Literary Devices

Symbolism, Imagery, Allegory

Gatsby's "books"

An owl-eyed man at a Gatsby party sits in awe in the library, murmuring with amazement that all the books on Gatsby's shelves are "real books." But does Gatsby even read them? The image works to suggest that much of what Gatsby presents to the world is a façade; for example, he wants people to believe that he's a well-educated man, an Oxford man, but in fact he only spent a short time there after the war. The books may represent the fact that Gatsby is a fraud – that he has built up an image of himself that is not consistent with the facts of his life. But, you could also argue that the unopened, unread books represent Gatsby himself: though there are many rumors about who he is and how he earned his money, the facts remain unexamined, unopened.

The Owl-Eyed Man

Speaking of those books, what's up with that guy in the library? We almost listed the owl-eyed man as a character, but then we realized we know absolutely nothing about him. Even Nick reduces him from a man to a pair of eyes. So we're thinking he's really more of a symbol than a full blown character. Feel free to disagree.

And, yes, we are getting to the point. First, there's the owl bit; owls are a symbol of wisdom, but can also be an omen of death (we don't know how that came about, either, but we're thinking someone got their signals crossed). Then there's the glasses bit; a man with large eyes and spectacles would be expected to be more perceptive than those around him.

So does the owl-eyed man fit the bill? Being perceptive and all, the bespectacled man is right to be suspicious of Gatsby. He is the only guest who, in doubting Gatsby, is also *wise* enough to investigate further. Moving right along to the portent of death part, did you notice that it was the owl-eyed man who had the car accident outside of Gatsby's house? And that, shortly after he got out of the car, he revealed that someone else was driving? Does any of this sound familiar?

If you're really interested in the owl-eyed man (as we so clearly are), you should check out the scene at the end where he's the only former guest to come to Gatsby's funeral. Why would that be? Exactly.

The Eyes of Dr. T.J. Eckleburg and the Valley of Ashes Below Them

The first time we see the eyes of T.J. Eckleburg, the image is intertwined with Nick's description of the valley of ashes. The ashes are, as ashes tend to be, "desolate" and "grotesque." Nick and the others have to pass through this "bleak" land any time they travel between the Eggs and the city. Think of the valley of ashes as one big, grey reality check. Compare Gatsby's lavish parties of fresh fruit and live music and champagne to this land of smokestacks and ash-men; it seems that not all the world is as privileged as our cast of characters.

But the valley of ashes can also be seen as more commentary on the American Dream. (THAT again?! Yes.) The America of *The Great Gatsby* is ashen, decaying, and barren. It is also, based on the action that goes down in the valley of the ashes, devoid of morality and compassion. Myrtle Wilson lives by the ashheaps, and so there resides Tom's infidelity. George Wilson lives by the ash heaps, so we can place there both anger and envy. Myrtle is, of course, killed there, so we also come to identify death with the valley (in case Nick's initial description wasn't enough for you).

Which brings us to the eyes. T.J. Eckleburg's billboard is the second notable pair of eyes in the novel (Owl-eyes, remember?). But these ones are a little different from those of the party-going bibliophile. It's no accident that the first time you hear about the eyes, your initial reaction is: "WHAT?!" Nick goes on for three sentences about these weird, disembodied eyes before actually explaining that they're on a billboard. He gives your mind time to picture eerie images, to wonder what's going on, even to form other notions of what the eyes could be. Clearly, to us, the readers, the eyes are more than just a billboard.

Now that we've established that, we're sharp on the look out for more information. Nick notices the eyes again as the quartet heads into the city in Chapter Seven, shortly before the Tom vs. Gatsby showdown. He notes them keeping a "watchful vigil" – which sounds like a rather religious choice of words, at least in connotation. But we hit the jackpot in Chapter Eight, when George takes Myrtle to the window (from which, we know, the billboard is visible) and tells her she can't fool God. Wilson then makes the very same connection we are; the eyes of T.J. Eckleburg are always watching, and so are the eyes of God.

