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## Civilization Is Going to Pieces: Crime, Morality, and Their Role in the Great Gatsby

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“CIVILIZATION IS GOING TO PIECES”:  
CRIME, MORALITY, AND THEIR ROLE IN *THE GREAT GATSBY*

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Bachelor of Science in Education  
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May 2007

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at the  
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**ABSTRACT**

Historically the 1920s contained growing tensions among the generations, classes and races. To hear that it is turbulent is not new. This becomes part of the frame for the 1925 novel, *The Great Gatsby*. The other part, which this thesis treats, is that of the moral and legal crime taking place within the novel itself. Beginning with the real-life Hall-Mills murder case, the thesis enumerates and details many, often overlooked, moral and legal crimes by every character within the book. Through this is it my intention to elucidate the potentiality of F. Scott Fitzgerald to portray a culture in crisis. Furthermore, it attempts to highlight the complexities taking place within the novel and Fitzgerald's possible intentions.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	iv
CHAPTERS	
I. INTRODUCTION .....	1
II. HALL-MILLS MURDER CASE ESTABLISHES NOVEL .....	3
III. CULPABILITY FOR JAY GATSBY’S DEATH .....	8
IV. INCURABLY DISHONEST JORDAN .....	13
V. MYRTLE’S SOCIAL LADDER—BROKEN BY A MAGAZINE .....	16
VI. LIKE AUTHOR, LIKE CHARACTER- FITZGERALD AND NICK ...	20
VII. TOM BUCHANAN- END, POLO PLAYER, ANACHRONISM .....	25
VIII. ROOTS OF ORGANIZED CRIME .....	33
IX. EVOLUTION OF JAMES GATZ .....	44
X. CONCLUSION .....	49
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	52

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The Great War and its aftermath changed the way many younger Americans at the time conceptualized the world around them. This generation, dubbed The Lost Generation, by Gertrude Stein, ushered the 1920s in with much tension. This turbulence flourished in a decade where the older and younger generational gap expanded. Music and fashion outwardly displayed the signs of the growing change. Musically, faster tempos and syncopated rhythms embodied a new form of music known as Jazz.

According to an upstate New York preacher, “Jazz may be analyzed as a combination of nervousness, lawlessness, primitive and savage animalism, and lasciviousness” (qtd. in Nelson). Younger women, in order to become part of this Jazz lifestyle, began bobbing their hair and trading their shirtwaists and skirts for dresses that exposed their shoulders and knees. Inwardly, the nation displayed the schism through Congressional approval of the Volstead Act, which eventually led into the 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment; then, eight months

later, the ratification of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment. Where Federal law guaranteed women the right to vote, they prohibited the right to manufacture, to transport, or to consume alcohol. The reasons for the 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment are many, some “dry factions” viewed liquor as evil, corrupting those who partook in libations.

While many in the country were law-abiding citizens, the focus of history remains on those who were not. Looking at this specifically from a legal perspective, the original definition of law came from the eminent 18<sup>th</sup> century legal scholar, Blackstone, who connected law and morality. In Blackstone’s view, law dictated right and “forbade the wrong. Law and morality were related” (Boyer 334). Simply put, law codified moral beliefs. If this is the case, then so too was law separating from morality in the 1920s. Allen Boyer, writing in *The Michigan Law Review* comments on this, writing, “in the 20s, to judge by the American people’s response to Prohibition, morality seemed to have no part in law” (334). In simplest terms, viewing the past from a modern perspective, people were going to drink despite its illegality; they cared not for the moralistic repercussions, but rather only for the consequences if caught.

The disparity between conceptions of morality and legality did not just range between two divergent generations, but also within generations. A tension displayed throughout F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*. As a self-proclaimed social historian, Fitzgerald strove to use real-life friends, underworld characters, and crimes to illustrate a culture in crisis due to a generation lost, not just from their parents, but also each other, and themselves. The following real-life murder case provides what becomes the paradigm for readers of the novel.



## CHAPTER II

### HALL-MILLS MURDER CASE ESTABLISHES NOVEL

In the fall of 1922, in New Brunswick, New Jersey, a young couple found the murdered bodies of Reverend Edward Hall and his mistress, Eleanor Mills, under a tree in Buccleuch Park. According to the police report, the killer posed the bodies in a position mimicking an intimate moment. Around the bodies lay scattered pieces of torn love letters sent between the two, and leaning against his foot, lay Reverend Hall's business card. The case instantly became tabloid fodder for the press. The story not just bled, but gushed with the lurid details of the love affair. Police immediately considered both James Mills and Frances Hall (the victims' spouses) as suspects. The police and prosecutors quickly released Mills, believing there to be no reason to suspect him, but Frances Hall found herself in a much different scenario. Though she had an alibi, she, and her brothers, were questioned extensively about the night of the murder.

Ultimately, the trial became a public spectacle. The case, unfortunately, had very little evidence, and virtually no credible witnesses— despite having the account of “The Pig Woman”, named so by the press because she raised hogs near the crime scene. On

the night in question, this woman reported to the police that she was on Lovers' Lane and saw the silhouettes of two men and two women; a short time later, she heard screams and shots fired (Bernard "Frances Hall" 328). This account quickly came into question when another woman, a neighbor to The Pig Woman, stated that she had been with her that night and neither were near the crime scene. Additionally, each time the prosecution questioned The Pig Woman, her story would become more elaborate and dramatic, thus undermining her credibility. As to the physical evidence— since people at the crime scene passed it around, the calling card bearing Reverend Hall's name had too many fingerprints to be admitted as evidence. In the end, the jury found Frances Hall, and her brothers, not guilty in the murder of Eleanor Mills.

The details of the Hall-Mills murder case serves to display how the 1925 novel *The Great Gatsby* bear many close similarities to it. First, Eleanor Mills, a choir singer at Reverend Hall's church, was much like her literary counterpart, Myrtle Wilson. Mills, too, found herself so unhappily married that "she no longer slept in the same room with her husband" (Phelps 34). They often fought in public, including a report that Mrs. Mills publicly denounced her husband, saying, "I care more for Mr. Hall's little finger than I do for your whole body" (qtd. in Phelps). This detail has relevance that is two-fold; the first part is that Mrs. Mills' body was found with her pinky blown off, potentially showing the culprit had a close relationship with the deceased. Second, this detail relates directly to the novel; in Chapter I, Daisy accuses Tom of hurting her little finger, though she claims he "didn't mean to" (Fitzgerald 16). This connection of the novel to the murder is not the only significant one.

As to the matter of James Mills, the description provided by observers to the case described him as “a thin, emaciated, drooping man with a perpetually apologetic expression” (qtd. in Phelps), which the press credited as to why the police released him. Fitzgerald seemingly draws from this detail when he originally describes Wilson as “a blonde, spiritless man, anemic and faintly handsome” (29), and later, as “so sick that he looked guilty, unforgivably guilty” (131). This second description comes as the readers learn of Wilson’s discovery of Myrtle’s illicit affair, but both provided descriptions are very similar to the accounts of James Mills. It is no secret in the literary world that Fitzgerald used the details in the world around him. In fact, in his published journal, he wrote the name “Eleanor Mills” (*Notebooks* 146) suggesting that he would use the idea for his writing at a later point.

The final detail parallel to the text, Fitzgerald discussed at some length through both his letters and journals. There is a small scene where Nick mentions trying to read the novel *Simon Called Peter*, which sits in the living room of Myrtle and Tom’s New York City apartment. Nick could not make any sense of it, and according to a footnote Matthew Bruccoli has in a letter Fitzgerald wrote, the novel was about the affairs of an army chaplain (*F. Scott Fitzgerald* 89). Furthermore, in a review where Fitzgerald refers to the novel, Bruccoli has a footnote there stating, “Fitzgerald greatly disliked the 1921 novel by English writer Robert Keable” (*On Authorship* 85). The note that Fitzgerald did not care for the novel is a minor piece of evidence; however, it is another detail in direct correlation to the Hall-Mills murder case. According to newspaper sources of the time, Hall gave the novel to Mills as a present (Phelps 37). The novel, which sits in the fictional secret lovers’ apartment, displays Fitzgerald’s love for combining social history

and his writings. Assuming Fitzgerald read and followed the case, as noted in his journal, he uses this minute detail to his advantage to mold the final details from the murder case that enriches his novel.

Through all the details of the case, it is telling that Fitzgerald frequently pulled social events from contemporary news headlines to help create his novel. It is important, however, to bear in mind that, while the Hall-Mills murder case provides the information for the central crime taking place in the novel, it does not encapsulate the complete picture of this complex novel.

