*The Great Gatsby* Final Essay

In the novel, *The Great Gatsby,* author F. Scott Fitzgerald uses the protagonist Gatsby to exemplify the contradictions that can arise when a person’s entire life is driven by dreams. As a child, Gatsby always dreamed of attaining wealth, and he desperately wanted to separate himself from his humble beginnings, even going as far as to change his last name from Gats to Gatsby. On his way to acquiring his fortune, Gatsby fell in love with Daisy, who was from a much higher socioeconomic class; after they were separated, Gatsby’s goal in life of attaining wealth was exacerbated because he now viewed it as a stepping stone toward a new, more powerful dream of his: getting Daisy back. But when Nick encounters Gatsby, Gatsby has acquired his fortune, yet it is almost worthless to him because he still doesn’t have Daisy. It is not until Daisy and Gatsby are reunited and she shows great favor towards his material possessions that it all finally becomes worth something to him. Gatsby’s attitude towards his wealth before the aforementioned reunion is the starkest example of Fitzgerald personifying the notion that nothing is ever enough in the eyes of dreamers. Gatsby grew up his whole life dreaming of wealth and Fitzgerald introduces Daisy into his life in order to show the futility of this dream because once he finally gets it, he’s still not happy. Fitzgerald uses three very stark symbols to comment on the complex tension between dreams and reality as he guides the reader through Gatsby’s downfall: the green light on the Buchanan’s dock, the Valley of Ashes, and the eyes of Doctor T.J. Eckleburg.

One of the first symbols that Fitzgerald introduces is the green light at the end of the Buchanan’s dock. When the reader is first shown a glimpse of Gatsby through Nick’s eyes, the green light is at the center of the scene: “I could have sworn he was trembling. Involuntarily I glanced seaward – and distinguished nothing except a single green light” (Fitzgerald 21). This scene sets up a connection early on between Gatsby’s instability as represented by his trembling and his longing for Daisy as represented by the green light; this connection is the result of his love for Daisy warping his dream of wealth into a stepping stone to getting her back in his life. Nick witnesses the aforementioned phenomena first hand when he goes over to Gatsby’s house with Gatsby and Daisy: “I think he revalued everything in his house according to the measure of response it drew from her well-loved eyes” (91). Material wealth – supposedly the symbol of his success – only has worth (or “value”) based on her reaction. When Gatsby and Daisy are reunited, it’s as if a veil is lifted from his eyes, and he is finally able to see that he’s been able to achieve the wealth he’s always wanted. Tragically his new outlook on life only lasts as long as Daisy’s affection does. The green light represents the cruel irony of Gatsby’s dreams because like his house’s proximity to the green light, he’ll always be right on the heel of what he wants but it will always be out of reach; he will never be able to attain it.

A common theme throughout the novel is the excessive life styles of its wealthy characters, but as a foil to this luxury, Fitzgerald includes the Valley of Ashes as a key location, a place that is the working class divide between the two eggs of Long Island and symbolically contrasts Gatsby’s material dream. Unlike the mansions and manicured lawns of the eggs, the Valley of Ashes is a place of desolation and poverty. Nick initially describes it as “[a] fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens; where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and, finally, with a transcendent effort, of men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air” (Fitzgerald 23). The Valley of Ashes acts as a literal and figurative analogue for the divide between the cultures of the two eggs. On either end of the valley lies luxury and happiness, but in the valley, itself, the intersection between old wealth and new wealth, all that can be found is resentment and mistreatment. However most importantly the Valley of Ashes represents the harshest divide between Gatsby and Daisy, the classes of their birth, and just as how he must cross the Valley of Ashes to get to her, so Gatsby must overcome his inferior social standing in order to have her. In the eyes of Tom Buchanan, the residents of both the Valley of Ashes and West egg are equally lower than him, to him a person can never get out of the socioeconomic class of their birth, and this concept of caste rigidity is something Gatsby struggles to escape throughout the novel but never succeeds at. Tom’s distain of Gatsby’s lower birth is most evident during their confrontation at the hotel room when he says, “Let Mr. Nobody from Nowhere make love to your wife” (130). In his anger, Tom reduces Gatsby from the successful and distinguished individual he had become, back to the ‘nobody’ he was at birth. Tom’s assault on Gatsby’s class gives credence to his desire to ascend passed the caste of his birth, but shows that despite how hard he worked, and how many of his dreams he attained, he would never be able to escape his heritage.

The exploits of the novel’s characters in the Valley of Ashes are all watched over by the eyes of Doctor T.J. Eckleburg, an old billboard for an optometrist that overlooks the Valley of Ashes. The ancient billboard acts as a symbol for the karmic guide that brings about the events of the novel’s final acts. Eckleburg sees everything unfold from Tom’s adultery, to Myrtle’s death, and finally the callous reaction of Daisy and Gatsby to the murder they just committed. Myrtle’s death could be viewed as this invisible figure’s first act of karmic justice, since she was cheating on Wilson, and instead of divorcing him continued to live off him while carrying on the affair. Fitzgerald makes the impact of this invisible force most apparent when he describes an interaction between Wilson and Eckleburg’s billboard, “But Wilson stood there for a long time, his face close to the window pane, nodding into the twilight” (Fitzgerald 160). Following the interaction, Wilson would go to murder Gatsby and then kill himself; Gatsby’s death is the end of his dream, and, like a cruel joke, it was that dream that got him killed. The gaze of Eckleburg convinced Wilson to murder Gatsby, like a karmic force punishing Gatsby for the sins he committed in his quest for Daisy. Gatsby rejected morality in his pursuit of Daisy, by bootlegging for wealth and covering up her involvement in Myrtle’s murder. A common theme between the acts of Myrtle and Gatsby is that both of them where inspired by their dreams to shatter their moral compasses. In a world, full of morally bankrupt characters, Fitzgerald needed a way to represent karma and morality, and the eyes of Doctor T.J. Eckleburg serve as his symbol of choice, while he also singles out the dreamers to show the reader the danger of abandoning your morals in the quest of something ‘better’.

Fitzgerald’s utilizes a variety of symbols throughout *The Great Gatsby* to guide the reader through the contradictions and tragedies that can arise in the life of someone who is driven solely by their dreams. An early symbol in the novel is a green light that represents how Gatsby will never be able to get everything he dreams of because he will always be right on the heel of it but will never catch it. An important analogue for Gatsby’s struggles with the class of his birth is the Valley of Ashes, a place that lies in between the new wealth of West egg and the old wealth of East egg. Finally, in order to show that morality exists on Long Island despite the immoral exploits of the novel’s characters and the tragic side of dreaming, Fitzgerald utilizes an old optometrist billboard to represent the karmic guide that brings justice to those most driven by their dreams. Through his various symbols, Fitzgerald reveals the volatility that comes with dreams and living your life according to them.