There are a few directions you can take from here. The first is that, despite the absence of religion from the characters in this story, God is still there. He is all-seeing, ever present, and, as Nick points out, frowning. Things are not well in the valley of American ashes. The other shot you could take at this is to say that God has been replaced by capitalism. Instead of a truly religious representation, the best this world can do is manifest God in a billboard – an advertisement.

The Green Light

The green light on Daisy's house that Gatsby gazes wistfully at from his own house across the water represents the "unattainable dream." But the green light also represents the hazy future,

the future that is forever elusive, as Nick claims in the last page of the novel, "Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter – to-morrow we will run farther, stretch out our arms farther…." The interesting question is, if the green light is the future, how is it so tied up with Daisy and the dreams of the past?

Colors

Sometimes we sound like art snobs when we talk about *The Great Gatsby* ("Look at the use of green! Such marvelous blues," and so forth). Honestly, it seems like there's a little too much color stuff going on here to be coincidental.

Yellow and Gold: Money, Money, Money. Oh, and Death.

First off, we've got yellows and golds, which we're thinking has something to do with…gold (in the cash money sense). Why gold and not green? Because we're talking about the real stuff, the authentic, traditional, "old money" – not these new-fangled dollar bills. So you've got your "yellow cocktail music" playing at Gatsby's party where the turkeys are "bewitched to dark gold" and Jordan and Nick sit with "two girls in yellow." It seems clear, then, that Gatsby is using these parties to try to fit in with the "old money" crowd. And it doesn't stop there; when Gatsby is finally going to see Daisy again at Nick's house, he wears a gold tie. Nick later mentions the "pale gold odor of kiss-me-at-the-gate," which may seem weird (since last we checked, colors didn't have a smell) until we remember Nick's description of New York as "a wish out of non-olfactory money." Odor then is associated with gold, and non-odor with money. The difference? Perhaps the same distinction as Daisy's upper class world and Gatsby's new-found wealth. While Gatsby buys a yellow car to further promote his facade, he's really not fooling anyone. Lastly, we've got Daisy, who is only called "the golden girl" once Gatsby realizes that her voice, her main feature, is "full of money." Yellow is not just the color of money, but also of destruction. Yellow is the color of the car that runs down Myrtle. The glasses of Eckleburg, looking over the wasteland of America, are yellow. This dual symbolism clearly associates money with destruction; the ash heaps are the filthy result of the decadent lifestyle led by the rich.

White: Innocence and Femininity. Maybe.

While we're looking at cars, notice that Daisy's car (back before she was married) was white. So are her clothes, the rooms of her house, and about half the adjectives used to describe her (her "white neck," "white girlhood," the king's daughter "high in a white palace"). Everyone likes to say that white in *The Great Gatsby* means innocence, probably

because 1) that's easy to say and 2) everyone else is saying it. But come on – Daisy is hardly the picture of girlish innocence. At the end of the novel, she is described as selfish, careless, and destructive. Does this make the point that even the purest characters in Gatsby have been corrupted? Did Daisy start off all innocent and fall along the way, or was there no such purity to begin with? Or, in some way, does Daisy's decision to remain with Tom allow her to keep her innocence? We'll keep thinking about that one.

Blue: This One's Up For Grabs

Then there's the color blue, which we think represents Gatsby's illusions -- his deeply romantic dreams of unreality. We did notice that the color blue is present around Gatsby more so than any other character. His gardens are blue, his chauffeur wears blue, the water separating him from Daisy is his "blue lawn," mingled with the "blue smoke of brittle leaves" in his yard. His transformation into Jay Gatsby is sparked by Cody, who buys him, among other things, a "blue coat." Before you tie this up under one simple label, keep in mind that the eyes of T.J. Eckleburg are also blue, and so is Tom's car. If blue represents illusions and alternatives to reality, God may be seen as a non-existent dream. As for Tom's car…well, you can field that one.

