth. Only Tom qualifies as a fully validated member of the new leisure class.

The contrast between the three men is tellingly disclosed during the scene when Tom stops by Gatsby's house on an afternoon horseback ride with Sloane and a female companion who may or may not be Mrs. Sloane. The riders are invited in for a drink (Nick is also on hand), and after a couple of highballs the lady accompanying Mr. Sloane becomes quite expansive. Gatsby must come to dinner with them, she insists (and Nick too, she adds), but Mr. Sloane does not join in the invitation and instead tries to hurry their departure. Nick intuits the situation at once, and politely declines. Gatsby, however, "wanted to go and he didn't see that Mr. Sloane had determined he shouldn't." Nor does Gatsby really belong in this company, if only because he doesn't have a horse of his own. He'd learned to ride in the army, but unlike Tom, with his string of polo ponies, had not been brought up with horses in the style of the honorifically idle rich. Significantly, though, the obtuse Tom has failed to acquire the social sensitivity expected of one in his genteel circumstances. Like Gatsby, he is blind to what is going on between Sloane and his companion. "Doesn't [Gatsby] know she doesn't want him?" he demands of Nick.

The lower and middle classes were naturally involved in the quest for pecuniary emulation, Veblen points out. But in the conventional social and economic structure at the turn of the century, the husband of the family was usually compelled to work, so it fell to his wife to indulge in vicarious consumption on his behalf. According to Veblen, "Unproductive consumption of goods" was "a mark of prowess and a perquisite of human dignity," and this was especially true of consumption of "the more desirable things." Unemployed members of the leisure class were expected to develop discriminating tastes, whether for apparel or architecture, games or narcotics. Cultivation of this aesthetic faculty was not easy. It demanded a "more or less arduous application to the business of learning how to live a life of ostensible leisure in a becoming way."

Inasmuch as "conspicuous consumption of valuable goods" represented "a means of reputability to the gentleman of leisure," he might be forgiven occasional overconsumption in, say, sex or liquor. Drunkenness too tends to become a mark of the superior status of those able to afford such expensive vices. Thus in "The Rich Boy," written immediately after *Gatsby*, Fitzgerald created a protagonist who becomes shame-

fully intoxicated but in apologizing is able to excuse himself and even attain a certain "moral superiority," much as Tom dismisses his extramarital adventures as basically unimportant.

It was obviously wasteful, Veblen acknowledged, to pursue a life of conspicuous consumption. Yet he held that "[i]n order to be reputable," one's consumption had to be wasteful: a waste of time and effort, and a waste of goods. Veblen slyly insisted that he used the term "waste" in a purely scientific fashion, just as he used the word "invidious" in speaking of invidious distinctions. In neither case, he maintained, did he intend any "undertone of depreciation." It is easy to imagine how this kind of irony, reasonably effective on the page, might have sailed right past the college students Veblen was lecturing to. Fitzgerald plays no such rhetorical games. He makes perfectly clear his feelings about the Buchanans, the careless, murderous couple who represent the full flowering of Veblen's leisure class.

IV. The Inessential Houses

In a culture where pecuniary emulation predominates, the single most important object by which to declare one's status is the house. In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald masterfully discriminates between Tom Buchanan and Jay Gatsby, the rivals for Daisy's love, on the basis of the very different homes they occupy on Long Island. And houses serve to define other characters as well, in particular Nick and Daisy.

Though he lacks the Buchanans' financial resources, Nick shares their privileged background. At Yale, for instance, he belonged to the same senior society as Tom—and few organizations are more selective than Yale senior societies. During the course of the novel, Nick lives for eighty dollars a month in a weather-beaten cardboard bungalow "squeezed between two huge places [one of them, of course, belonging to Gatsby] that rented for twelve or fifteen thousand a season," at least fifty times as much as Nick was paying. But when the disastrous summer of 1922 limps to an end, Nick can return to the midwestern city where his "well-to-do, prominent" family has lived for three generations. He feels a part of that atmosphere, Nick reflects, "a little solemn with the feel of those long winters, a little complacent from growing up in the Carraway house in a city where dwellings are still called through decades by a family's name."