*The Great Gatsby* receives more attention than ever by readers and critics alike. Much of this reexamination has been maintained over time, yet with the release of the 2013 Luhrmann remake, many more scholars are taking a closer look at this American classic. Current scholarly discussions regarding the novel tend to explore the novel from a Queer Theory perspective or a New Historicists perspective. While my argument is also a part of the New Historicism, it will take most of the different arguments and combine them to reveal what is at the heart of the novel. Many scholars only address one of the many crimes, or one of the many historical references within the novel and explore it thoroughly. It is my intention that by combining many of these views, the resulting outcome will produce a potential picture of what F. Scott Fitzgerald may have intended for the reader by incorporating these various historical references.

However, some modern critics go as far as stating the book is “aesthetically overrated, psychologically vacant, and morally complacent” (Schulz), in addition to being “sacrosanct” (Schulz). The last two comments in particular are salient to this argument. This is a commonly missed point of *The Great Gatsby*; many do not seem to

notice that the morality within the novel is a reflection of what is taking place in the America of the 1920s. Though Kathryn Schulz is correct in the fact that none of the characters are likeable—or at least they shouldn't be—but that is the magic of Fitzgerald. By the end, the reader's focus is no longer on whether they liked the characters or not, rather readers are left trying to grasp the gravity of the message. The book should not be oversimplified. Subtly, Fitzgerald incorporates a multitude of plots within his novel, all of which should leave the reader feeling uncomfortable and questioning the status quo. Thus, I intend my argument to place the various moral and legal crimes together, creating a patchwork of what is really at play in Fitzgerald's novel.

The incorporation of these many elements in relation to the Hall-Mills murder case serves not only as an inspiration for the murder finale that ends *The Great Gatsby*, but also serves as the culminating point to the culture of criminal life explored by Fitzgerald in the novel. Yet, it is also a novel without a hero, filled only with villains of varying degrees, for each character is guilty of more than one moral or legal crime. It is, in fact, that by the end, his careful incorporation of various crimes and varying degrees of culpability, that Fitzgerald depicts as an American society in decay. In turning the attention to the novel, it seems appropriate to start with the overshadowing crime.

### CHAPTER III

#### CULPABILITY FOR JAY GATSBY'S DEATH

Each character within *Gatsby* is culpable for a range of crimes whether moral or legal. Seemingly, the crux of this issue arrives in the moments following Myrtle's demise. Treating this topic, Brian Fintan Moore's article, "Assigning Moral Culpability in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*", examines this scene from the legal perspective. The reader knows from the details, that Tom is one not used to suffering the consequences for any of his actions, and thus, is quick to assert his whereabouts to Wilson, before Wilson places the blame on him. Moore's article insinuates that Tom knows Wilson would kill Gatsby—the man supposedly responsible for Myrtle's death—and consequently, does nothing to prevent it (648). This counts as "more misfeasance than nonfeasance—he still made an informed choice to permit and enable Wilson to kill Gatsby" (648). While this is indirectly seen in the novel, we know Tom quickly relays to Wilson that the car Wilson saw Tom driving earlier in the day did not actually belong to him. Though it is not expressly stated, Tom does provide information to exonerate himself, and in doing so, gives Wilson enough information to implicate Gatsby, thus

leading Wilson to this conclusion. Still, he does not expressly state, from Nick's narrative, that it was Gatsby's car. Moore believes this makes Tom morally culpable for Gatsby's murder, further asserting that the scene where Tom and Daisy are in their kitchen eating a bucket of cold chicken is additional proof of "Tom's moral culpability and suggests maybe he knew more of the circumstances than our earlier analysis suggest" (651). This is a reasonable consideration, for Nick has a limited perspective of the events, and as Fitzgerald develops this scene to the readers forcing them to wonder what exactly the couple could be discussing. The scene described is far too cozy, Tom, being the manipulative sort, would indicate that a discussion over a cold bucket of chicken displays an intimacy between the couple that would potentially demonstrate Tom's knowledge of circumstances. Any character study of Tom Buchanan would reveal that because of his wealth, power, and overall social status, he feels he is above the law. It would not surprise many readers that Tom refuses accept blame for Myrtle's death—especially if he could pin it on his wife's lover. Ultimately, though, Moore believes that "Tom's justification for killing Gatsby may be flawed and erroneous, but his decision not to prevent Wilson from killing Gatsby is morally culpable" (648). Though, this is not be the only crime for which Tom is culpable.

Similarly, Nick is no less guilty in the matter of Gatsby's demise, though he himself does not recognize this fact. Despite the claim of being within and without as he narrates the novel, Nick plays a significant role in many crimes throughout the novel. This makes Nick unique, in that we, as readers, trust him from the beginning of the novel, as he makes himself appear to the readers as innocent and honest. Yet, he demonstrates almost immediately his tendency for hypocrisy. He reflects that he is inclined to reserve

all judgments, yet promptly comments on having scorn for Gatsby from the moment he met him. It is easy to forget that Nick is a biased narrator; he rather seems a blend of third person omniscient, instead of solely first person. He remains connected to the reader throughout the novel and, in turn, ties himself to each crime, and even in some cases, a facilitator. Truly, Nick betrays the reader's trust in each chapter, becoming almost willfully ignorant of the events around him.

In relation to Myrtle's death scene, Nick acts as a reporter, telling readers all the details, yet he never reports to the readers about speaking to the police himself regarding the incident. In fact, he does not say anything at all. His silence at the scene of the crime makes him complicit with Tom's lie to the police. Nick's silence continues when he fails to make Gatsby aware of Wilson's potential for retribution. According to Moore, "Regardless if Nick knew for certain that Gatsby was in peril, he certainly had a suspicion. The novel later suggests this" (650). Though he does not elucidate Nick's suspicions, one can assume that Moore refers to the scene at the beginning of Chapter VIII where Nick suggests to Gatsby to leave town for a while. Moore further believes that Nick does not tell Gatsby of his imminent danger, because of Nick's expressed distaste toward Gatsby at this juncture in the novel. All of these details incriminate Nick, protesting against his proclaimed innocence.

Daisy's culpability differs from that of Nick's and Tom's in that, while she is not culpable for Gatsby's death, she is guilty in the death of Myrtle. Her rap sheet belies her innocent exterior. Namely, she is the instrument of Myrtle's death, as she does not stop the car, she lets Gatsby take the blame for her, and she never comes forward with information. Moore argues that, despite this fact, she is not morally culpable for



Gatsby's murder. While it is possible that, in Daisy's simple mind, she could not have foreseen anyone tracing the car back to Gatsby, Nick chooses to gloss over the fact that Daisy is completely responsible for Myrtle's death. Ironically, he seems more upset about her response to Gatsby's death, than at the fact she killed Myrtle without a second thought. Ultimately, in relation to Gatsby's murder, there is not enough evidence to legally incriminate Daisy, the reader must then separate themselves from Nick's narrative grasp and remember that Daisy is, at least, legally and morally culpable for Myrtle's death.

In terms of Wilson's blatant criminality in *The Great Gatsby*, to most readers who might look at laws of the time, it might seem that Wilson virtually has no loopholes in which to escape the conviction of murder. Yet, according to Brian Fintan Moore, "Had Wilson lived and been brought to trial, perhaps he could evade a murder conviction by pleading insanity" (646). However, the insanity plea is a delicate one. If, from a legal standpoint, Wilson's attorneys try to use the theory that Wilson has the mind of a child, it would be no use. As a law ruled in a 1923 document on judicial decisions on criminal law and procedure, in the case of State versus Ehlers, the theory of a mental age as far as adults were concerned "does not amount to shucks" (124). The reason provided that the mental age of a person would change with each doctor's examination. Additionally, the case claimed that the average mental age of the American soldier was 12—therefore, the mental age in this case does not pertain. This can be equally applicable to Wilson's case, if attorneys claimed Wilson to be too simple to commit such a heinous act. Consequently, because of Fitzgerald's selected ending, and each character's involvement in the crime, he shows the parallels between the chaos surrounding his world with the

Hall-Mills murder and the world he created with *Gatsby*. Gatsby's murder, then, becomes a synecdoche for all the crimes in the novel.