Grey and a General Lack of Color: Lifelessness (no surprise there)

Then there is the lack of color presented in the grey ash heaps. If the ash heaps are associated with lifelessness and barrenness, and grey is associated with the ash heaps, anyone described as grey is going to be connected to barren lifelessness. Our main contender is Wilson: "When anyone spoke to him he invariably laughed in an agreeable colorless way." Wilson's face is "ashen." His eyes are described as "pale" and "glazed." It is then no coincidence that Wilson is the bearer of lifelessness, killing Gatsby among yellow leaved trees, which we already decided had something to do with destruction.

Green: Life, Vitality, The Future, Exploration

Last one. We're thinking green = plants and trees and stuff, so life and springtime and other happy things. Do we see this in *The Great Gatsby*? The most noticeable image is that green light we seem to see over and over. You know, the green light of the "orgastic future" that we stretch our hands towards, etc. etc. We can definitely see green as being hopeful, as being the future, as being vitality and freshness. Right before these famous last lines, Nick also describes the "fresh, green breast of the new world," the new world being this land as Nick

imagines it existed hundreds of years before. The new world might be green, but when Nick imagines Gatsby's future without Daisy, he sees "a new world, material without being real, where poor ghosts, breathing dreams like air, drifted fortuitously about...like that ashen fantastic figure gliding toward him through the amorphous trees." Nick struggles to define what the future really means, especially as he faces the new decade before him (the dreaded thirties). Is he driving on toward grey, ashen death through the twilight, or reaching out for a bright, fresh green future across the water?

Setting

Long Island and New York City in the early 1920s

The story is set in New York City and on Long Island, in two areas known as "West Egg" and "East Egg." The story is set in the early 1920s, just after World War I, during Prohibition, a time period that outlawed the manufacture, sale, or consumption of alcoholic beverages. This is significant not only because Gatsby's ill-gotten wealth is apparently due to bootlegging, but also because alcohol is conspicuously available, despite being illegal, throughout the book. Indeed, the characters are seen drinking expensive champagne – suggesting that the wealthy are not at all affected by these laws.

The social setting is among wealthy, educated people, those with a good deal of leisure time and little concern about people who are not in their social milieu. Nobody's concerned about politics or spiritual matters – but everybody cares about how they are perceived socially. The social climate demands respectability; it asks people to conform to certain standards. This is one reason why Tom's flaunting of his mistress is an issue. Organized crime enters the picture through the backdoor with Jay Gatsby. Everybody suspects him, but everybody is willing to partake in his lavish parties anyway.

The life of ease and luxury is contrasted sharply with the stranglehold of poverty containing Myrtle and George Wilson or the life from which Jay Gatsby emerged. It is also interesting to note that George Wilson is the only one who mentions God in the text: religion is notoriously absent from the upper crust's sensibilities.

There are two more important contrasts to keep in mind if you want to talk about the geographical setting in Great Gatsby. The first is the whole East Egg/West Egg thing. Nick tells us right off the bat that East Egg is the wealthier, more elite of the two. Despite all his money, Gatsby lives in West Egg, suggesting that he has not been able to complete his transformation into a member of the social elite. The distance that separates him from Daisy lies across the span of water between their houses – the very distance between West Egg and East Egg. The barrier between them, then, is one of class distinctions.

The second contrast is between the city scenes and the suburban ones. Like Nick Carraway,

Tom Buchanan and Jay Gatsby commute into the city for their respective lines of work. The women are left behind. This geographical divide is also a gender borderline. But the city is important in other ways, too; Tom only interacts with his mistress in the city, and Gatsby only sees Meyer Wolfsheim there. They both use the city to hide their goings-on from the people they value on Long Island.

