

On *The Great Gatsby*

Byun Jong-min

I

When he was contemplating his great novel, *The Great Gatsby*, F. S. Fitzgerald wrote to his editor, Maxwell Perkins of Scribner's: "I want to write something new-something extraordinary and beautiful and simple and intricately patterned."¹⁾ And at the end of his life Fitzgerald wrote to his daughter: "Sometimes...but I guess I am too much a moralist at heart and really want to preach at people in some acceptable form rather than to entertain them."²⁾ This retrospective comment on his choice of the novelist's vocation will probably show Fitzgerald combining the roles of artist and moralist with perfect harmony in the *The Great Gatsby*. Eliot's remarks are worth quoting: "It has interested and excited me more than any new novel I have seen, either English or American, for a number of years. It seems to me to be the first step that American fiction has taken since Henry James."³⁾ This writing focuses on pursuing the moralistic virtues in *The Great Gatsby*.

As a matter of fact, Fitzgerald was a man with the most strenuous social appetites; much of his work is a statement of the intellectual and moral cost of attempting to gratify these appetites. In book after book, and essay after essay, he sought earnestly and hopelessly to imagine a way of life which would seem glamorous and graceful and free enough to warrant something of the energy he had himself expended in his pursuit of glamour, grace, and freedom. *The Great Gatsby*, which is Fitzgerald's finest work, dramatizes the conflict between the two American dreams. It does this because its characters represent fundamental tendencies in American life, and the novel acts its meaning on this representative level. It reveals a profound insight into American past and the meaning of that past in the present. Fitzgerald dramatizes with a sure touch the moral consequences of the conflict and the moral differences between the two dreams. Moreover, he lays his finger on what is tragically missing in American life: an articulated awareness of moral evil.

1) Arthur Mizener, *The Far Side of Paradise: A Biography of F. Scott Fitzgerald* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1951), p. 170.

2) F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Letters of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, ed. Andrew Turnbull (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963), p. 63.

3) Frederic J. Hoffman, ed., *The Great Gatsby: A Study* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962), pp. 178-79.

II

The central issue of the novel is the validity of the moral judgement made overtly by the narrator, Nick Carraway, when he tells Gatsby: "They're a rotten crowd... You're worth the whole damn bunch put together."⁴ The condemnation is specifically of the rich Buchanans, but extends to most of the other characters in the book. The authority with which Nick says this is justified only if the novel is seen, in part, as the story of the moral education of Nick, who moves—in the course of living through the events he relates—from flippancy to wisdom, from detachment to commitment. The central character of the novel may be the doomed Gatsby, but Fitzgerald makes the reader identify with Nick Carraway and undertake a spiritual journey akin to his voyage of discovery.

Nick reveals himself to the reader as a likeable young man, quizzically ironic about himself and sympathetic to others. He explains that he is always mindful of certain advice given to him by his father, about reserving judgement, and remembering that others might not have had his advantages. But although the reader is impressed with the need to reserve judgements on the characters of the novel, it is also made clear to him that this reservation must not be indefinite; there is also a need for judgements to be made. Even Nick Carraway's tolerance has a limit: "Conduct may be founded on the hard rock or the wet marshes, but after a certain point I don't care what it's founded on" (p. 3). His tone suggests the reaching of the end of a teacher and the snapping of patience.

In the opening pages of the book Fitzgerald introduces the reader to Nick, and allows him to examine his credentials and judge his reliability. Nick is neither solemn nor portentous, and the reader begins to like him almost immediately. He is direct and colloquial and has that minimal requirement for veracity—sincerity. Carraway's tone in the opening pages suggests an interesting personality, a good listener and therefore probably one who is in a good position to tell a story.

The reader, however, cannot automatically take the narrator's word: he has to be convinced that his word is worth taking. Fitzgerald has to win the reader's confidence in Nick's veracity. What sort of narrator is Nick? He is both an observer of and a participant in the events of the summer of 1922 that make up the story, but it is usually as an onlooker, contact and interpreter that he is important. Nick's function as narrator is facilitated by his having sources of information, secondary narrators like Jordan Baker, the attractive woman golfer with whom he becomes involved, and Gatsby's father. Jordan Baker is a friend of the Buchanans and has known Daisy as a girl. It is through her that Fitzgerald tells the story of Daisy's girlhood romance with Gatsby.⁵ His close relationship with other main characters enable Nick to give us eye-witness reports of most of the events in the novel.