In Louisville, similarly, Daisy grew up in the Fay house. Gatsby meets her there in 1917, when red-white-and-blue banners patriotically whipped in the summer wind. "The largest of the banners and the

largest of the lawns belonged to Daisy Fay's house." The home itself *owns* things, and entirely enchants the poor young officer from the shores of Lake Superior, who has never seen such a beautiful house before. He invests the place with "a ripe mystery," and senses "a hint of bedrooms upstairs more beautiful and cool than other bedrooms . . . of romances that were not musty and laid away already in lavender but fresh and breathing and redolent of this year's shining motor cars." The magic for Gatsby, in this commodified universe, is inevitably linked to expensive objects, just as Daisy herself, the gleaming golden girl, is repeatedly depicted as dressed in white, driving her white roadster, living in a white palace.

As Fitzgerald re-creates the romance, Gatsby did not fall in love with Daisy until two days after he seduced her. They are sitting on her porch, which is mysteriously "bright with the bought luxury of starshine"—mysteriously because in the everyday world star-shine is not for sale. The wicker settee takes on anthropomorphic qualities, "squeak[ing] fashionably as [Daisy] turned toward him and he kissed her lovely and curious mouth." (That squeaking settee may have derived from memories of Edward Fitzgerald's failed career in the wicker-furniture business.) When Daisy speaks, her amazing voice rendered "huskier and more charming" than ever by the cold she's caught, Gatsby makes his eternal commitment to her, and to "the youth and mystery that wealth imprisons and preserves."

After the war, after Daisy has married and gone away, Gatsby spends the last of his mustering-out pay on a pilgrimage to Louisville, staying a week to revisit the streets they walked, the out-of-the-way places they drove to in her white car, and the house that "always seemed to him more mysterious and gay than other houses." Later, he makes it an impossible condition of his impossible dream of recovering the past that they go back to Louisville and be married from her wonderful house. In Gatsby's imagination, Daisy and her house are inseparable, while she comfortably changes location from the white palace in Louisville to—one feels certain—an elegant home in Lake Forest, and finally to the mansion Tom buys for her among the "white palaces of fashionable East Egg." In fact the Buchanans' place is a *red*-and-white Georgian Colonial overlooking the bay. Whatever its color, it is a magical place where nature is harnessed for the pleasure of its inhabitants.

To begin with, the lawn has superhuman qualities. On its course up from the beach, it runs for a quarter-mile, jumps over sundials and brick walls, drifts up the outside wall, and even seems to grow a little way into the house itself. A breeze blows through a rosy-colored room

from French windows ajar at either end, and there on an enormous couch are Daisy Buchanan and Jordan Baker in their white dresses. The two young women are "buoyed up" on the couch "as though upon an anchored balloon." Their dresses ripple in the breeze, as if they have just returned from a short flight around the house. Then Tom comes in, shuts the rear windows, cutting off the wind, and the skirts balloon slowly to the floor. Fitzgerald liked the antigravity effect so much that he reprised it for the Divers' dinner party in *Tender Is the Night*. There, bewitched by Dick's charm, the table seemed to rise "a little toward the sky like a mechanical dancing platform."

The most memorable adornment of the Buchanans' home—the green light at the end of their dock Gatsby can see from across the bay—also assumes supernatural importance. Before he and Daisy are reunited, the green light took on an aura of enchantment for Gatsby, representing a lost love just beyond his grasp. But once he sees and touches the actual rather than the idealized Daisy, the beacon begins to lose its "colossal significance" for him.

When Nick comes to the Buchanans' for dinner, the decorum of the evening is shattered by Myrtle's phone calls; and in an effort to change the subject, Tom proposes taking Nick down to see the stables, in which he takes particular pride. The subject comes up again on Nick's next visit to the Buchanans', during the climactic and stifling hot Sunday afternoon. On this occasion Daisy and Jordan are again dressed in white and reposing on an enormous couch, but in the heat of the day the awnings are drawn, the room is darkened, and they are weighted down like "silver idols." Despite this oppressive weather, Tom proclaims his legerdemain. A few pages earlier, Gatsby had his famous conversation with Nick about the passage of time. "Can't repeat the past?" he says. "Why of course you can." Gatsby is to discover that he cannot repeat the past, of course, but Tom does, in his way, manage to turn back the calendar. "I've heard of making a garage out of a stable," he tells Gatsby, "but I'm the first man who ever made a stable out of a garage." After this, as if to demonstrate the anachronism of the trick Tom has played on time and progress, they all pile into cars for the drive to Manhattan.

As Tom and Nick and Jordan drive back from the city later that day, the Buchanans' magical home contravenes the law of gravity, "float-[ing] suddenly toward them through the dark, rustling trees," with two windows on the second floor abloom with light. Against such violations of natural law, Gatsby can hardly compete. His gigantic house remains sadly earthbound throughout.