Narrator Point of View

First Person (Peripheral Narrator): Nick Carraway

The story is told in the first person, through the eyes of Nick Carraway. The primary and most visible story is about Jay Gatsby and his devotion to his dream. Other stories, also told through Carraway's eyes, include Tom's reconciliation with his wife Daisy, Nick's own relationship with Jordan, and Nick's evolving friendship with Gatsby. Nick is only able to tell these stories through his limited omniscience. At times, he is able to narrate scenes despite not being present – but he rarely takes advantage of this fact. Although the story is told in the first person, Nick Carraway is able to easily become part of the wallpaper. His major character trait – reserving judgment – allows him to be almost an "invisible" narrator, similar to a traditional third-person omniscient point of view. Ultimately, however, if we lost Nick's point-of-view, we would never understand the evolution of his character. He is the invisible man until the end of the book, when suddenly, he has opinions about everybody.

Genre

Literary Fiction, Modernism

Almost anything on the Shmoop module list would probably fit under the category of "literary fiction": it's an umbrella term for a story or novel that focuses more on character development and style than on page-turning plots. And it's this kind of fiction that you usually read for school: books that provoke discussion over what it all *means* (Life, the Universe, and Everything).

The Great Gatsby is definitely no exception. Fitzgerald is much more interested in plumbing the depths of Gatsby's heart and in experimenting with symbolic language (the green light, anyone?) than he is in working through the latest forensic evidence to give us clues for who hit Myrtle with his (or her) car. This novel is definitely not *CSI: West Egg*.

And the way Nick's narration jumps around, shifting from dialogue to personal meditation to foreshadowing and back again, tips us off that *The Great Gatsby* is also a Modernist work (like a lot of other books to come in the wake of World War I – check out any of our Shmoop guides

on Ernest Hemingway or James Joyce novels for examples). It's fragmented and non-linear, but the writing style also tries to get at difficult truths that a more realistic book might not capture.

Tone

Cynical, Ironic

Nick is one cynical little cookie. Even though Nick reserves explicit judgment on the characters, Fitzgerald still manages to implicitly criticize through his narrator's tone. (Think about how ludicrous Myrtle seems when, although she isn't upper class, she still tries to look down on her husband.) The characters are sometimes slighted by the ironic tone, and we the readers are forced to read with the same cynicism that Fitzgerald writes.

Let's take a look at two passages. This first one is from Chapter 1, when Nick is hanging out with the Buchanans and Jordan for the first time:

"I love to see you at my table, Nick. You remind me of a – of a rose, an absolute rose. Doesn't he?" She turned to Miss Baker for confirmation: "An absolute rose?"

This was untrue. I am not even faintly like a rose. She was only extemporizing, but a stirring warmth flowed from her, as if her heart was trying to come out to you concealed in one of those breathless, thrilling words. Then suddenly she threw her napkin on the table and excused herself and went into the house.

We see here that Nick is all too aware of the ridiculousness of certain social circumstances; he's also aware of the seductive quality of the upper class, even though he feels it's somewhat empty. He narrates this scene as though his personal recollection is the objectively true version, Isn't there is room for alternate interpretations? While reading, we took Nick's account of the story as the truth, but there probably is a way of viewing the story's events without his cynical assumptions.

Nick also has a good grip on what he thinks is righteous or reproachable, and he hands that to his audience as the absolute true judgment of a person or an act. For instance, take a look at this excerpt from the last few pages of the novel, when Nick has become disillusioned with his former acquaintances:

I couldn't forgive [Tom] or like him, but I saw that what he had done was, to him, entirely justified. It was all very careless and confused. They were careless people, Tom and Daisy – they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made....

I shook hands with him; it seemed silly not to, for I felt suddenly as though I were talking to a child.

How would you feel about Tom and Daisy if Nick's tone were less cynical – if his version of the story was completely objective? Would it be possible to empathize with them?