At the beginning of *The Great Gatsby* we are given an assurance that "Gatsby turned out all right at the

4) F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962), p. 117. Hereinafter, all references are to this edition.

5) *The Great Gatsby*, pp. 57-59. Even if the reader suspends disbelief and accepts Jordan's total recall of events long past, the details and style of Jordan's account do not suit entirely the Jordan of other parts of the book.

end" (p. 4); here Fitzgerald allows his narrator to give a summing-up that might be more appropriate at the end of the book. It is not only natural, however, for a storyteller to make a ruminative remark like this but it is necessary to suggest the terms in which Gatsby must be considered: in twentieth century colloquial language it suggests a heroic role, despite Gatsby's shortcomings which are never glossed over: "Gatsby... represented everything for which I have an unaffected scorn" (p. 3). The rhythm of the comment and the stress which Nick gives it suggest that this conclusion is by no means arbitrary. It has involved a careful summing-up and balancing of his material; an act of soulsearching has been undertaken by the cautious and tolerant Nick.

When West Egg haunts Nick in nightmares after his return to the Middle West, he describes it as like:

...a night scene by El Greco: a hundred houses, at once conventional and grotesque, crouching under a sullen, overhanging sky and a lustreless moon. In the foreground four solemn men in dress suits are walking along the sidewalk with a stretcher on which lies a drunken woman in white evening dress. Her hand, which dangles over the side, sparkles cold with jewels. Gravely the men turn in at a house — the wrong house. But no one knows the woman's name, and no one cares. (p. 134)

"No one cares." That sums up the East for Nick. But Nick has learned to care, he has learned to discriminate and he has involved himself in life. That is why *The Great Gatsby* is, seen from one angle, the story of Nick's moral education. This is a gradual process, without the dramatic revelations of a Pauline conversion. It begins with Nick's descriptions of three contrasting parties at the beginning of the book.

At the first party at Gatsby's that he attends. Nick thinks he is one of the few guests actually invited. Fitzgerald has been in no hurry to bring Nick into direct contact with Gatsby, and even when he attends a party at Gatsby's, he does not recognize Gatsby; his host has to introduce himself, and their relationship begins on a comic note. But Gatsby's appearance makes a deep impression on Nick:

He smiled understandingly — much more than understandingly. It was one of those rare smiles with a quality of eternal reassurance in it, that you may come across four or five times in life. It faced — or seemed to face — the whole external world for an instant, and then concentrated on you with an irresistible prejudice in your favor. It understood you just as far as you wanted to be understood, believed in you as you would like to believe in yourself, and assured you that it had precisely the impression of you that, at your best, you hoped to convey. Precisely at that point it vanished — I was looking at an elegant young roughneck, a year or two over thirty, whose elaborate formality of speech just missed being absurd. Some time before he introduced himself I'd got a strong impression that he was picking his words with care. (pp. 37-38)

Nick's first meeting with Gatsby is undramatic — even an anti-climax — but later in the evening Gatsby sends a message that he wants to see Jordan Baker, who is with Nick. The discussion that ensues sets in action a series of events that is to bring Gatsby and Nick into close contiguity: Gatsby wants Nick to act as a go — between for him and Daisy Buchanan, Gatsby's childhood sweetheart, whom he has worshipped from afar ever since.

Nick forms an ironic contrast with Gatsby not only in his relationship with Jordan, but also with the two other women with whom he is at various stages "involved". As he leaves after his first visit

to the Buchanans they tell him they have heard he is "engaged to a girl out West" (p. 17). Nick comments:

Of course I knew what they were referring to, but I wasn't even vaguely engaged. The fact that gossip had published the banns was one of the reasons I had come East. You can't stop going with an old friend on account of rumors, and on the other hand I had no intention of being rumored into marriage. (p. 17)

Before he allows himself to become "involved" with Jordan, he says:

"I knew that first I had to get myself definitely out of that tangle back home. I'd been writing letters once a week and singing them: "Love, Nick," and all I could think of was how, when that certain girl played tennis, a faint mustache of perspiration appeared on her upper lip. Nevertheless there was a vague understanding that had to be tactfully broken off before I was free."