As opposed to Nick's modest summer quarters, or even the Buchanan mansion that once was owned by "Demaine, the oil man," Gatsby's huge "imitation of some Hotel de Ville in Normandy" looms large. It is a house that declares itself, that looks like the world's fair when all the lights are turned on at night.

As Nick comments during Gatsby's first party, in his experience "young men didn't . . . drift coolly out of nowhere and buy a palace on Long Island Sound." Rumors circulate about Gatsby's past: He killed a man; he was a German spy during the war. He spreads some of them himself, as in his recital for Nick's benefit of an impossibly romantic past involving tigers and rubies. "I didn't want you to think I was just some nobody," he explains. This phrase finds an echo, in a novel rife with echoes, during the confrontation scene at the Plaza, when Tom remarks that he doesn't intend to "sit back and let Mr. Nobody from Nowhere make love to [his] wife." In a sense, Tom is right to characterize Gatsby in this way, for he lacks any mentionable social background. The outsized house, together with the lavish parties and the garish clothing, the automobiles and the aquaplane, represent his attempt to establish himself as Somebody, or at least not Nobody.

The trouble is that these possessions, which Gatsby shows off like a peacock his plumage, proclaim him as an arriviste. Nick describes Gatsby's mansion as "a colossal affair by any standard," and it is no accident that he borrows an adjective from the promotional language of motion-picture advertisements. On the exterior, the house features a tower (for what conceivable purpose?) that looks "spanking new under a thin beard of raw ivy." The thin beard, the only anthropomorphizing quality cited, makes the place seem less rather than more attractive, despite its marble swimming pool and forty acres of meticulously tended lawn and garden.

The enormous house, it turns out, has something of a history. A brewer had built it a decade earlier, and tried to bribe his neighbors into having their roofs thatched with straw. But this faintly ridiculous endeavor to recover the past collapsed when the neighbors obstinately refused to play their assigned role as peasants to the brewer's lord of the manor. Gatsby bought the mansion not to lord it over the neighbors but solely because it was situated across the bay from Daisy. To increase the chances of a reunion, Gatsby makes a point of showing off his house to all comers. Despite the undoubted impressiveness of the place, however, he lacks the confident assurance Tom displays when showing his mansion to visitors. "I've got a nice place here," Tom *tells* Nick, brooking no dissent. "My house looks well, doesn't it?" Gatsby *asks* Nick, seeking

validation. "See how the whole front of it catches the light," he remarks, and then Daisy appears, the brass buttons on her dress gleaming in the sunlight.

Gatsby takes Nick and Daisy on a tour of his Hotel de Ville. As they walk up from the big postern, Daisy admires everything about the huge place—the feudal silhouette, the gardens with the mingled odors of jonquil and hawthorn and plum blossom and kiss-me-at-the-gate. Inside, Gatsby leads them through an architecturally eclectic mishmash. The house contains a little bit from every period: Restoration salons and Marie Antoinette music rooms, period bedrooms and an Adam study. Gatsby gives them a glass of chartreuse from a cupboard in the study, opens two "hulking" cabinets in the bedroom to display the suits and shirts made by his man in England, and calls on Klipspringer, his Kato Kaelin—like "boarder," to play two tellingly inappropriate tunes—"The Love Nest" and "Ain't We Got Fun?" Daisy professes to love everything, and proposes the kind of experiment in transforming nature that seems possible only to the Buchanans of the world. She and Gatsby stand at the window gazing at the pink and golden clouds over the sea. "I'd like just to get one of those clouds," she whispers, "and put you in it and push you around."

The most significant room in the house is its facsimile of the Merton College library at Oxford. (Fitzgerald knew this room well, not from Oxford but from its reproduction at Princeton's University Cottage Club.) So much about the house was calculated for show, as part of a performance, that the owl-eyed man was astounded to discover that the books were real, though uncut and unread. He's "a regular Belasco," Owl Eyes remarks, associating Gatsby with the well-known Broadway producer.

Gatsby's house is for show, certainly, and so are his parties. When Daisy wonders how he can live there alone, Gatsby says he keeps the place "always full of interesting people. . . . People who do interesting things. Celebrated people." Finally Daisy and Tom are prevailed upon to come to downscale West Egg for one of the parties. The evening does not go well. Gatsby "certainly must have strained himself to get this menagerie together," Tom comments, and with some accuracy, considering the names of the guests. Daisy defends the assembled crowd—and by extension, Gatsby himself—but without conviction. She is less than amused when a drunken girl asks to be put under a cold shower. And although she professes to like the movie star who is striking attitudes for the benefit of partygoers, in *Trimalchio* she balked at Gatsby's suggestion that she supply the star with the name of her hairdresser. She is appalled

by West Egg in general, this place of raw emotions that "Broadway had begotten upon a Long Island fishing village."

