TRAGIC INEVITABILITY IN *THE GREAT GATSBY*

By Edwin Moses

A lot of people regard *The Great Gatsby* as a masterpiece; a great many more, who don't think of books in those terms, know only that they love to read it. All works of art have their detractors, of course, and the legitimate question such people raise is why? What's all the fuss about? It's important to keep on answering that question, I think, lest we forget why great literature is so important to us. On the greatness of *Gatsby*, I'm quite prepared to accept the following as given:

> . . . what immediately impresses itself upon most readers . . . [is] the astonishing accession of technical power and skill. Less pretentious than his earlier work, *The Great Gatsby* achieves much more; in it Fitzgerald discovers not only his true subject but a completely adequate form. . . . he has attained a maturity that transcends the merely aesthetic, that reveals itself also in the moral implications of the fable.
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> Nearly every critic . . . has stressed the tremendous structural importance of the narrator, Nick Carraway, the character through whom Fitzgerald is able to achieve that aesthetic distance from his own experience necessary for firmness of control and clarity of perception . . .
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> Again, most critics of the novel have amply demonstrated its economy, the clarity of its narrative outline and the forceful, unbroken drive of it forward from the first page to the last . . . Many critics have expanded and expounded the significance of the major symbolic structures of the book . . .
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> . . . [In] the language of the book . . . we find, co-existing with economy, clarity and force, an extreme density of texture. It is this which ultimately gives richness and depth to the novel . . .[1]

There's more, though—with a book like *The Great Gatsby*, at once skillfully wrought and haunting, there's always more. I'd like to suggest (and obviously this essay is meant to be suggestive rather than conclusive) that a lot of *Gatsby*'s power

[1] W. J. Harvey, "Theme and Texture in *The Great Gatsby*," *English Studies*, 38 (1957), 12-20; rpt. in Ernest Lockridge, ed., *Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Great Gatsby* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1968), pp. 90-91.

stems from the sense of tragic inevitability which Fitzgerald develops in the very first chapter.

The aspect of tragedy I'm concerned with here is nemesis: the inevitable, convulsive righting of a balance in nature which the tragic hero has disturbed.[2] When Macbeth listens to the witches and kills the king, when Lear listens to the voice of senility and divides his kingdom, they cause a breakdown in the natural order which can only be—and ultimately must be—repaired by their deaths. When Gatsby determines to steal Daisy away from Tom, he similarly rends the fabric of things, here defined in social terms, and the outcome is the same. Because the law he breaks is petty and arbitrary, the object he hopes to attain by breaking it frivolous, his fate is simultaneously tragic and ironic—but it's inevitable nevertheless, and Gatsby *himself* looms large enough to make it matter.

A problem peculiar to the modern writer of tragedy is the non-existence of universal values, and hence of universally comprehended and accepted laws. " Comic and tragic are merely two aspects of the same situation," Ionesco said, " and I have now reached the stage when I find it hard to distinguish one from the other." [3] Shakespeare did not have to explain to his audience that regicide or abdication would inevitably produce disastrous consequences. But in the 20th century a plot about an attempt to steal a rich man's wife *need* not—and normally would not—produce anything more than melodrama: the denouement, happy or sad, as arbitrary as the author's conception of what will sell. Everything depends on the fictive world which the individual writer creates. It's a sign of the way things have changed that one can speak more-or-less convincingly of the Elizabethan world view or the Augustan world view, but with recent literature is reduced to talking about the world view of James or Dreiser. Hemingway and Fitzgerald wrote at the same time, but they inhabited parallel universes which, though they touch at various points, differ fundamentally. So when Fitzgerald came to write *The Great Gatsby* he could not depend, as Shakespeare could, on a shared sensibility.

[2] See Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 209.

[3] Quoted in Robert W. Corrigan, ed., *Comedy: Meaning and Form* (Scranton: Chandler, 1965), p. 9.

Just as Shakespeare, at once freed and limited by his bare stage, had to indicate the time of day and the weather, Fitzgerald had to make his own world with its own laws and its own inevitable consequences for breaking them. He did so in the first chapter, and I propose now to describe that world and some of the techniques whereby Fitzgerald created it.

The fundamental natural law in the world of *The Great Gatsby* is that the relationship between self and environment—physical setting as symbol and embodiment of social milieu—is integral. Jake Barnes is the same man anywhere, but the Buchanans depend for their identity on the East Egg estate and all that it implies. So when Gatsby attempts to break down that relationship by leaving his own milieu and luring Daisy from hers, he looses chaos into the world and invites nemesis.[4] In Shakespeare the commonest agent of nemesis is military action; here it is social action. Because the people in this world depend for their sense of self on what others think of them, the Buchanans can destroy Gatsby simply by denying him the identity he has so desperately struggled to develop. Tom's affair with Myrtle, drawing him away from his proper sphere in East Egg into a tawdry apartment in the city, has jarred the natural order even before Gatsby arrives. By the end of the first chapter it will be clear that Gatsby will strain it to the breaking point, and thereby bring about his tragic ending.