When it comes to taking blame and acknowledging fault, even Myrtle's own sister, Catherine, "[...] swore that her sister had never seen Gatsby, that her sister was completely happy with her husband, and that her sister had been into no mischief whatever" (172), when the police questioned her. In this sense, each character plays a role in the murder of Gatsby, though perhaps not according to Moore. This includes Catherine, because had she indicated that Myrtle and Tom were in the midst of an affair, it would potentially have saved Gatsby's life. The two final murder scenes, tied in with the real-life Hall-Mills murder case, creates a large piece to the puzzle that forms the moral and legal criminal in *Gatsby*, thus forcing the reader to become aware of the various levels of criminal activity simultaneously taking place elsewhere in the novel.

## CHAPTER IV

### INCURABLY DISHONEST JORDAN

Another example of Fitzgerald's use of real life to illustrate the moral decay taking place in society is through his usage of the automobile, and ultimately, Myrtle's death by an automobile accident. This seems to be one of the first instances of a car as an instrument of death within a novel. The focus of the car within the novel takes on symbolic meaning, best seen through instances with Jordan Baker. Rumored to be named after the defunct and short-lived Baker Motorcar and her character modeled after famed golfer Edith Cummings, Jordan is, according to Nick, a "rotten driver" (63). While she contends that she is a careful driver, she contradicts herself by conceding in the next breath that she may not be, but others are, saying, "It takes two to make an accident" (63). This belief of Jordan's is not necessarily true. The way she behaves, it is more as though she is in search of a willing partner to create an accident. According to Veronica Makowsky, this is indicative from the scene where Jordan relates a story from her youth in Louisville. As she is describing her walk, Makowsky believes that "because she [Jordan] veers from the sidewalks, she ... is straying from the straight and narrow. For a

young woman, even such venial infractions are more serious since America, in the form of its flags, reproves her indecorously blowing skirt..." (30). This is furthered by the fact that Jordan is not rooted the way even Daisy and Tom are. She is not married, and only has an old aunt to watch after her. Jordan is essentially free to roam as she pleases, which causes Tom to comment, "They oughtn't to let her run around the country this way" (23). She effectively has no family, and Tom and Daisy are not exactly the best example for her, potentially fostering some of Jordan's less respectable moments.

While much of Jordan's behavior and activity does not seem indicative of criminal behavior from a modern perspective, in the 20s, this behavior was unseemly and unbecoming of a woman with any social status. Despite the fact that the US granted women's suffrage, societal rules and views for women were not drastically different; therefore, Jordan breaks the societal rules, and if that is not enough for readers, Jordan has a penchant for lying. Nick even describes her as "incurably dishonest" (63). He demonstrates this characteristic by relaying two stories. The first is when Jordan borrows a car, leaves the top down in the rain, and then lies about it (62). This instance then helps Nick to remember Jordan's worst lie, and the small scandal that followed. A caddy accused Jordan of moving her own ball during a golf tournament, but somehow she managed to keep it from making the newspapers. Nick blames her for none of this, as he explains, "Dishonesty in a woman is a thing you never blame deeply" (63). Yet, there is something in Jordan's behavior, and Nick's response to it, that is not completely above reproach. She is a shameless liar and gossip, neither of which bothers Nick, nor does he suffer himself to make a caustic comment regarding her irresponsible behavior. Perhaps it is the tone Fitzgerald sets around her, as she is perhaps the most elusive of the

characters. She floats in and out of scenes, easily forgotten by the end of the novel. Yet despite her seemingly minor role, her ability to glide in and out of morally questionable situations should be more troubling to readers. For what kind of person is able to move themselves seamlessly out of problematic situations? Perhaps Fitzgerald wishes to use Jordan as a caveat against cars. Cars, like Jordan, display the cold capability to speed headlong through life without consideration for others. Either way, Jordan's overall behavior fits into Fitzgerald's moral and legal criminal rhetoric.

## CHAPTER V

### MYRTLE'S SOCIAL LADDER—BROKEN BY A MAGAZINE

Fitzgerald pulled, not only from murder cases, but also from the gossip magazines. For this purpose, Fitzgerald uses Myrtle almost as a foil. Comparatively, Myrtle, does not possess the same ability of Jordan's—the ability to glide through life without worrying about consequences. Perhaps it is a quality for the social elite, like the Buchanans and Jordan. Myrtle, instead, ineptly attempts to talk her way in and out situations. It is more as though she prefers to use her command of the language in hopes of gaining access into a secret society. Her currency is the usage of “knowledge” and the ability to carry conversations with the class above her, and it seems that her means of achieving this is via reading. Unfortunately, her selection of reading materials is just as empty as she is. At this juncture in history, newspapers influenced the peoples' emotions. Reporters often followed the policy of “if it bled, it led”. This trend soon spread to the tabloids.

One particular magazine proves to be prominently useful in this examination. Though it started from humble beginnings, originally titled *Andrews' American Queen: A*

*National Society Journal*, Eugene Mann took over the defunct high society journal and renamed it *Town Topics* (Hamilton 35). Most likely to save the paper, Mann “replaced the engagement, wedding, and birth announcements ... with columns implying the impure relationships between society heiresses and their young doctors or the wild nature of parties attended by debutants” (Hamilton 35). Once his brother, Col. William D’Alton Mann, took over, the opening of the magazine included a regular section entitled “Saunterings”, which covered the latest gossip among New York City’s rich and powerful.

In the middle of July in 1905, the *New York Times* ran an exposé on *Town Topics* for bribery (Hamilton 36-7). The sting operation involved then Editor, Charles Ahle, caught bribing a man for the of sum \$500 in then US currency and collected in name as a “subscription” for the non-existent book titled, *Fads and Fancies of Representative America*. The list of bribed was lengthy and included such big names as J.J. Astor and three Vanderbilts. Additionally, on the list were various subscription prices ranging from \$2,500 to \$10,000 (Hamilton 37). When this went to trial, the public discovered that “several prominent New Yorkers had been ‘almost compelled’ by the Colonel to subscribe to a forthcoming book called *Fads and Fancies* for ‘sums of 5 figures’ in return for the Colonel’s promise that certain news items would not appear in *Town Topics*” (Hamilton 34). And how could they not? For their lives would be fodder for all of America to see.

According to Sharon Hamilton’s article, “The New York Gossip Magazine in *The Great Gatsby*”, by Fitzgerald including a parody of it in the novel, he saw the magazine for what it really was: “a tool for blackmail and the destruction of lives, a signpost on the

road of an America falling away from Columbus's glorious vision" (43). She also believes that the usage of the magazine in the novel serves a few purposes, one, that it reflects "his response, by 1925, to his own celebrity status" (45), and two, that Fitzgerald desires to show the "moral/ religious presence in *Gatsby*" (45). Her first argument, that Fitzgerald is responding to his own celebrity status, is a delicate one in that Fitzgerald both enjoyed and loathed the spotlight. She additionally asserts later that "gossip in *Gatsby* is a sign of moral collapse" (50). This ties itself back to Myrtle and the theme of a criminal atmosphere through her purchase of the gossip magazine titled *Town Tattle*, and the purchase of a dog, all within the company of Tom. Hamilton believes this is a thoughtless behavior, as the historical context of the time indicates that informants for the magazine would be everywhere (42). Additionally, it stands to reason that Tom, as affluent as he is, would be a member of the socially elite class and one who would also most likely be reported on in the magazine, as well as one whom would have been bribed. Proof of this may be evidenced by Jordan's remark about Tom's car accident during Tom and Daisy's honeymoon—the newspapers reported a chambermaid as injured in the accident. Hamilton believes this because Andrew Hook writes that "*The Great Gatsby* is a novel of manners: it does comment on American society in the 1920s and it is critical of the corruption and moral disorder of the period" (qtd. in Hamilton 50). It means that Myrtle, to a degree, symbolizes the lack of morality and susceptibility to corruption with her "ability to go to the newsstand and buy intimate news about New Yorkers" (Hamilton 50). Myrtle is committing a moral crime; she is not above any reproach because she is careless and thoughtless. The residing in an apartment with Tom, and the puppy shopping let her act as though she is married to him instead of his mistress, and she rarely



seems to be bothered by this. She is not only guilty of adultery, a clear moral (and legal crime at the time), but also guilty of being a social climber who puts on airs. She cannot realistically survive in a world where every move is calculated and she is so thoughtless. She is morally bankrupt through these facts, and serves to display this to the readers. This closely parallels Gatsby's own social climbing, which both fail horribly. Ultimately, their untimely deaths signify them as morally bankrupt.

