

'The Great Gatsby' - mimetic desire and scapegoating in a highly ironic Biblical tale

Essay based on a detailed [close reading](#) of the novel.

In 'The Great Gatsby' Scott Fitzgerald plunges his readers into a world of millionaires. For most of us this is a completely unknown world. The world of the likes of wealthy Russian and Emirati billionaires who buy British football clubs as a sidekick, or of the football stars themselves like Lionel Messi who is claimed to have earned 555,237,619 euro in four years' time. But what Scott Fitzgerald - he was only 29 when his novel was published in 1925 - is showing us in that world, is exactly the same as what is happening in the real world we all live in: the eternal struggle with *love, sex and lust*.

In the novel we are the witnesses of the fight for the lovely Daisy Fay between Jay Gatsby, her former lover, and Tom Buchanan, her husband. Quite remarkably though, the story is not told by an omniscient narrator who lets us drift from one character to the other (like all soap writers do these days) or by one of the main characters (who then confesses or cries his or her heart out or tries to justify his or her acts). No, the whole story is written down by another character in the plot, Nick Carraway. Not a millionaire, but a more or less normal person like you or I, who just happened to be in the right place at the right time, being the neighbour of Gatsby and a relative of Daisy. More importantly, a young man who himself was struggling with love, having not decided yet on his true love. A brilliant touch of genius by Scott Fitzgerald to explore the desirous heart.

The struggle between the two rivals for the lovely Daisy leads to death and that is why 'The Great Gatsby' may perhaps be a (sort of ironic, modern?) moral or even Biblical tale but then one that takes place in the immoral world of the rich millionaires and beau monde of New York in the early 1920s. A world without God in which not one but two of the Ten Commandments of the Bible are infringed: ['Thou shalt not commit adultery'](#) and ['Thou shalt not kill'](#).

Mimetic desire

In 'The Great Gatsby' we see the hypotheses of René Girard on human desire at work. The first one is what Girard calls mimetic desire. We humans desire what others desire. Moreover, we are not aware that we do. We always claim that our desire is ours and ours alone. But Girard is convinced that there is always 'a triangular relationship': a subject always imitates the desire of a model for the object he (of she) desires. Jay Gatsby (= subject) was poor when he first wanted to get a date with Daisy Fay, the most popular

girl in town (object). He had seen lots of officers (= models) dating her when he was in the army training camp near Louisville. Normally, he didn't have a chance to date Daisy Fay, let alone marry her, because her family was enormously rich. But at the time he met her, he was wearing the same uniform as the other, rich officers and so he took his chance and lo and behold, Daisy fell in love with him. As a matter of fact, the young officer started seeing her a lot. He knew he didn't stand a chance because he was 'a penniless young man without a past', but the United States were about [to send troops to Europe](#) and before Gatsby had to go and fight, he made love to her. Daisy was devastated when her parents forbade her to say goodbye when Gatsby left for Europe. Was their daughter too young- she was only 18? Or did they already know the social background of Jay Gatsby?

After the war Daisy married a rich millionaire, Tom Buchanan. Gatsby was still in Europe at that time. We do not know why exactly he hadn't come home. Was it because he knew he didn't have a chance to marry her? We don't know why Daisy didn't wait for him, only that she had been angry with her parents for weeks in 1917, hadn't dated any other officers or other young men for a year. But then she started to date again, was engaged to one person, broke that off and married Tom Buchanan instead.

The day before her marriage, however, she was found by her bridesmaid drunken and in panic. She didn't want to marry Tom! She destroyed the letter in her hand and didn't want to reveal who it was from or what was in it, but she took 'the hundred and fifty thousand dollar' string of pearls she had received as a wedding present from her future husband out of the wastebasket and gave it to the bridesmaid saying: "Take 'em downstairs and give 'em back to whoever they belong to. Tell 'em all Daisy's change' her mine." Daisy could, however, be sobered and persuaded to marry Tom Buchanan the next day. The couple seemed to be very happy the first months, but by the time they were having a first baby Tom had already had an affair with a chambermaid of a hotel.