Fitzgerald goes to great lengths to establish the essential link between the Buchanans and the place they inhabit.[5] It's true that they "drift unrestfully" and that Nick doesn't believe this last move of theirs is permanent, but always they drift where "people [are] rich together," so whether or not they stay on this particular estate, it remains their emblem—it forms and identifies them. To begin with, Tom's lawn behaves very much like Tom: it "*r*[*uns*] toward the front door" and "*jump*[*s*]

[4] This is somewhat like Antony's destructive passion for Cleopatra, only with ironic overtones. The profoundly conservative law operating here is reminiscent of the old idea of the Great Chain of Being: one link out of place jangles the whole chain. The social structure is so rigid that it's almost a caste system. Tom would equate the rise of James Gatz with the Rise of the Colored Empires.

[5] Nick has not yet settled into a place, on the other hand. Everything about him—his residency in the East, his career in the bond business, his dog that runs away from him—is temporary, which is why he can move freely between West and East Egg—and tell the story.

over sun-dials," like a football player, and then "*drift*[*s*]" (p. 6), like this particular ex-football player. Fitzgerald further links Tom and the house by introducing him at the end of a sentence *about* the house: "The front was broken by a line of French windows, glowing now with reflected gold and wide open to the warm windy afternoon, and Tom Buchanan in riding clothes was standing with his legs apart on the front porch" (p. 7). And the first words of his which Fitzgerald reports are not "How are you?" which would imply an interest in Nick, but rather "I've got a nice place here." The focus of his attention is all outward, on the things he owns: regarding Nick apparently as a kind of machine for admiration, he "turn[s him] around by one arm" and aims him at the Italian garden, the roses, the motor-boat. It's not "Love me, love my roses," but rather "Admire my property, admire me." For all his money and power, Tom still needs this sort of support from Nick. The main point here, though, is that this method of presenting Tom and his property instills very strongly the feeling that he's part of the place; that the elaborate house and grounds represent and form the man. They're in no essential way separable.

Daisy's characteristic place is the inside of the house. In *The Sun Also Rises* Hemingway introduces Brett in a four-word sentence—"With them was Brett," repeated to reveal her impact on Jake—which isolates and focuses attention on her as an individual. But Fitzgerald presents Daisy, as he does Tom, as part of a setting: "The only completely stationary object in the room was an enormous couch on which two young women were buoyed up as though upon an anchored balloon" (p. 8). And: "Then there was a boom as Tom Buchanan shut the rear windows and the caught wind died out about the room, and the curtains and the rugs and the two young women ballooned slowly to the floor" (p. 8). Fitzgerald's descriptions of Daisy and the place, even more than with Tom, overlap at a number of points. The place: glowing French windows, bright rosy-colored space, windows gleaming white, rippling breeze. Daisy: white dress rippling in the breeze, bright eyes and mouth, glowing face. She belongs to this place; she can't exist apart from it. And she can't exist in a human vacuum either: her identity as much as Tom's is formed by the response of other people. Her first coherent remark, which she makes with regard

to the citizenry of Chicago, is "Do they miss me?" This is a version of the central question of her existence—"How do they respond to me?"—and so Nick's jokingly hyperbolic reply is appropriate to the occasion. In this world the perceived depends on the perceiver for its being.

Having established the laws and necessities that his people live by, Fitzgerald introduces the forces which will threaten that order and so will have to be exorcised: Myrtle Wilson and Gatsby. His introduction of Gatsby into the scene is brilliant, a masterpiece of economy:

> "You live in West Egg," Jordan remarked contemptuously. "I know somebody there."
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> "I don't know a single—"
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> "You must know Gatsby."
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> "Gatsby?" demanded Daisy. "What Gatsby?"
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> Before I could reply that he was my neighbor dinner was announced; wedging his tense arm imperatively under mine, Tom Buchanan compelled me from the room . . . (pp. 11-12)

This anticipates the climax of the chapter, in which Nick sees Gatsby standing alone in the darkness. And it suggests the form of nemesis which will overtake Gatsby. Ultimately the Buchanans will deny him the identity—Jay Gatsby, rich socialite, worthy squire to Daisy—that he's been striving so desperately to establish; now Tom denies him even his identity as Jay Gatsby, Nick Carraway's neighbor.[6] By refusing to respond to him in any way, these people (excluding Nick) in effect declare his non-existence—and in Fitzgerald's world they're in a position to make such a declaration stick. In Hemingway and Fitzgerald—in this respect, at least—the laws of cause and effect are reversed: Robert Cohn comes to be despised because he is blind and impotent, in the most important sense, and not a man, but Jay Gatsby falls apart and ultimately dies because Tom and Daisy despise and reject him.