The party marks the beginning of the end for Daisy and Gatsby. Daisy didn't have a good time, a discouraged Gatsby tells Nick afterward, sensing that their romance has gone sour. At this stage in *Trimalchio*, Daisy frantically proposes that they run away together. Gatsby rejects the idea, and in telling Nick about it, he stares at his house. "She even wants to leave that," he said bitterly. "I've gotten these things for her, and now she wants to run away." In an earlier passage from the novel as published, Fitzgerald underlined the proliferation of Gatsby's things. "There was music from my neighbor's house through the summer nights," Nick reports. *His* guests came to *his* blue gardens, dived from *his* raft, and sunned on *his* beach while *his* two motorboats "slit the waters of the Sound," *his* Rolls-Royce brought groups out from the city, and *his* station wagon met every train. But what good were all those possessions if Daisy was not pleased?

Thereupon Gatsby ends the parties, fires the servants, lets the place deteriorate. It is dusty and in disarray when Nick comes early in the morning after the disastrous day at the Plaza and the fatal accident on the road. In its emptiness, the house seems even more enormous than usual. Together they throw open the windows, and Gatsby tells Nick the real story of what he learned from Dan Cody and how he fell in love with Daisy Fay. After breakfast together, Nick unburdens himself to Gatsby that he's worth more than all the East Egg crowd, and, fearing the worst, reluctantly takes the train into town. He is still there when George Wilson finds his way to Gatsby's house and pool, sometime between two and four in the afternoon.

Taking responsibility for the funeral arrangements, Nick keeps vigil at the house until Gatsby's father arrives. Henry C. Gatz brings two mementoes of his son that he produces for Nick's inspection. One is a boyhood schedule and list of general resolves written on the flyleaf of a Hopalong Cassidy book. This document sets forth an ambitious program reminiscent of the recommendations for personal improvement in Benjamin Franklin's autobiography: "Study needed inventions"; "Practice elocution, poise and how to attain it"; "No more smokeing or chewing." "It just shows you," Mr. Gatz declares, in a surge of pride for his son's not quite successful attempt to reinvent himself and escape his humble origins. Mr. Gatz's other treasure is a photograph of Gatsby's house, "cracked in the corners and dirty with many hands," which he fishes out of his wallet to show Nick. "Look there," he says, and again, "Look there." He and Nick are standing in the hall of the house, but

as far as Mr. Gatz is concerned they might be anywhere. What matters is the soiled photograph in his hands, which—Nick sees—was more real to him than the house itself. "[I]t's a very pretty picture. It shows up well," Mr. Gatz observes, like his son focusing on the mansion's appearance. It is appropriate that he should be fixated on a photographic image that only seems to freeze time. Father and son alike prefer the imagined to the real, the irrecoverable romantic past to the inescapable material present.

On the night before returning to the Middle West, Nick pays a final visit to the "huge incoherent failure of a house" that in its effrontery mirrored Gatsby's own ostentation. Concerned as always with propriety, Nick erases an obscene word some boy has scrawled on the front steps. Then he strolls down to the beach, sprawls on the sand, lets his mind wander in search of a moral. "[A]s the moon rose higher the inessential houses began to melt away"—inessential because inescapably concrete, solid, and substantial, and so unworthy of the wonder the Dutch sailors felt upon beholding for the first time the "fresh, green breast of the new world," or of Gatsby's wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of Daisy's dock and stretched his arms toward a dream that would forever elude his grasp.

This makes for a moving, even uplifting conclusion. But *The Great Gatsby* conveys another message as well: It tells a cautionary tale about the debilitating effects of money and social class on American society and those who seek fulfillment within its confines. Fitzgerald wrote in a world full of clocks and calendars, Malcolm Cowley once observed, thinking of the author's immersion in the culture of his time. But as Cowley also famously remarked, in his fiction Fitzgerald regarded that culture both from within, as someone typical of and essentially involved in it, and from without, as a more or less disinterested and hardheaded observer. Fitzgerald's masterpiece remains an engaging example of social history even as it uncovers the cracks in the glittering surface, the poison eating its way underneath. It is this double vision that makes *The Great Gatsby* great.