This tragic story of mimetic desire was told in chapter 4 of the novel to the narrator of the novel, Nick Carraway by Jordan Baker. Jordan was two years younger than Daisy, helped her back in 1917 to cover up a date with Gatsby and later became one of Daisy's best friends as she was Daisy's bridesmaid. Just like Daisy she had lots of suitors by then - in this way being the object of desire in a series of mimetic triangles herself. But four years later she still hadn't married. Moreover, she had become a celebrity as a professional golf player and perhaps she was more popular than ever when the two girlfriends met in New York in 1922 at about the same time as Jay Gatsby turned up again.

Marriage

In order to make sure humans are not constantly fighting to determine who finally wins the object of his or her desire, there are a number of laws we humans have agreed on. These rules differ from culture to culture and have also constantly evolved. 'The Great Gatsby' is set in the United States of the 1920s and was written by a writer who lived in the same era. Quite possibly we (I am living in Belgium) think differently today, one hundred years later, but one of these rules was and still is [marriage](#), whether this takes place in church (the Catholic tradition I was brought up in calls it the [sacrament of matrimony](#)) or in the town hall, whether there is a feast or not, marriage means the end of a complicated search of two people for their true love. At the same time, marriage shows all the people in a certain community they should not desire any of the two people any longer. This also makes it easy to know whose children a woman will give birth to.

Thou shalt not commit adultery

But obviously, in every sort of society marriage laws can clash with the desire of human beings. Once married we still are humans who desire what others desire. In religious but also secular communities in the past and in the present, there are not only strict rules to make sure that doesn't happen - rules or laws that are backed up by sacred beliefs or volumes of legislation. There is also a (vast) majority of the community who believes and observes these laws.

The rich and the mighty, though, have been notorious in getting round that conflict between what the heart desires and the law forbids. [King David](#) of the Jews sent Uria to war to be killed, so that he could have his lovely wife Batseba, who he had got pregnant first! [Henry VIII](#) is said to have started a new church to be able to divorce from his first wife, who couldn't produce a male heir (after six pregnancies). Afterwards, he had another two divorces and he had two other wives killed.

Jordan Baker told the story of Daisy, Gatsby and Tom to Nick Carraway, because multimillionaire Jay Gatsby had asked her to. He wanted to date Daisy again and saw Nick - her cousin and his neighbour in New York - as an opportunity to act as a go-between.

Jordan could obviously only tell about Gatsby dating her friend Daisy back in 1917 from her point of view. That means she didn't know anything about Gatsby's background. Or did she not tell this on purpose? As a matter of fact when Nick heard the story, Gatsby was a multimillionaire. If you hear the story like that, it is a story of a couple madly in love with each other. A relationship that gets prohibited by the parents. The secret of Gatsby's social background only gets (completely) revealed at the end of the story after the fatal accident Gatsby and Daisy were involved in. At that moment Nick heard the same story

but then told by Gatsby in a heart-to-heart talk a few hours before Gatsby himself got killed. So, it is Nick who eventually reveals the hidden models of the mimetic triangle.

Nick Carraway

By the time Nick heard the tragic love story of Gatsby in the preamble of the First World War, Nick was not only the neighbour of Gatsby in New York and the cousin of Daisy, he had also started seeing Jordan Baker. This episode of his life surely was an emotional roller coaster, as he couldn't make up his mind if he really loved her. But she was ever so popular, his lovely cousin was her best friend and she seemed to be quite fond of him too. But Nick was also writing letters to a girl in Chicago at the same time and he had even had a short affair with a girl at his office in New York.

To further understand the fact that Nick tried to help his rich neighbour to date his cousin Daisy again and so start an adulterous affair, we have to know that before Gatsby will ask him to arrange a secret rendezvous with her at his cottage, Nick knew that Tom, the husband of his cousin, was also having an affair with Myrtle, the wife of a local garage owner. What's more, on his first visit to their house in New York, Daisy herself had told him in confidence how unhappy she was. On the day her first child was born two years before, she had told Nick, she already knew that Tom was not a faithful husband and that day she had wept and had been glad her child was a girl: "And I hope she'll be a fool—that's the best thing a girl can be in this world, a beautiful little fool."