By reiterating the Buchanans' restlessness Fitzgerald has revealed the potential instability of their world, and now Myrtle Wilson's telephonic invasion suggests that a crisis is imminent. (The heavy emphasis on Tom's great power makes it seem

[6] This isn't just happenstance. Jordan treats Gatsby in *exactly* the same way later in the chapter:

> "This Mr. Gatsby you spoke of is my neighbor—" I said.
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> "Don't talk, I want to hear what happens."

likely—but not inevitable, at this point—that the victims of the resulting catastrophe will be not the defenders of the red-and-white Georgian castle, but the invaders.) The great significance of setting, and the degree to which the characters are part of the setting, imparts considerable importance to physical movement: if one is a fixture in a given physical and social environment, his abrupt departure is naturally disruptive. When Tom leaves the room to answer the phone, and Daisy, after some chatter even more frivolous and irrelevant than usual, gets up and follows him, the result is a tense tableau: the room, all of a sudden, is noticeably empty. Fitzgerald heightens the tension by clever manipulation of point of view. Nick up to this point has observed and speculated, but outwardly at least has maintained a fair degree of detachment. So his response to the present events—his " instinct . . . to telephone immediately for the police," and his attempt " to look pleasantly interested and a little deaf " (pp. 16-17)—inevitably electrifies the atmosphere.

Fitzgerald introduces his major characters in reverse order, in terms of their ultimate importance: Tom, Daisy, Gatsby. At the point when he appears in person, at the end of the first chapter, Gatsby has no obvious connection with the people and events that have come before. But the part he will play in the Buchanans' lives is implicit in Fitzgerald's selection and presentation of detail. To begin with, Fitzgerald has been careful to establish that Tom and Daisy are essentially two of a kind. Tom is a willful and domineering man who gets what he wants with money and muscles; Daisy, his feminine counterpart, dominates with the face, the smile, the " low, thrilling voice." And her will to manipulate people is revealed in a little scene so light in tone that its import is easy to miss. " I think I'll arrange a marriage," she says. " Come over often, Nick, and I'll sort of—oh—fling you together " (p. 19). Tom's restlessness is revealed by his affair with Myrtle Wilson; Daisy's, explicitly, by her conversation (" God, I'm sophisticated ") with Nick. The difference is that Tom's random power and willfulness has borne fruit, so to speak, whereas Daisy's for the moment has not. Given all this, the logic of the situation simply demands another man: Daisy's lover-to-be is the x-factor required to balance the equation. And the way that Gatsby's

name has been spotted into the conversation at the dinner party—once in the episode I mentioned above, once, by Nick this time, when he and Jordan are alone—reveals Gatsby as the missing man. Fitzgerald has manipulated the elements in this scene so skillfully that during a first reading and without benefit of title one could deduce Gatsby's place in the story.

The final question is how Gatsby's role is revealed as inevitably tragic. I've stressed the integral and inviolable relationship between people and their characteristic place. So if Tom and Daisy are people of the opulent light, Gatsby is a creature of the "unquiet darkness" in which Nick first sees him, physically separated from that light (and from the green light at the end of the dock) by a tremendous symbolic barrier, the bay that separates West from East Egg. Thus Gatsy is revealed as inevitably a part of but inevitably alienated from that scene toward which he yearns. He appears alone—an invariable characteristic of the tragic hero is that he is or becomes isolated—and the last and highly charged words of the chapter are that "when I looked once more for Gatsby he had vanished . . ." Darkness is Gatsby's element, his characteristic place, in which he cannot bear to stay but to which he must return. The natural order of things is stronger than he is: nemesis overtakes him, and he vanishes at the end of the novel as at the end of the chapter. The pattern of the whole is implicit in the part.

That Fitzgerald believed in this created world as real was essential—otherwise the novel would have revealed itself as a cynical potboiler—but we as readers need not believe in it in that sense to feel its power. We can be cynical about the inevitability of anything in the world of our own experience, and yet find the unfolding of the tragic design in Fitzgerald's world profoundly reassuring.[7] We need faith in this at least, I think: that in "a little world made cunningly" man the image-maker can transcend the chaos we feel around us. Fitzgerald never managed to create order in his own life, but he did in *The Great Gatsby*, and for that we should be deeply grateful.

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[7] The *form* of tragedy is satisfying, however pitiable its *content*.