## CHAPTER VI

### LIKE AUTHOR, LIKE CHARACTER- FITZGERALD AND NICK

Through Nick Carraway's narration, Fitzgerald leads the readers through a slow descent into a world that functions on multiple levels of crime. But, this feeling is also created because Fitzgerald has Nick function like a detective throughout the novel; Nick provides eyewitness accounts of events, repeats information from second-hand sources, and also reconstructs events from several sources (Gray 38). He is indeed a reflection of his creator, as Fitzgerald himself constantly judged the world around him. In his biography, *Some Sort of Epic Grandeur: The Life of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, Matthew J. Bruccoli writes that Fitzgerald took the importance of authorship onto himself within his own life and writing. Bruccoli further accounts that Fitzgerald's writing reveals a "constant process of judgment and a search for values. Character is a moral problem for Fitzgerald" (*Some Sort* 140). Bruccoli goes on to describe the extent Fitzgerald placed on observing the world around him and reporting it as faithfully as possible. This also includes, like Nick, a compilation of lists of everything taking place within his life. A prime example of this is at the beginning of Chapter IV, where Nick lists the guests at

Gatsby's parties on a timetable. All of this Fitzgerald kept in his journals. One such example included in his various journal entries is a morbid fascination with vehicular related deaths noting, "300 a day die in auto accidents in the USA" (Brucoli, *Notebooks* 18) and "[...] In those days there was one auto for every 200 inhabitants" (Brucoli, *Notebooks* 46). In addition to his often violent and crime related entries, he admitted to reading novels in the crime genre and their indirect effects on his writing. For example, he mentions reading *Crime and Punishment* by Fyodor Dostoevsky around the time that he wrote *Gatsby*.

Perhaps through the reading and observations of the world around him and within literature, Fitzgerald felt a sense of a world in disarray. Sharon Hamilton believes this is best expressed in his early fiction, believing that "Fitzgerald frequently expressed concern about what would come to replace religion as a moral guide in people's lives once they had abandoned traditional religious belief, and in particular moral guidance provided by the Decalogue, or Ten Commandments" (46). She further identifies that this perspective continued throughout *Gatsby*, where each character proceeds to break one or more of the Ten Commandments (48). This argument leaves some of Fitzgerald's letters in question, then. For he in years earlier wrote to Edmund Wilson, in August of 1919, briefly about the state of his Catholicism. He wrote, "I am ashamed to say that my Catholicism is scarcely more than a memory—no that's wrong, its more than that; at any rate I go not to the church nor mumble stray nothings over chrystaline beads" (Brucoli, *Letters* 29). He does not sound concerned with anyone's, let alone his own moral compass. Yet, Fitzgerald does convey a sense of moral crisis within his writing.

In reference back to the internet article Kathryn Schulz wrote, she believes that “what he preached about the most was the degeneracy of the wealthy”. I contend that it was the degeneracy of people in general, for any and every one who attended Gatsby’s parties. In order to enhance the senselessness and chaos pervading the world around him, and his characters, Fitzgerald breaks the world down in varying degrees of crime. He does not state this, but his use of Nick Carraway leaves room for this assumption; for Nick tells readers from the onset that, he is “inclined to reserve all judgments” and “was privy to the secret griefs of wild, unknown men” (5). He becomes the detective for the reader, reporting all he sees, supposedly without being overly critical. Nevertheless, initially even he puts stress upon Gatsby as the centripetal force within the novel, consequently setting the reader up for the ensuing misdirection of crimes. Nick claims to want “no more riotous excursions with privileged glimpses into the human heart” (6), indicating that by his summer spent watching Gatsby and the others around him, he is more than sated by the opulence and tragedy within Gatsby’s world. For Gatsby and people like him, he had an “unaffected scorn”, yet, still he exempts Gatsby from this scorn—the contradiction playing the initial part in the misdirection.

Nick also narrates with “moral detachment, as if lunching with gangsters were the same as watching strange beasts in a national park” (Boyer 335). It is true that in his discussions with Wolfsheimer, and in other scenes, he writes of such instances as if it was no more than a sporting match. At first, it may appear to the readers that he is doing so in order to appear unbiased, but a closer examination reveals more. First, Daisy mentions a broken engagement at dinner in Chapter I, yet Nick denies the affair and informs the audience that “... 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" (24). Unfortunately, for Nick, he mentions this rumored engagement again at the end of Chapter III, and implies it is a much more serious problem. As he expresses a desire to spend more time with Jordan, he writes that "... I knew that first I had to get myself definitely out of that tangle back home [...] Nevertheless there was a vague understanding that had to be tactfully broken off before I was free" (64). Nick should not be trusted, even as he, a few lines later, states his belief that his cardinal virtue is honesty. Paradoxically, he cannot even be honest about the state of a relationship back home. Apparently, he is willfully ignorant of his own moral failings, or perhaps he is too daft to see them in himself.

Another example of this is the night he spent in the city at Tom and Myrtle's apartment complex. There are overt homosexual overtones alluding that something more takes place between him and Mr. McKee. He conveniently inserts elided moments leaving the readers with the only detail "...I was standing beside his bed and he was sitting up between the sheets, clad in his underwear, with a great portfolio in his hands" (42). This is a rather peculiar place for two men to end up in, at any juncture in American history. This is problematic in that, not only does Nick omit key details, but it is also problematic morally and legally at the time. Any homosexual act could gravely cost the parties involved.

Finally, there is Nick's evident hypocrisy involving the affairs of both Tom and Myrtle, and Daisy and Gatsby. He clearly shuns the relationship between Tom and Myrtle, but with Daisy and Jay, he actually helps them. Again, Allen Boyer elaborates

more upon the moral paradoxes within the novel and comments upon the nature of the “moral vacuum”. He states, “people dislike dealing face-to-face with Myrtle Wilson but they condone Tom Buchanan’s keeping a mistress. Despite Nick’s self-proclaimed honesty, he romanticizes Gatsby, despite Gatsby is linked to the underworld and is obsessed with a woman married to someone else” (335). This paradox continues throughout the novel, which creates for the reader a confused sense of what is right and what is morally wrong.

## CHAPTER VII

### TOM BUCHANAN- END, POLO PLAYER, ANACHRONISM

By the middle of Chapter I, the reader meets Tom Buchanan. There is a great deal of scholarship dedicated to the character of Tom Buchanan, most of which pertains to his role as an Ivy League footballer. Despite there being only a page in the novel devoted to his time as an end, it bears some fruit in examining this role as it sheds some light on the latent violence and corruption of the character of Tom Buchanan. According to Christian Messenger's article "Tom Buchanan and the Death of the Ivy League Hero", Fitzgerald loved watching football, especially his favorite team at Yale. Messenger expounds on Fitzgerald's love by listing the qualities many magazines deemed Ivy League footballers to have had. To highlight a few here—footballers often exhibited "resourcefulness, self-knowledge, self-reliance [...] the ability to work with others [...] and a] readiness to subordinate selfish impulses, personal desires, and even individual credit to a common end" (402). In short, they were the antithesis of Tom Buchanan. This then begs the question—why would Fitzgerald create a character so completely the opposite of what he, and even President Theodore Roosevelt claimed to be "America's

kind of men” (qtd. in Messenger 403)? In answering this, Messenger believes that Tom symbolizes the downfall of the Ivy League hero. This failing of Tom’s reflects the greater moral collapse taking place in American society.

Christian Messenger also believes that *The Great Gatsby* is really a story of “the American loss of innocence and a decline in social privilege and an ideal of responsibility” (402). This notion is exemplified best through Tom, a 30-year-old, whom is aimless, restless, and whom Nick feels “as though he would drift on forever seeking a little wistfully for the dramatic turbulence of some irrecoverable football game” (10). Nick continues that even his peers at Yale “hated his guts” (11) and as for Tom, he lives constantly in the present, with no clear calling in life, though only vaguely stated by Nick. He is not engaged in business or government as far as Nick represents him. He is, in essence, an anachronism, doomed in his own world by his desire to remain in the past. Realizing this, Tom feels threatened by anyone who dreams to climb the social ladder. Fitzgerald depicts this quality through Tom’s reading of “The Rise of the Colored Empire”. Relying heavily upon Pamela Bourgeois and John Clendenning’s article, titled “Gatsby, Belasco, and Ethnic Ambiguity”, their closer examination of the text Tom reads yields some insight into the view of the societal ladder of the 20s. The original text is titled *The Decline of the West* by Oswald Spengler. While scholars agree that Fitzgerald could not have read the book at the time he wrote *Gatsby*, there is the consensus that he may have been able to gloss information regarding it through second hand sources. As in the 20s, “Spengler’s theory was a hot topic in intellectual circles especially in Europe, where Fitzgerald was living while writing the novel” (Bourgeois and Clendenning 114).