Gatsby, on the other hand, had evolved from a curiosity - who was that wealthy man next door who was throwing these wild parties for all these guests every weekend? - to the friendly neighbour that shared a history of war with Nick. But there is more, Gatsby seemed to be genuinely interested in him, an ordinary neighbour living in a small house next to his own colossal mansion. As a matter of fact, Nick was really carried away by him. No wonder Scott Fitzgerald named his narrator Nick Carraway.

Interesting from a moral point of view is that Nick describes the joyous parties at the house of Jay Gatsby as parties he really enjoyed, although the things that were happening there were highly immoral and illegal. He too drank plenty of (free) alcohol in times of [national prohibition in the United States](#); there was exciting live music and ample opportunity for dancing and flirts etc. So, he didn't go just once, but three times before Gatsby asked him to do him a favour. He had also enjoyed the ride in the lovely automobile of Gatsby (and before that in his hydroplane) and he had stood in awe for the way Gatsby got away with speeding etc.

The events, however, are not only immoral but at times really ridiculously comic. Nick was the witness of a hilarious car accident at the first party he was invited to - a nice little anecdote which will contrast in more than one way with the catastrophic accident later on in the novel and then there was the clumsy rendezvous between Gatsby and Daisy at

the house of Nick - Daisy even thought Nick was in love with her! Not sure if she would mind too.

Gatsby had told Jordan he had purchased his house, to be near Daisy and when he showed her the mansion, Nick observed the stress Gatsby had to go through ... would she like what he liked? At a certain moment he was throwing piles and piles of shirts from a huge cabinet one by one on a table in front of Daisy to impress her with his clothes that were specially chosen by somebody in England and sent to him every season.

It is clear that Gatsby had done his utmost best to become fabulously rich to impress her, just like her rich husband and the other officers who dated her back in 1917. In terms of René Girard, the subject (Gatsby) had imitated his model (Tom Buchanan) to conquer the object of his desire (Daisy).

The tour in Gatsby's enormous house was a triumph. Daisy adored literally everything and there was absolutely no doubt, when Nick said goodbye to them, that Gatsby and Daisy were in love (again). Of course, Nick was very happy he had played an important part in this adulterous affair.

Gatsby's mythical background

At about the same time of Gatsby and Daisy's first secret rendezvous, the press became interested in Gatsby. There were all sorts of rumours about his activities and even more about his identity, also among his numerous guests. And as a sort of counterbalance, Nick now writes down the fantastic but what he believes to be the true story of Gatsby's younger years as Gatsby himself told this to him in confidence much later.

Jay was born in North Dakota, his parents were poor and he fled from his home as a young man: 'his imagination had never really accepted them as his parents at all.' He had all sorts of jobs, and changed his name James Gatz into Jay Gatsby after he met the miner multimillionaire Dan Cody. He had warned him on his yacht about a storm and made quite an impression on Cody. For Gatsby the yacht had been love at first sight. He was asked to stay on Cody's ship and did all sorts of duties on the yacht while sailing around the world with him. He became a good friend of Cody and five years later when Cody died, he was entitled to inherit lots of money but that was prevented in one way or another by Cody's wife.

Gatsby's story about his early years and his years with Cody - so before he met Daisy in 1917 - are full of remarkable details about women too. It is clear that Gatsby not only had a wild and chaotic life before he met her, but he had also had lots of women before he actually fell in love with Daisy.

What's more, Nick gives Gatsby in this way a sort of mythical (i.e. Biblical) background. A young poor boy in conflict with his parents, looking for an independent future, striving to become somebody in the world, in love with glamour and wealth. Once more we see Gatsby fascinated by and imitating an unattainable model, this time the rich millionaire Cody.