"Every one suspects himself of at least one of the cardinal virtues, and this is mine: I am one of the few honest people that I have ever known." (p. 46)

And it is with a weary and more self-critical tone that, when he breaks with Jordan, he says: "I'm five years too old to lie to myself and call it honor" (p. 135). We take this statement without irony. Fitzgerald's use of the sardonic outsider, Nick, allows irony, comedy and the grotesque to balance the early parts of the reunion, but this in no way vitiates the climax. The phone-call from one of Gatsby's sinister associates reminds us that he is no conventional hero.

It is for a quality of his imagination finally that Gatsby is honoured with the label of "Great". To understand this it is necessary to understand Gatsby's origins and the roots of his dream. The reader is given these by Nick, who breaks the continuity of his narrative "with the idea of exploding those first wild rumors about his antecedents, which weren't even faintly true" (pp. 74-75). Trilling has written:

Gatsby, divided between power and dream, comes inevitably to stand for America itself. Ours is the only nation that prides itself upon a dream and gives its name to one, "the American Dream." We are told that "the truth was that Jsy Gatsby of West Egg, Long Island, sprang from his Platonic conception of himself. He was a son of God—a phrase which, if it means anything, means just that—and he must be about His Father's business, the service of a vast, vulgar, and meretricious beauty." Clearly it is Fitzgerald's intention that our mind should turn to the thought of the nation that has sprung from its "Platonic conception" of itself. To the world it is anomalous in America, just as in the novel it is anomalous in Gatsby that so much raw power should be haunted by envisioned romance. Yet in that anomaly lies, for good or bad, much of the truth of our national life, as, at the present moment, we think about it.⁶⁾

Gatsby fulfils the classical American success pattern in a way that gives new meaning to the cliché "from rags to riches"; like that other American "culture-hero", Ben Loman in *Death of a Salesman*, he has known that "there is a new continent at (his) doorstep ... (He) could walk out

6) Lionel Trilling, "F. Scott Fitzgerald", *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society* (London: Mercury Books, 1961), pp. 251-52.

rich."⁷) Floyd C. Watkins has related the schedule drawn up by Gatsby to the success precepts of Benjamin Franklin:

...that early American whom Carlyle called "the Father of all Yankees" and who was to Sinclair Lewis' *Babbalanza* (sic) "this solid American citizen." Most of the resolutions of Fitzgerald's hero can be traced either to Franklin's own schedule or his list of thirteen virtues to which he gives "a week's strict attention" in order to attain moral perfection.

Such close parallels as these surely indicate that Fitzgerald had Franklin's *Autobiography* either in front of him or in his mind when he wrote the schedule of Jay (sic) Gatz. It is my opinion that he closely followed Franklin in order to give concreteness to the historical tradition of Gatsby and to make Gatsby something beyond a mere member of the lost generation: an American who was a personification of the national dreams as it had been corrupted.⁸

Marius Bewley has linked Gatsby with a young hunter described in *Col. David Crockett's Exploits and Adventures in Texas*: "The young dandy of the frontier, dreaming in the dawn and singing to the morning, is a progenitor of Gatsby. It is because of such a traditional American ancestry that Gatsby's romanticism transcends the limiting glamour of the Jazz Age."⁹ Gatsby's father, Mr. Henry Gatz, who is described by Marius Bewley as "only the kindly shepherd who once found a baby on the old hillside":¹⁰ "his parents were shiftless and unsuccessful farm people—his imagination had never really accepted them as his parents at all" (p. 74), speaks of his dead son in proverbial American terms: "If he'd of lived, he'd of been a great man. A man like James H. Hill. He'd of helped build up the country" (p. 128). "Jimmy was bound to get ahead" (p. 132). "He had a big future in front of him" (p. 131).

Fitzgerald is acutely aware of the setting of the book in relation to the American past, and this, as Bewley says, helps him to transcend the limitations of the "Jazz Age"; but the book is related not only to the American Past, but also to the history and present of Western Man: he has had what amounts to a second chance, and America is the new Eden, but the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge is as bitter as it was in Paradise. It is not for nothing that the imagery of death pervades *The Great Gatsby*.

After the death of Gatsby, indirectly perpetrated by the Buchanans, Nick Carraway cleans up the mess. He has a last encounter with Tom Buchanan, who says when Nick hesitates to shake hands with him: "'You're crazy, Nick... Crazy as hell. I don't know what's the matter with you'" (p. 135) This reminds the reader of the predominant scale of values in the corrupt East. Nick leaves, "rid of (Nick's) provincial squeamishness for ever" (p. 136). On the night before he returns to the Middle West, Nick takes a last look at Gatsby's mansion, erases an obscene word scrawled on the steps, and has a vision of "the old island here that flowered once for sailors' eye—a fresh, green breast of the new world" (p. 137):

7) Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1961), p. 68.