Therefore, it is not unlikely that many news outlets would be reporting, and his circle of friends discussing, Spengler's controversial theory.

The crux of Spengler's argument resided in the fact that every culture has a lifespan and that the modern world consisted of only two. Of these two, one culture over extends itself, thus losing its center and eventually disappearing (Bourgeois and Clendenning 115). According to Bourgeois and Clendenning, this turns "the once potent countryside... to a vast, amorphous, sterile, mass culture" (116) reflected within the Valley of Ashes. Naturally, the theory has been largely discredited because many see it as "extravagant, romantic, and racist construction" (117). Bruccoli also comments on Fitzgerald's usage of the theory, writing that Fitzgerald believed that it "prophesied gang rule 'young peoples hungry for spoil', and more particularly 'The world as a spoil idea...'" (*Some Sort* 207), which the readers see through almost every character within the novel. Subsequently, each character hungers after one or more person or idea. Bruccoli additionally believes that he added Spengler's theory into the text "Because Fitzgerald was excited by large ideas about the movement of civilizations and felt insecure about his own education, he regarded *The Decline of the West* as a summation of intellectual history" (*Some Sort* 39). The text left such an indelible mark that even in 1940, in his letter to Max Perkins, he mentioned reading the book while writing *Gatsby*, stating "I don't think I ever quite recovered from him" (*Some Sort* 39), which becomes clear when we see Tom reading a thinly veiled version of Spengler's book. This could be why Christian Messenger describes Fitzgerald as putting Tom into "domestic settings to demonstrate his bizarre, half-understood ideas of racial superiority and the decline of the West" (406). Tom's misunderstandings truly exemplify the ignorance in relation to the

foundation of this country, best displayed when Tom “broke out violently” that “civilization is going to pieces” (17). He is correct that civilization is going to pieces, though he does not realize that he is a part of the regression.

As for Tom, he has been examining the happenings of the world around him. A particular case that may serve to highlight this point is held within America. At the time of his writing, a famous trial with which Fitzgerald was most likely familiar was that of Leo Frank. Despite the evidence pointing away from him, Frank was wrongfully tried, and sentenced to death, for the murder of 13-year-old Mary Phagan. Seeing this injustice, a judge commuted the sentence to life in prison. This, however, did not save Frank’s life. A lynch mob hung Frank because he was Jewish (or so was the conjectured reasoning at the time). Thus, the consequential murder of Mary Phagan created a moment for the KKK to rally around (Christianson, “Leo” 272). This case bears the effect that Fitzgerald would have seen this in the papers, and at the time, immigrants and those of minority backgrounds were perceived as a threat. For this reason, Fitzgerald possibly places Tom Buchanan in domestic settings where his ideas of racial superiority are only half understood. Once he mentions it, he is out of place—all in the room perceiving him as ridiculous. It is also within Tom’s belief that, as the world is going to pieces, he can use his body for leverage to sustain his societal role (Messenger 407). Because of his ill fit in time and space, he is confined to living at home raising Polo ponies. This is not the dream envisioned for the Ivy League Hero and all the experience he had in college prepared him for nothing, a moral criminal for trying to fit into a more significant role than he belongs.

Tom, the dethroned hero, then has a level of culpability dependent on which crime he commits at which point in the novel. Using the scholarship on Fitzgerald, as well as the “clues” left in the text, Tom’s crimes range from domestic violence, to adultery, to lewd and lascivious behavior, to buying and consuming alcohol, and finally to the potential gambling within an organized crime ring. His violent nature, as previously mentioned, is nearly always lurking at the surface. This can be attributed to his role as an end, but it also relates to the fact that Tom commits the “simple” crime of domestic violence. At this point in America, it is not easy to find many cases pertaining to domestic violence. One particular instance was a speech given by Charles W. Hoffman about divorce and its role in America. Hoffman believed that domestic violence was mostly sexual in nature and the cause originated with “unusual sex practices” in childhood (Shriman 415). While there does not appear to be any implications of this within the novel, it provides us with a historical background of the time. It is interesting to note that despite the immoral criminal activity taking place between Tom and Daisy, or, Tom and Myrtle, amongst their friends and relatives, the abuse goes largely uncommented. The only comment made about Daisy’s bruised finger after all looked upon it was Tom protesting Daisy’s use of the word “hulking”. None comment on how Tom should behave with his wife, nor inquire as to how the finger was bruised, and only a few pages later, Tom is on the phone with his mistress—the other victim of his abuse.

Daisy’s injury is fairly minor in comparison to Myrtle’s in Chapter II. Ironically, Myrtle’s injury stems from a fight over her flagrant mentioning of Tom’s wife. In the small apartment, after a long evening of vigorous drinking, the shouts ended when “Making a short deft movement Tom Buchanan broke her nose with his open hand” (41).

It could be considered that Tom did not want to hurt Myrtle, but rather stun her enough to stop her, since he used an open hand instead of a fist. Yet, this end does not justify the means. The way Fitzgerald describes it, because it is a “deft movement” it is clear that it was a premeditated, yet the most response it evokes can be likened to a mother scolding her little boy for pushing down his younger sibling. Even Nick, as a narrator only mentions it like it is an everyday occurrence in the presence of company, almost as though she *deserved* it. Because of this action, it appears, unfortunately, that Tom really is prepared for nothing but a combat role without much finesse in the social world, a moral criminal life filled with violence and crime with such subtleties only his wealth could buy (Messenger 406), specifically the crimes of adultery and abuse, which his money and position hide.

The party at the New York City apartment as described in Chapter II also reveals another subtle crime of Tom’s. Despite the seemingly wild times of the “Roaring 20s”, the laws were anything but this. As mentioned in the introduction, Prohibition became the law of the land. In other areas of the law, there can be found instances of people charged with lewd and lascivious behavior that one would, in modern times, consider conventional behavior. In one such case, the court defines the two actions as “a defiance of the usual conventions recognized in our laws as standards of decency. It is sought by the law to prevent acts detrimental to the entire field of public morals” (Nissen 462). The court further defines and separates the act of adultery (a crime) from the act of lewd and lascivious behavior. The differentiation being that the latter is a “*violation* to the entire field of public morals” (emphasis mine 462), whereas adultery only affects the married couple(s). Applying this to *Gatsby*, Tom Buchanan clearly breaks this law by having an

apartment with Myrtle, and even if it was not a written law until 1933, there was precedence before this year. This is not to mention that the law includes the phrasing “public morals”, meaning that Tom breaks a few moral codes that also happen to have legal repercussions.

Tom is not the only one committing said crimes. Often, readers place the focus of the adultery on Tom and Myrtle as the culprits, while Daisy and Wilson are the sad victims, but Daisy, too, commits the moral crime of adultery. Fitzgerald writes in a fashion that her affair with Jay Gatsby is almost given a blessing to continue because of the circumstances and responses (or lack thereof) of the narrator/ detective Nick. As stated earlier, Nick facilitates the relationship between the latter couple and frowns upon Myrtle and Tom. In a sense, this is ironic, because according to judicial law *Ex Parte Lawrence* in Oklahoma, adultery is prosecutable by either of the parties to the crime only by their own spouse or the spouse of the other party to the crime. And interestingly enough, according to an article in *Congressional Digest* in March of 1924, had the novel taken place in Texas, Tom would have been able to divorce Daisy for a single act of infidelity; however, Daisy is not able to do the same, unless he abandons her, and actively lives with Myrtle (assuming on a longer lasting basis) (Matthews). Also in Texas, terrifyingly enough, there was a penal code justifying the husband’s murder of “the person of anyone taken in the act of adultery with the wife provided the killing takes place before the parties to the act have separated” (Vernier and Shepherd). It remains questionable whether this was the exception or the rule in America at the time; however scary or unsettling some of these laws may be, divorce is not a desirable option for Daisy or Tom, for it was still a fairly uncommon activity. It was legal, but Tom would most

likely become the sole guardian of Pamela, their daughter (Matthews 195). Also, in some states, it was near impossible to obtain a divorce. Despite the passage of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment, Daisy is not completely free to pursue what she desires. Women were by-and-large still confined to their societal expectations. It is partially for these reasons that Tom and Daisy stay together at the end. They are comfortable in the status quo of their relationship because both are able to essentially live the life they want, free from repercussions.