The ultimate fight for the love of Daisy

One hot afternoon, the rivalry between Jay Gatsby and Tom Buchanan reached its climax in an open confrontation between the rivals. Scott Fitzgerald invented a double scene for this ultimate fight. To make these scenes even more hilarious and sensational he makes the protagonists Daisy, Tom and their guests Jordan and Nick drive from one scene - the house of the Buchanans - to the other - a hotel room they rent in town - in the car of their rival; and as there is no petrol enough in Gatsby's car, Tom Buchanan even has to stop at the petrol station of ... the husband of Myrtle, his mistress! That stop will later prove to be of utmost importance to the denouement of the plot.

Scott Fitzgerald added other nice dramatic touches to the two scenes. The conversations take place while it is unbearably hot and (forbidden) alcohol is consumed all the time, two elements which make people both highly irritable and unrestrained. He also added a hilarious thematic note to the whole dramatic situation: the second scene takes place in a hotel where they all of sudden hear 'Mendelssohn's Wedding March from the ballroom below'. Quite a sarcastic coincidence indeed!

Nick writes down the long and open fight between the lovers to conquer Daisy that afternoon in much detail. In what he observed that afternoon, we can see what René Girard pointed out time and again in mimetic crises. At the height of a mimetic conflict rivals mirror one another: they become doubles. Gatsby and Tom Buchanan tried very hard not so much to win the heart of their beloved as to destroy each other, without taking into account the effect of their words on Daisy. In this way both rivals really looked like one another.

By the end of the afternoon Tom Buchanan seemed to have won. He could convince Daisy that Gatsby must have become fabulously rich because he was a criminal bootlegger.

Thou shalt not kill

Why does Nick tell us the story of this adulterous affair? An affair that he willingly facilitated between his dear cousin and a criminal, an illegal liquor dealer? And why is Nick at the same time so open and frank about his own complicated love life?

Scott Fitzgerald didn't let Nick write a candid diary. No Nick writes down the story after the events had taken place. Nick would never have written down the whole story in such unbridled details if the events hadn't ended tragically. In the wake of the open conflict between the two rivals, two people got killed and one person committed suicide. After the first tragic event - a car accident - Nick had a long heart-to-heart talk with Gatsby which revealed not only the secret of Gatsby when he was dating Daisy back in 1917, but also disclosed the circumstances that led to the death of the woman in the car accident. He wasn't driving at that moment, Daisy was! He added he would take full responsibility but the next day Gatsby got killed and in the next few days and weeks Nick found out that the death of Gatsby really proved to be the death of a scapegoat, an innocent person "who is blamed for the wrongdoings, mistakes, or faults of others" (Oxford Dictionary).

Gatsby may be the main character in the central love story in 'The Great Gatsby', but Scott Fitzgerald made Nick the narrator. He made Nick start to write his book about Gatsby because Nick felt morally disgusted by the events and the role of everybody involved. That is why Scott Fitzgerald's narrator is so interested in the morals of everyone, while he is writing - including his own.

Scapegoating

In this way another hypothesis of René Girard on our human behaviour is illustrated. In times of chaos and disorder - Girard has shown in numerous studies - people try to find peace of mind and restore order by putting the blame on one person: a scapegoat. According to René Girard this fundamental law of human behaviour was exposed once and for all in the Bible, to be more precise in the New Testament.

In this novel this scapegoat mechanism is revealed to us because the story is written down by someone who is convinced that Gatsby - despite his numerous other faults - is really an innocent victim. At the end of the story, we too get convinced, piecing together the puzzle of what had really happened.

Gatsby got killed by Mr. Wilson, who blamed him for killing his wife. But Gatsby was the wrong (i.e. innocent) person, as it had been Daisy who was driving his car at that moment. Moreover, Mr. Wilson's wife was partly to blame for the accident herself too, as she was jumping recklessly in front of the car believing she could make the driver stop. All she wanted at that moment was to flee from her raging husband - so he too was to blame for the accident! Myrtle must have wanted to go away with Tom Buchanan who

she believed was the driver of that beautiful yellow car, as she had seen him in that car that very afternoon when he had stopped to get petrol. Mr Wilson who had just found out his wife was seeing another man - he had discovered a dog collar (oh irony!) she couldn't account for - and he wrongly believed that man to be the very owner of that car. So, by killing him Wilson thought he killed his wife's suitor at the same time. But he was wrong again, that person was Tom Buchanan. In this way, Gatsby was blamed for the faults committed by Daisy and Tom. Whereas Mr. Wilson didn't know he had killed the wrong person - he does not know what he is doing! - Tom and Daisy both knew Gatsby was innocent. But still for various reasons they let him down and then, a couple of weeks later (40 Biblical days?) Tom admitted to Nick he gave Gatsby's address to the vindictive killer searching for the owner of the yellow car that ran over his wife, without warning the police or Gatsby by telephone for the armed lunatic that had threatened to kill him.