Writing Style

Soldierly, Confessional, A herd of galloping horses

Hold on to your hats, Shmoopsters, because once you ride the Fitzgerald train, there's no stopping. You will be hurdling through this plot faster than you can say "T.J. Eckleburg." It seems to us that F. Scott Fitzgerald loves winding, garden-path sentences. He likes to begin a sentence with one idea, person, or location and end in a completely different universe. Because of this, he draws amazing connections. In this example, watch how he begins with personality and ends with earthquakes:

*If personality is an unbroken series of successful gestures, then there was something gorgeous about him, some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life, as if he were related to one of those intricate machines that register earthquakes ten thousand miles away. (1.4)*How's that for some plate tectonics? Our speaker talks about the "unbroken series of successful gestures" that characterizes personality, but we can't help but think of the series of successful words that live in this very sentence. Unlike a personality, these words are broken up by three commas. We can't get enough of the commas and semi-colons that live in *The Great Gatsby*; they are everywhere, and they make for some juicy, action-packed sentences. Sometimes, we have to read sentences over and over again just to make sure we understand them, just to make sure we actually did read the phrases "whole caravansary" and "card house" in the same sentence (8.15).

Fitzgerald seems to love the chaos of a ramble, but he also loves to enforce order. He creates beautifully ornate sentences that gallop like wild horses in all directions, and he also simultaneously lassoes these sentences and pulls the reigns. Get out your chaps, find your spurs, and giddy on up.

What's Up With the Title?

For such a short title, *The Great Gatsby* can be interpreted in a couple different ways. Is Gatsby great? Or is Fitzgerald being ironic? Let's break it down.

The way we see it, there are three ways to read the title. First, there's the surface level of Gatsby's persona. He's one of the wealthiest people on Long Island, and definitely one of the wealthiest in West Egg. He's got a mansion loaded with the nicest, most expensive stuff and a great car. And his parties... oh the parties. Each would be qualify as a legendary event in itself, and he hosts at least one every weekend. He gives all of his guests first-class treatment, even though he doesn't really know any of them.

Gatsby is a local celebrity, and everyone has a theory about how he's gotten to be so wealthy. In short, everyone seems to know his name and is endlessly interested in his life. So in that way, he's, well, "great." Great in that he seems to live a dream-like existence. He briefly even wins back the girl of his dreams – and therefore achieves his ultimate goal – even if Daisy only sticks around short time.

Then there's the second way of looking at Gatsby: his dream-like life is a sham. He rises to the top of society in a dishonest way; he's earned his fortune through illegal activities. The "old money" folks see right through his appearance. He's not upper class to them – he's a phony. When everyone figures out the truth behind his rise to "greatness," their adoration of him crumbles. All those friends of his turn out to simply be people who take advantage of his generosity and riches. None of them even bothers to show up for his funeral, except for the owl-eyed man. In this way, Fitzgerald's title seems more ironic than literal.

But then there's a third way of looking at that adjective. Although Nick is disgusted with the means Gatsby has used to achieve his dream, Nick sees that he's truly driven by a noble emotion: love. In that way, Gatsby's willingness to do whatever necessary to win back Daisy seems honorably romantic. Also, Nick believes that Gatsby is truly a good person; the man is generous, loyal, and sincere. In this way, Gatsby is great. Nick sees Gatsby as a victim of Tom and Daisy's selfish, shallow addiction to their wealth and lifestyle. Nick empathizes with Gatsby's inability to break down class barriers and earn the respect of the upper class. In the end, Nick sides with Gatsby and is infuriated with the way he was treated.

All things considered, do you think that Gatsby is great? Check out Gatsby's "Character Analysis" for more of our thoughts on him and his "greatness."

What's Up With the Epigraph?

"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

First of all, who is this Thomas Parke D'Invilliers? What, you've never heard of him? Well, that's because Fitzgerald made him up. This is breaking the normalcy – if not the flat out rules – of epigraphs, which usually use someone *else's* words and not the