## CHAPTER VII

### ROOTS OF ORGANIZED CRIME

The sentiment of living as one wishes without worrying about consequences, appropriately sums up not just Tom and Daisy's relationship, but also the 1920s as a whole, which gave rise most notably to organized crime. Between the new arrivals of immigrants every day and the Prohibition laws, organized crime became a big business. Though this is perhaps the most academically covered subject within *Gatsby*, for this thesis, it may potentially show that what originally appeared to put the culture at risk, actually sustained or stabilized it. As immigrants arrived through New York City, the easiest way for them to survive a city where many occupants perceived them as a threat was by organizing themselves into groups or gangs within their ethnic ghettos. According to Mark Haller, in his article titled "Organized Crime in Urban Society: Chicago in the Twentieth Century", a system of shared beliefs and values in a particular society defined organized crime. To have it run smoothly, deals, friendships, and mutual favors were required as well as a shrewd man to make the executive decisions at the top. The attribution for its success and overall pervasiveness connects to the interrelated

occupations mainly available to uneducated and not very respectable youths. Within these crime syndicates also existed political figures, labor leaders, businessmen, and entertainers. For many people, organized crime provided a way up the social ladder for young men raised within the ethnic ghettos.

Originally starting with the Irish, they dominated the two areas of labor and major gambling syndicates. Everyday these members of the underworld made transactions with each other, as well as various levels of the law. According to Haller, many top police officers were Irish, and rose through the ranks by attaching themselves to the varied political factions of the city guaranteeing them security and power (147). Also, ironically, many police officers “moonlighted as truck drivers who delivered booze to the many retail outlets of the city” (151). As a consequence of this power, many top city officials would receive bribes in order for these syndicates to obtain free reign of the city. For this reason, people didn’t call the police, because they knew full well that the culprits lived outside the law. Additionally, if anyone cooperated with the law *against* someone whom he was associated or to whom he owed favors, he was “considered a stoolpigeon whose behavior was beneath contempt” (145); therefore, if one wanted to take a stand against a corrupt official within the ethnic ghettos, it would be as if they signed their own death warrant.

Fitzgerald would have been aware of this connection between ethnic immigrant and organized crime within the society because of the Charles Becker Trial, which he includes within the novel. Charles Becker, a police lieutenant in New York City, ran a gambling house with his joint partner Herman Rosenthal, while still maintaining the role of a police officer. There was a falling out between the two over the percentage of profit



sharing; consequently, Becker had Rosenthal's operation raided and shut down. By means of retaliation, Rosenthal went to the district attorney and told him about Becker's dealings with organized crime. At this point, Rosenthal signed his own death warrant. Becker then orders a hit on Rosenthal by promising police protection to those who would kill him. On July 16, 1912, Rosenthal was shot to death only hours before he was scheduled to testify (Joselit 75). Once murdered, speculation went straight to Becker, who was not worried about the trial. He should have been; this time, the money did not save him from the judicial process. Becker was found guilty of murder twice (as he demanded a re-trial), and sentenced to death by electrocution.

In spite of this obvious criminal lapse, the Jewish community, too, views it as a moral crisis. According to Jenna Weissman Joselit's book treating Jewish crime in New York City, "the religious community attributed the Rosenthal murder to a pervasive moral decay in American life" (78). Simply put, murder comes down to a moral problem, and, "guilt-ridden over the involvement of its 'sons' in the Rosenthal affair, New York Jewry regarded the episode as 'its greatest moral crisis'" (76). It is not just the Jewish community who suffered this moral crisis, the whole city of New York was faced with this, especially since the New York District Attorney found implications of Mayor William Gaynor's involvement in the crime (Joselit 76). This must have sent a warning throughout the city that corruption went straight to the top, because Joselit reports that the New York papers did not seem to focus on the ethnicity of the participants, but rather concentrated instead on such themes as "municipal corruption, police inefficiency, and Gaynor's political ineptitude" (76). Justifiably worrisome to the Jewish community and New York City entirely, this almost certainly concerns Fitzgerald, for not only does he

mention the Rosenthal murder within the novel, but he also includes several other real-life examples as noted in the following paragraphs.

Many scholars of Fitzgerald know that, while he resided in Paris as an expatriate, writing *Gatsby*, he received American newspapers. Within the novel, Fitzgerald gives potential indication of his awareness of many topics, including the police department's corruption. Allen Boyer mentions also that "the law plays little part in Fitzgerald's novel. Only two policemen actually appear" (335). These few appearances become telling, and probably indicating Fitzgerald's desire to show the law playing a small role in staving off crime. Of the two events, the first is in Chapter IV, as Nick and Jay speed along towards New York City, a policeman on a motorcycle proceeds to pull them over. Gatsby takes a white card out of his wallet and waives it before the officer who becomes apologetic at once. Upon Nick's inquiry, Gatsby answers evasively that he "was able to do the commissioner a favor once, and he sends me a Christmas card every year" (73). This minor subtlety Nick never comments upon, but because of his reports on Gatsby through his second-hand information, this experience makes it almost impossible to consider Gatsby a mystery any longer. It also indicates that police, and on a larger part, the law, are easily bought and persuaded.

The second instance comes much later. At the end of the novel, the second officer appears who seems to ineffectually research the case of Myrtle's death. This is not to mention the luncheon scene with Wolfsheimer where they discuss the Metropole. If the reader is to rely upon Nick as a trustworthy and accurate source, then the details of the text do not reveal much about the police officer other than his aimlessly wandering around, trying to collect information. Perhaps this is Fitzgerald's way of stating his belief

in the corruption of city law officials, or at the very least, their inability to accomplish much for the betterment of the whole of the community. Organized crime filtered through even to “The Law”.

A larger example of the breadth of organized crime is yet another well-studied one within Fitzgerald’s novels. In Chapter IV, after the incident with the police officer, Jay and Nick arrive in the city to have lunch with Meyer Wolfshiem, who believes that they are there to make a “business connegtion”. Wolfshiem serves a double purpose to the novel, but for this thesis, his primary purpose is to demonstrate multiple facets of Jewish crime. As stated previously, in America, organized crime began with the Irish, but according to Jenna Weissman Joselit’s research, the Jews made a somewhat solid start on their own. Joselit writes, “In 1908, Theodore A. Bingham, Police Commissioner, estimated 50% of all New York criminals were Jews and at least 85% of the city’s criminals were foreign born” (23). Understandably, statistics can be erroneous and exaggerated, but this number may not be as far-fetched when the reader considers what was stated about organized crime’s appeal earlier in the paper. Also, Joselit supports this statistic with another: “Of a sample of several thousand New York County (that is Manhattan and Bronx) residents arraigned on felony charges between 1900 and 1914, Jews accounted for 21%” (32). These numbers, without further research, may or may not be indicative of one another.

With her meticulous detail, according to Joselit, public opinion, even at that time, “not only held Jews responsible for much of the wrong doing, but also linked them to specific types of wrongdoing” (32). She takes care to describe the kind of crimes typically attributed to Jews, first writing, “Close to 80% of all felony charges brought

against Jews between 1900 and 1915 had to do with the commission of property crimes” (33). Then specifically that “Contemporaries... uniformly maintained that Jews tended to violate property laws rather than those against the person” (32), and finally, “words-not-fists became the Jews’ weapon against a hostile environment”(43). It would seem, according to all of Joselit’s research, that Jews orchestrated complex crime rings, depicted best through the luncheon with Jay, Nick, and Meyer Wolfshiem. This scene has a role that is two-fold. One, it is a direct reflection of the time, and two, it also shines light on Gatsby’s truer identity. Fitzgerald, reflecting the world around him, builds Wolfshiem from the real life person of Arnold Rothstein of New York. Though there are many sides to the story of Rothstein’s life, all agree upon the following: the height of his power coincides with rise of Jewish crime syndicates and that he was a major player in the New York City gambling scene. This one point is where all agreement ends. Joselit’s profile is perhaps the most detailed of Arnold Rothstein’s as I have come across in my research. She includes an excerpt from the *New York American* that read, “When others poured liquor down their throats, he sipped a glass of water. While others smoked a cigarette continuously, he did not even chew gum. And where they crashed into profanity, he clicked his teeth and uttered at most a syllable” (141). In reading this, it almost seems as if Fitzgerald, instead of using these details to describe Wolfshiem, is actually using them for Gatsby. Nevertheless, maintaining focus on Rothstein, Joselit asserts that it is through this kind of description of him that he was able to move easily through New York’s higher society and that he was sought out by a wide range of people (142). By the early 1920s, Rothstein began to buy and sell drugs (146), which connects directly into Tom’s accusation of Gatsby owning a chain of drug stores, used as a front to

run liquor. Despite the disparity between the selling of illegal drugs and those found at the corner drug store, it is reasonable that Fitzgerald would have used this detail in some form for his own characters of Wolfshiem and Gatsby.