Nick may have felt ashamed about his own attitude towards Gatsby too! Indeed, he had not warned Gatsby about the new bond he had seen the night after the car accident between Daisy and her husband. But he did organise Gatsby's funeral and did his utmost best to have all of Gatsby's friends at his funeral - that results in a few hilarious scenes with Nick trying to persuade Gatsby's criminal friend or partner Meyer Wolfsheimer. Without success, though! More importantly, Nick didn't stand up for Gatsby, confronting Tom with the truth when he happened to bump into him a few weeks later. No, he didn't react at all when Tom told him: "That fellow had it coming to him. He threw dust into your eyes just like he did in Daisy's, but he was a tough one. He ran over Myrtle like you'd run over a dog and never even stopped his car."

Disillusioned Nick stopped seeing Jordan Baker - well, she said she was engaged to be married to someone else when he told her and then, he left New York. But now two years later, he has finished writing down everything, as true and honest as possible. Scott Fitzgerald even suggests that Nick Carraway's book is titled 'The Great Gatsby' when Nick writes on one of the first pages of the book: 'Gatsby, the man who gives his name to this book'.

Irony or sarcasm?

All these immoral events are written down, however, with an enormous amount of ironic and sarcastic undertones. Was Scott Fitzgerald trying to make fun of his narrator too? Was Fitzgerald not so much ironic as sarcastic?

The plot surely unmasks the morals of 'new money'. Illegal and criminal bootlegging on Gatsby's side had led to illegal and immoral parties. On the other hand, the explicit racism of Tom at the dinner table in the Buchanan house may refer to the fact that his family money or 'old money' was based on slavery and plantations. Tom certainly didn't want to share these (immorally) acquired privileges with others now. Moreover, even

Nick's (relative) family wealth seemed to be based on a legal but rather immoral trick of an ancestor to avoid getting killed in the founding war of the United States.

And then there is the dishonest love life of these millionaires. Gatsby didn't mind courting a married woman and Daisy didn't object to his avances. Her husband Tom was a brutal, serial adulterer who got mad at the thought his wife would act in the same way. Also Nick's love life had turned out to be quite a disaster during the time he was in New York.

But, by the end of the story Fitzgerald's naive but honest, morally disgusted narrator had amply proved that Gatsby's immoral love for Daisy had been purified by the accident, as he was willing to take up the responsibility for Daisy's hit and run. As a matter of fact, Gatsby had already stopped to organise the parties at his house too - momentarily perhaps, but still. By his tragic death his love for Daisy turned out to be worth so much more than Daisy's whimsical, frivolous and selfish love for him; so much more than the unfaithful love of Tom for Daisy; and vice versa when Daisy started to date Gatsby again; so much more than the brutal love of Tom for his mistress (his aggressive slam in her face broke her nose) ... Gatsby's larger-than-life love for Daisy had eventually made him the deadly victim of the immoral attitudes of Tom and Daisy. A fatal fate that - oh irony! - was triggered by the foolish behaviour of Tom's mistress and carried out by her deceived and vindictive husband.

The green light

So, the only thing that might perhaps be a beacon of light in these mad pursuits for love and happiness, can only be Gatsby's corrupt love for Daisy that might have changed Gatsby completely if only he hadn't been killed and if only Daisy had felt the same for him - little chance she might have changed too, though! No wonder, thus, the book ends with Nick remembering Gatsby staring at that green light on the pier at her house at the other side of the water. And Nick trying to imagine how Gatsby once must have thought how close he was to realize that dream.