8) Floyd C. Watkins, "Fitzgerald's Jay Gatz and Young Ben Franklin", *New England Quarterly*, XXVII (1954), 251-52.

9) Marius Bewley, *The Eccentric Design: Form in the Classic American Novel* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1959), p. 271.

10) Bewley, p. 273.

And as I sat there brooding on the old, unknown world, I thought of Gatsby's wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of Daisy's dock. He had come a long way to this blue lawn, and his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night.

Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgiastic¹¹⁾ future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter—tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther... And one fine morning—

So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past. (p. 137)

Nick is left a sadder and a wiser man. His new insight into life and his understanding of at least some of the perplexities of morality are of no value in the East, where they are seen as madness and "provincial squeamishness". The Middle West is no Utopia, with its "interminable inquisitions which spare only the children any very old" (p. 137), but although a sense of fundamental human solidarity is expressed with comic undertones: "all my aunts and uncles talked it over as if they were choosing a prep school for me, and finally said, 'Why—ye-es,' with very grave hesitant faces" (p. 4), there exists the possibility of a better life.

John Farrelly, engaging in a critical exchange with D.W. Harding in *Scrutiny*, said of Fitzgerald:

There is an emptiness in his work that makes 'convincing analysis' honestly difficult, but leaves a hollow space where critics can create their own substitute Fitzgerald. And I should probe for that hollow space in what we call the centre of a writer's work—that around which and with reference to which he organizes his experiences; in short, his values.¹²⁾

In view of the central judgement of the book, the subtly moral nature of Nick's narrative and the disgust evoked by those wholly without ideals, selfishly grasping or "careless", this is surely an inaccurate comment. Farrelly cites a letter that Fitzgerald wrote to Ludlow Fowler: "That's the whole burden of the novel—the loss of those illusions that give such colour to the world so that you didn't care whether things are true or false as long as they partake of the magical glory."¹³⁾ Although this appears to support Farrelly's case, it only does so if one forgets to "trust the tale and not the teller." If that was how Fitzgerald summed it up, he must have missed the mature and balanced judgement and the moral insight of the book.

III

The Eyes of Doctor T.J. Eckleburg: A Note.

Above the gray land and the spasms of bleak dust which drift endlessly over it, you perceive, after

11) This Scribner's text reads "orgiastic", Fitzgerald made clear in a letter to his editor, Maxwell Perkins, that he intended "orgastic". 'Orgastic' is the adjective for 'orgasm' and it expresses exactly the intended ecstasy. It's not a bit dirty." *The Letters of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, p. 175.

12) John Farrelly, "Scott Fitzgerald: Another View", *Scrutiny*, XVIII (1952), 267.

13) Farrelly, p. 269.

a moment, the eyes of Doctor T.J. Eckleburg are blue and gigantic—their retinas are one yard high. They look out of no face, but, instead, from a pair of enormous yellow spectacles which pass over a non-existent nose. Evidently some wild wag of an oculist set them there to fatten his practice in the borough of Queens, and then sank down himself into eternal blindness, or forgot them and moved away. But his eyes, dimmed a little by many countless days under sun and rain, brood on over the solemn dumping ground. (p. 269)

This passage, from the opening of Chapter Two of *The Great Gatsby* which forms such a striking contrast to the somewhat tinselly glamour of the Buchanan home of Chapter One, has given rise to almost endless comment by critics; Robert F. McDonnell¹⁴ has gone so far as to trace the cognates of *Ecke* in German, Old Norse, Danish and Swedish and compared them with the cognates of *Egg*, thus attempting to link the eyes of Doctor Eckleburg with the pair of egg-shaped rocks mentioned by Fitzgerald in Chapter One. This is to read *The Great Gatsby* as though it were written by Joyce of *Finnegans Wake*. Perhaps more happily, McDonnell, drawing on an article by Milton J. Hindus,¹⁵ links Doctor Eckleburg with the “stout, middle-aged man, with enormous owl-eyed spectacles” (p. 35) who is encountered by Nick in Gatsby’s “Merton College Library” (p. 69) and who appears at Gatsby’s funeral, to pronounce the sombre epitaph: “The poor son-of-a-bitch” (p. 133). Among the most useful comments on Doctor Eckleburg, the genius of the “waste land”¹⁶ (p. 20), is that of William York Tindall:

As a symbol they suggest, to use Webster’s word, more thoughts and feelings than we could state; for if we stated as many as we could—the wasteland, the suburb, the modern world, futility, or moral censure—some would be left over and some would remain unstateable.¹⁷

But perhaps the most helpful remarks, if slightly misleading, are those of A.E. Dyson:

As a simple but haunting symbol of the *deus absconditus* who might once have set the waste land in motion Dr. Eckleburg recurs at certain crucial moments in the novel. He is the only religious reference, but his sightless gaze precludes the possibility of judging the “ash grey men” against traditional religious norms, and confers upon them the right to pity as well as to scorn.¹⁸

Here Dyson appears to have translated the phrase *deus absconditus* as “renegade god”. But it is correctly translated as “hidden god”. However, although temporarily misleading, Dyson is surely on the right track, and his invocation of Fitzgerald’s words: “Sank down into eternal blindness, or forgot . . . and moved away” (p. 19) suggests as strictly deistic interpretation of the world, seen with

14) Robert F. McDonnell, “Eggs and Eyes in *The Great Gatsby*”, *Modern Fiction Studies*, VII (1961), 32-36.

15) Milton J. Hindus, “The Mysterious Eyes of Doctor T.J. Eckleburg”, *Boston University Studies in English*, III (1957), 32-44.

16) Fitzgerald inscribed a copy of the novel that he sent to Eliot (when it appeared in 1925, three years after the publication of Eliot’s poem, *The Waste Land*): “To T.S. Eliot, the master of us all.” For an interesting if sometimes stretched article on the relation of Fitzgerald to Eliot, see Philip Young, “Scott Fitzgerald’s Waste Land”, *Kansas Magazine*, 1956, 73-77.

17) William York Tindall, *The Literary Symbol* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955), p. 6.

18) A.E. Dyson, “*The Great Gatsby*: thirty six years after”, *Modern Fiction Studies*, VII (1961), 38.

profound irony.

Tom burnam asks rhetorically:

Do not the eyes in spite of everything they survey, perhaps even because of it, serve both as a focus and an undeviating base, a single point of reference in the midst of monstrous disorder?¹⁹⁾

One can only agree if one sees this as the final irony, which is perhaps established in this crucial passage:

Wilson's glazed eyes turned out to the ashheals, where small gray clouds took on fantastic shapes and scurried here and there in the faint dawn wind.

"I spoke to her," he muttered, after a long silence. "I told her she might fool me but she couldn't fool God. I took her to the window"—with an effort he got up and walked to the rear window and leaned with his face pressed against it—"and I said 'God knows what you've been doing, everything you've been doing. You may fool me, but you can't fool God!'"

Standing behind him, Michaelis saw with a shock that he was looking at the eyes of Doctor T.J. Eckleburg, which had just emerged, pale and enormous, from the dissolving night.

"God sees everyting," repeated Wilson.

"That's an advertisement," Michaelis assured him. (p. 121)

Bernard Tanner has described *The Great Gatsby* as "novel which may have as its subliminal message the quite simple question, 'Have you tried Christ?'"²⁰⁾ but this scene surely proves that it is much closer to the prayer of a waiter. At this point it should seem that Fitzgerald illustrates that the American Dream has turned into nightmare.

In the light of the above dicussion, *The Great Gatsby* is a definition of the senses in which Nick understands the word "Great" rather than a melodrama about Jay Gatsby. And its subject is an American morality, which is explored historically on the basis of "the conflict between the surviving Puritan morality of the West and the post-war hedonism of the East."²¹⁾ Accordingly the significance of this novel should be from the personal history of a young American provincial, Nick Carraway, whose moral intellegence and education presents the possibility and mode of a moral reevaluation for contemporary American.

19) Tom Burnam, "The eyes of Dr Eccleburg: a re-examination of *The Great Gatsby*", *College English*, XIV (1952), 12.

20) Bernard Tanner, "The Gospel of Gatsby", *English Journal*, LIV (1965), 467.

21) Tomas Hanzi, "The Theme and the Narrator of *The Great Gatsby*", ed., Frederick J. Hoffman, *The Great Gatsby: A Study* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962), p. 296.