But even more interesting is that according to Allen Boyer, Rothstein was involved in “bucket shops”. A bucket-shop, in simplest terms, is a discount retail securities market that functions as such: the seller would make a phone solicitation and hold the order. Depending upon the Market, the seller would continue to hold the money and in the case that the particular stock dropped, the seller would make the purchase at the lower share and keep the difference (330-1). While Rothstein lived, he stayed clear of any indication of involvement with such a scheme. It was quick and easy money during the time. Perhaps this detail may explain the “business gonnegtion” that Wolfshiem suggests during the lunch. For as the readers know, Nick does work with bonds—usually deemed as a safer market, but it has its own share of risks, most famously the Ponzi scheme. Also, seen in the final chapter, on page 174, as Nick is trying to settle things in the wake of Gatsby’s death, he gets a rather mysterious phone call. The man on the other line, not realizing it is Nick, says, “Young Parke’s in trouble [...] They picked him up when he handed the bonds over the counter. They got a circular from New York giving ‘em the numbers just five minutes before” (174). This could be a reference back to the potential “business gonnegtion” Wolfshiem mentions at lunch. Readers may also remember that, in exchange for Nick scheduling a with Daisy, Gatsby offers Nick a job, though he swears Nick wouldn’t have to do any business with Wolfshiem, Nick turns it down. The moment should strike readers as odd because, moments before Gatsby makes the offer, he inquires as to whether Nick dealt with bonds. As Nick confirms this, Gatsby

states, “Well, this would interest you. It wouldn’t take up much of your time and you might pick up a nice bit of money. It happens to be a rather confidential sort of thing” (88). Considering what we know of Arnold Rothstein’s history, and that Fitzgerald used him as a reference for his character of Meyer Wolfshiem, Nick’s speaking with Wolfshiem draws him into the circle of crime, however unwittingly, so that he becomes cognizant of the schemes circulating around Gatsby. He can no longer claim innocence. Yet again, though, Nick shows his inability to see the crimes taking place around him considering he is associating with underworld crime bosses. Despite the obvious connection to the crime syndicate, Nick is as morally confused as all the other characters in the novel.

Looking back to Wolfshiem, as the men dine, Nick discovers from Gatsby that Wolfshiem was behind the fix of the 1919 World Series (78). In regards towards one of the biggest sports scandals of the Twentieth Century—The 1919 World Series. This epic task of fixing the World Series, in the real world, lives on in infamy. Fans of baseball at the time considered the sport to be “an almost religious rite, and the World Series was its most holy sacrament” (Smith 133). Also, according to Allen Boyer, the sport was “emblematic of American social structure. Its teamwork showed democracy in action; its fans were found among all classes of society; it taught American traditional values to successive waves of immigrants and served as an annual ritual which united cities behind their teams” (332). It seems astonishing that anyone would have fixed the game.

Immediately, suspicion led to Rothstein because many considered him to be the only person able to put up enough money to fix the World Series. In the end, Rothstein escaped indictment by convincing the jury of his innocence (Smith 138). Allen Boyer

deems this decision by the court as something more sinister than the fix of a baseball game, and that “by the decision of that court, fixing the World Series, tampering with the faith of 50 million people was not a crime” (335). Even Nick reflects this sentiment, saying, “The idea staggered me... It never occurred to me that one man could start to play with the faith of fifty million people—with the single-mindedness of a burglar blowing a safe” (78). This reaction of Nick’s, though, reflects again how morally confused he is of the world around him.

Many believe that Rothstein was indeed behind the fix “despite...repeated heated denials of any complicity, the press charged him with ‘fixing the World Series’, a charge picked up and embroidered upon by America’s leading anti-Semite, Henry Ford” (Joselit 145). Matters were not helped when, even before the case went to trial, a reporter overheard Rothstein’s number one man, Abe Attell, tell another man that it was Arnold Rothstein who put up the money for the fix. While it is uncertain as to Rothstein’s actual culpability in the World Series, Fitzgerald made his literary counterpart nearly own up to the fact, through Gatsby. Boyer believes that Fitzgerald included this moment for two reasons: one, that F. Scott Fitzgerald saw Ring Lardner, who uncovered the Black Sox scandal, almost daily while writing *Gatsby*, and two, that with all the other sports included in the novel, the Black Sox Scandal “fit [Fitzgerald’s] fictional rhetoric” (332-3). While I believe these are both solid reasons, it is also appropriate because of Fitzgerald’s love of social history and using details from real life to influence his art, not to mention the criminal atmosphere he desired to create within his novel.

All of these historical details prove to highlight the type of character Fitzgerald created in Wolfshiem, whom he uses to draw a fine, but distinct line between “reputable”

and “disreputable” gambling. At one point in his life, Rothstein involved himself in horseracing; this does not seem to match up with the fictional Wolfshiem, whom Fitzgerald describes as having human molars for cuff links, and gives impression that he would be involved in a more complex and sophisticated form of crime than something such as horseracing. This was, though, a much more popular type of gambling, as a “number of successful gamblers had stables of horses and thus mixed business with pleasure” (Haller 144). The races were conducted mainly for betting, and many of these gamblers and investors controlled most of the racetracks near Chicago and in the rest of the nation. It is no coincidence, then, that Tom and Daisy have just moved from Chicago and Tom brought along his Polo ponies. While this is not directly implying Tom gambles, he does play polo and would presumably gamble on his own games. Because Tom has the role of a playboy of sorts, he has the funding from “old money”. Also, because it is polo, a sport the royal family plays, it is more acceptable than solely racing a horse, despite the fact that Tom seems to be, as mentioned earlier, to not quite fit into the societal realm to which he and Daisy live. Comparatively, if Tom is anachronistic, then Gatsby is a contemporary, for it is with him that Fitzgerald uses to propel his crime drama.

Fitzgerald furthers the possible ties between real life crime and the novel through Wolfshiem when Gatsby first introduces him and begins the conversation lamenting the loss of the Metropole, which directly relates to the actual Charles Becker Trial approximately ten years prior. As Nick interrupts with a piece of information pertaining to the trial, Wolfshiem erroneously assumes that Nick is there to make a business connection; again, Nick barely reacts to the near direct suggestion towards Gatsby’s



background. Even after Wolfshiem's departure, Nick does not recognize the ruthless man for his sordid background, instead asking Gatsby if the man was an actor.

## CHAPTER IX

### THE EVOLUTION OF JAMES GATZ

This potential suggestion of a sleazy and villainous character is not how Fitzgerald ultimately portrays Jay Gatsby. For Fitzgerald, art imitated life once again in the form of Jay Gatsby whom Fitzgerald mainly based upon a real man named Max von Gerlach. Both Gatsby and Gerlach remained somewhat of a mystery until their end, yet Fitzgerald provides clues to whom both men really were. First, in Gatsby's personal history, Nick discusses the influence of Dan Cody. The inspiration for Dan Cody reportedly comes from a personal acquaintance in the author's life named Robert Kerr. First, the figure of Major Edwin R. Gilman, who warned by Fitzgerald's then 14 year-old friend that Gilman's yacht would capsize in Little Girl Bay, gratefully hired the boy who continued to live aboard the yacht for the next three years (Brucoli, *Some Sort* 213). Fitzgerald thus used Kerr's story to shape the background history of Gatsby's meeting of Don Cody. Some of this story is supported by the letters Fitzgerald wrote about Kerr while referencing his character Jay Gatsby, but Jay is anything but the story of a single friend of the author. He is rather a conglomeration, and even Fitzgerald was not sure

what his character looked like in nature. He wrote to his editor, stating, “I never at any one time saw him clear myself—for he started as one man I knew and then changed into myself—the amalgam was never complete in my mind” (Brucoli, *Letters* 126). His editor agreed—Gatsby’s true identity had to remain a secret (Brucoli, *F. Scott* 87-91). Despite this claim, there are still hints left among the letters, many of which allude to Gatsby’s original source of money. Though never fully decided upon by the author, Fitzgerald wanted Gatsby to accrue his wealth from two of the biggest scandals in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century: The Fuller-McGee Scandal and the Tea Pot Dome Scandal. The former involved Ed Fuller and Frank McGee setting up series of bucket shops across the US. They would take orders on stocks in hopes that it would decrease in value, which their gambling paid off, until 1922 when the market was doing well. Consequently, they went bankrupt, and when their company was investigated, New York City took notice. With the Tea Pot Dome Scandal, Albert Beacon Fall leased federal oil reserves to a single company, in return for monies to improve his ranch. It is perhaps the former scandal that is most appropriate contribution to Gatsby’s wealth, for in the end of the novel there is the potential reference to bucket shops. Also it may be more appropriate because Arnold Rothstein’s lawyer represented Fuller and McGee in court.