Is that ultimate, vulnerable longing for (purifying)love something only Nick Carraway wants to hold on to or believe in? Or also Scott Fitzgerald? The fact that the answer to that question will remain a mystery, is due to the genius of Scott Fitzgerald, the 29-year-old writer of 'The Great Gatsby', who hid himself behind the both hilarious and dramatic events his imagination had come up with, and behind his naive, promiscuous but morally awoken narrator, while meanwhile revealing the darkest secrets of the desirous heart that René Girard would theorise half a century later and give it names like mimetic desire, object, subject and model, rivals and doubles and scapegoating ...

That Scott Fitzgerald was in search of true love too, may perhaps be convincingly proved by the only words in 'The Great Gatsby' he chose not to assign to Nick. Scott Fitzgerald

dedicated the novel 'Once again to Zelda' (his wife). And he added a poem fragment evoking some crazy advice (but fitting to his novel!) for a highly in love person to convince the girl of his dreams to cry out she loves him too:

“Then wear the gold hat, if that will move her;
If you can bounce high, bounce for her too,
Till she cry “Lover, gold-hatted, high-bouncing lover,
I must have you!”

Thomas Parke d'Invilliers

But of course, these words too may be ironic!

- **Joost Dancet** -

Epilogue

As a matter of fact, the poet on the dedication page of 'The Great Gatsby' [does not exist!](#) So, the poetic verses are really the words of Scott Fitzgerald, but once again he had hidden himself, now behind Thomas Parke d'Invilliers, a fictional character he had created in a previous novel.

Love and marriage and Scott Fitzgerald

May I take a risky guess about the relation between the novel and its author concerning desire, love and marriage?

There are lots of parallels between the novel and the love life of Scott Fitzgerald. Like Gatsby, Scott Fitzgerald himself was rejected because he was too poor. Not by one but by two women! First by Ginevra King, the second time by Zelda Sayre. Scott Fitzgerald eventually married Zelda in 1920 after he had become a successful writer.

While writing 'The Great Gatsby' the couple went through a bad patch, though. Zelda was having an affair with a French pilot, she wanted to divorce, she survived an overdose of sleeping tablets etc.

Scott Fitzgerald may be covering up everything in 'The Great Gatsby' under tons of irony or even sarcasm, but while writing the novel he must have identified himself largely with Jay Gatsby. I believe - like many critics do - that Daisy stands for Scott Fitzgerald's first love, Ginevra King, who rejected him in 1917 (!). She refused to marry him, among other things because she and/or her parents thought he was too poor. Instead, she wedded the

millionaire William Mitchell a year later. One of her closest friends was the almost two years younger Edith Cummings, an amateur golfer who Fitzgerald transformed into Jordan Baker in his novel.

In the early 1920s, while Scott Fitzgerald and Zelda were on the verge of a divorce, he wrote the novel, imagining trying to seduce Ginevra once more. Her refusal to marry him (in 1917) and letting him down again in his imagination (5 years later) felt like a murder attempt. Scott Fitzgerald may admit to have lots of flaws and vices - just like Gatsby, but his love for her was pure! Nick Carraway is then the apostle Scott Fitzgerald needed to prove Ginevra what a terrible mistake she had made to let him down in a cold-hearted way and choose once more for her husband, a betrayal of his pure and genuine love for her. Or did he prove how loveless Ginevra was in order to win back Zelda?

As other critics have pointed out, Zelda too could recognise lots of her own in Daisy. Anyway, Scott Fitzgerald and Zelda didn't split up but went on together to face many other marriage storms.

Ah, those mysterious wonders of the loving heart!

Sources

- Ginevra King:
https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ginevra_King
- Zelda Sayre:
https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zelda_Fitzgerald
- Edith Cummings:
https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edith_Cummings

More info

- About [Scott Fitzgerald \(1896 - 1940\)](#)



After a long struggle with alcoholism, Scott Fitzgerald died in 1940, at the age of 44.

More about Scott Fitzgerald's alcohol problems, including wild parties - see link above.

Photograph of Scott Fitzgerald taken in 1925, the year of the publication of 'The Great Gatsby'.

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