圖 文 抄 錄

T. S. Eliot 가 *The Great Gatsby* 를 Henry James 이래 미국소설의 'the first step' 이라고 극찬하듯이 F. S. Fitzgerald 는 그의 대표작이라고 할 수 있는 *The Great Gatsby* 에서 천부적 예술성과 도덕적 탁월성의 완벽한 조화를 이루어 20세기 미국인의 생활에 내재하는 선과 악의 정신적 갈등을 훌륭하게 소설화시키고 있다. 일반적으로 독자는 이 작품을 읽으며 결국 인생의 파멸을 자초하는 Jay Gatsby 를 주인공으로, 그리고 그가 이룩한 물질적 富의 성취와 그의 꿈의 화신인 Daisy 에 대한 정열적 신뢰에 초점을 맞추어 'American dream' 이라는 보편적 주제에 집착할런지 모른다. 물론 Gatsby 가 이룩한 엄청난 富의 성취과정과 실제와 그 富를 이용해 과거의 꿈을 되찾으려는 이상적인 목적이 현실적으로 생명감을 부여받았다는 측면에서 'American dream' 이라는 주제적 고찰은 타당한 것이다.

그러나 이 소설은 Jay Gatsby 에 관한 단순한 멜로드라마로서 보다는 narrator 로 등장하는 Nick Carraway 가 'Great' 의 진정한 의미를 인식하기까지 그의 고도의 감수성을 통한 정신적 여정에 더욱 많은 의미가 부여되어 있다고 하겠다. 그러므로 이 소설은 정신적 혼돈과 도덕적 무질서의 한 시대를 살아가는 Nick 의 도덕적 교육과 정신적 성장의 이야기로서 그가 작중에서 관련하는 인물과 사건을 통해 체득하는 삶의 지혜와 인간의 영원한 운명에 대한 자각과정으로부터 표출되는 도덕주제라는 측면에서 올바른 평가를 받을 수 있다고 하겠다. 작중에서 Nick 는 한쪽에 Gatsby 를 또 한쪽에는 Buchanan 부부를 두고 그 중간에 위치해 있다. Nick 에게 Daisy 와 Tom 과 그 친구들의 생활은 표면적으로는 지극히 우아하고 화려하지만, 근본적으로는 정신적 결함을 지닌 것으로 나타난다. 그러므로 Nick 는 그들의 도덕적 무책임이 초래한 엄청난 죄악을 용납할 수 없게 된다. 그러나 오로지 과거의 꿈이었던 Daisy 와의 사랑을 실현키 위해 富를 축적한 Gatsby 는 Tom 과 Daisy 의 생활내면에 흐르는 타락성은 전혀 인식치 못하고 오히려 그들의 인생을 교양있고 문화적인 생활의 표본으로 생각하고 모방하기에 혈안이 된다. 그의 천박한 취향과 허황적 생활의 추구에도 불구하고 Gatsby 는 자신에 대한 플라톤적 사고방식과 꿈의 실현의지에 의해 Nick 로 부터 긍정적 의미를 부여 받는다. 따라서 자신의 이상적인 생활양식을 현실속에서 실현시키려는 Gatsby 의 순수하고 강렬한 삶의 의지는 'American dream' 의 한 양상으로 평가될 수 있다. 그러나 천박한 물질과 조야하고 허식적인 미를 이용하여 과거의 꿈을 실현하려다 결국 파멸하는 Gatsby 의 人生은, 비록 Nick 에 의해 「아니-결국 Gatsby 는 좋은 인간이다」라는 찬미를 듣게 되지만, 결코 어떤 근거에서도 미화될 수 없을 것이다.

요컨대, 이 작품의 주제는 narrator인 Nick Carraway의 섬세한 감수성과 고도의 지각력을 통해 표출되는 미국적 도덕주의로서, 그것은 西部에 내재하는 청교도적 도덕성과 戰後 東部에 만연된 향락주의 사이의 갈등으로 과거와 현실을 연결하는 역사적 맥락에서 탐구되고 있다. 결국 내용적으로 총괄해 볼때 이 작품은 20세기 미국의 황금만능주의에 대한 통렬한 비판으로 해석될 수 있겠지만, 의미적으로는 정신적 무질서와 혼돈의 한 시대를 살아가는 Nick Carraway라는 젊은 미국인의 도덕적 교육과 삶의 인식과정을 훌륭하게 극화시킴으로서 오늘을 사는 현대인에게 지대한 정신적 감화와 도덕적 가치개념을 부여해 준다고 하겠다.