For many, Jay is the best representation of Max von Gerlach, who led an equally tragic life. Gerlach, or von Gerlach, depending on which part of his life someone refers, neighbored the Fitzgeralds during their stay on Long Island. Zelda once wrote of him that he was a “Teutonic man [...] said to be General Pershing’s nephew and in trouble over bootlegging” (Kruse 46). He was also known as a yachtsman, which at the time was a clever euphemism for rum-runner. Within his own life, as previously mentioned, he

changed his name, dropping the “von” because of its ethnic indication. He also reportedly never wore the same shirt twice, was an officer in World War I, and had the “showy and tasteless interior design indicative to a bootlegger” (Kruse 47). All of these qualifications made him the perfect candidate for bootlegging. It was obvious he was a bootlegger, and in a similar vein, many would have known Gatsby to be one too. His opulent parties, the decorations of his mansion all indirectly gave Gatsby’s true identity away. As to Gerlach, Horst Kruse’s description provides the methodical reader pause: “A spurious university connection, the self-conferred rank of major, and his pretend nobility, however helpful they may have been to Gerlach in starting and pursuing his criminal career, made his social status very precarious” (68). Though Kruse does note that his qualities “were indeed singularly appropriate qualifications for a successful career as a gentleman bootlegger” (67). While Gatsby is granted this, his truer identity is given away by his inappropriate behavior at his own parties (Kruse 61). A prime example is in Chapter III when Gatsby himself concedes that he is not much of a host at his lavish parties.

There are two, more subtle incidents, that may too, give away part of Gatsby’s identity. The first is the scene at Nick’s first Gatsby party, in the library he meets the Owl-Eyed Man, whom refers to Gatsby as a “regular Belasco” (50). Pamela Bourgeois and Jon Clendenning devote an entire article to the relationship between the novel, Gatsby, and David Belasco, and there are several points from which to draw. The first is that “Like Belasco’s world, nothing in Gatsby’s world is real, but it is all experienced as real. Jay Gatsby is ‘a regular Belasco’ in that his library—and, by extension, his imaginary universe—is theatre” (105). This is true for Jay Gatsby as he performs

everything, most importantly the weekly parties at his mansion in attempts to attract and impress Daisy Buchanan. The second likeness that Belasco and Gatsby share is their belief in their created worlds. It is their illusions, specifically Gatsby's illusions, that keep him alive. Gradually as each one fades out, the life in Gatsby slowly dissipates. So not only is Gatsby culpable for his legal crimes, but he also is morally culpable for pretending to be "the real deal", when his life is just built upon seemingly realistic illusions. By the time Gatsby takes his first, and last, swim in the pool, his life, his created universe, is gone in a puff of gun smoke.

The second subtle scene that has yet to be explored, is the memorable one between Nick, Daisy, and Gatsby. As they tour Gatsby's mansion, he curiously takes them to his room where Nick describes him opening "two hulking patent cabinets which held his massed suits and dressing gowns and ties, his shirt piled like bricks in stacks a dozen high" (97). Gatsby explains that a man in London buys him clothes and sends the selection over for every new season. As Gatsby proceeds to take them out one by one, he throws them about the room. This scene stays with readers because of Daisy's ultimate, and puzzling response. While his explanation for the shirts seems to be a reasonable, and an expensive way to acquire his clothing, Jenna Weissman Joselit's information on Jewish organized crime in the early 1900s, may lead us to examine from where they may have less legitimately arrived. According to Joselit, "Much of the crime involved the theft and subsequent fencing of clothing by Jews from Jewish manufacturers, contractors, and jobbers" (34). If we take what we know of Wolfshiem, it may not be a stretch to conceive him as part of the clothing racket. If Gatsby's life is as sordid as many suspect, then it is no stretch that he would possibly acquire the shirts in less than reputable

scenarios. Thus in turn, Gatsby would be able to have an unlimited supply of impressive shirts, and adding to his list of morally and legally questionable behavior. In fact, Joselit provides a case regarding twenty-one-year-old Harry Goldstein, who worked as a garment industry clerk. He was discovered “stealing seventeen dozen men’s shirts from an Eldridge Street manufacturer which he then sold to a female fence” (34). Yet as W. Russell Gray writes, “Fitzgerald soft pedaled the nature of Gatsby’s crimes, eliminating suggestions of extortion and drugs. Thus Long Island’s man of mystery is no sleazy gangster but rather a fashionable upper class parvenu and party giver with underworld connections” (39). Ultimately, Fitzgerald perhaps means for us to forgive Gatsby for his overreach. Readers should not admire Gatsby, rather pity him, for Nick romanticizes him as doing it for love, and Gatsby becomes a martyr. Yet, readers must not forgive him. Gatsby must pay for his moral and legal crimes, first of the masking and deception, fooling no one but himself, and second, the moral (and then legal) crime of adultery.

Since Gatsby is a representation of Gerlach, it seems almost appropriate that, like Gerlach, he met an untimely death. Gerlach killed himself in 1939, but Gatsby’s demise is only metaphorically through his own hands. Gatsby’s death usually leaves readers not with a sense of justice, but with injustice. It is the one ticket Gatsby cannot pay or charm his way into getting a free pass (Gray 43). The reader recognizes the unfairness of the Buchanans’ escape from any repercussions and Fitzgerald’s message to the readers: climbing the social ladder is dangerous. Crime only seems to pay when the person can safely retreat behind their “old money”.

## CHAPTER X

### CONCLUSION

Despite the Hall-Mills crime never being solved, the senselessness of the murder reverberates within the ending murders-suicide of *Gatsby*. Despite the laws against adultery in the United States at the time, and the feeling the reader should have towards Myrtle and Gatsby as adulterers, the trifecta of violent deaths leaves the readers feeling distressed about Gatsby, for he did not kill Myrtle. Instead, Tom takes charge quickly upon arriving at Myrtle's murder scene. He makes it clear to Wilson that he had not been driving the yellow car the whole afternoon and was just coming back from the city. Planting this seed in Wilson's mind, Tom inadvertently—or perhaps intentionally—clears his wife of the blame and lets it rest solely on Gatsby's mostly innocent shoulders. With the finale set in motion, the reader discovers Wilson's suspicions of infidelity and his intentions to rectify the “intentional” murder of his wife. He asserts that he's “one of these trusting fellas and I don't think any harm to *nobody*, but when I get to know a thing, I know it” (166). Unfortunately, for Wilson, he is just as clueless as his wife proclaimed him to be at the beginning of the novel. He erroneously puts the pieces together and

murders Gatsby before he turns the gun on himself. If the world surrounding Gatsby at the time hadn't felt off kilter before, it was definitively at this point. Nothing ends the way the readers, or Nick, want it to. Yet, despite the focus of the murders being on Gatsby, there are several "accomplices" to the final crime.

The overall pervasiveness of crime and moral decay within the text is a subtle one. Because of the deterioration of morals, legal crimes arose. Whether it is a murder-suicide, being incurably dishonest, being a social climber, or a gangster and a bootlegger, it is the American Dream failing. Best encapsulated by Bruccoli, who writes, "Much of the endurance of *The Great Gatsby* results from its investigation of the American Dream as Fitzgerald enlarged a Horatio Alger story into a meditation on the New World myth... Gatsby becomes an archetypal figure who betrays and is betrayed by the promises of America" (*Some Sort* 223). Specifically, it is the nefarious methodology each character uses to achieve what they want, no matter the moral or legal ramifications. No one is a hero and all the reader is left with is a crowd of villains, all guilty in their own respect of a multitude of crimes.

What one of Fitzgerald's final messages to the readers is potentially an uncomfortable one. For it seems only those with new money, trying to make it into the upper echelons of society are struck down. Looking at the demise of both Myrtle and Gatsby, both try to mimic the paths of the old money to achieve what they desire. Unfortunately, it works for neither, and they are punished for it. Also, unfortunately for the readers, we become just as complicit in the crime because, just like Nick, we look on and do nothing, but this time, we are just as lucky as the old money—for we do not have



to suffer consequences for any crimes committed. Like all the surviving characters, we are able to “float on”.

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