

Beating against the Current

A Psychoanalytic Interpretation of Gatsby's American Dream

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The masterplot of the “American Dream” is deeply rooted in the collective psyche of U.S. culture. For most of the history of the nation, there has been a cherished belief that almost anyone can rise up from poverty by their own “hard work and clean living to the highest level of social standing and often great wealth.”¹ From Benjamin Franklin to the popular stories of Horatio Alger to Andrew Carnegie, John D. Rockefeller, and digital moguls like Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, and Jeff Bezos, the American imagination has been captivated by the compelling vision that all can succeed if they diligently apply themselves. As H. Porter Abbott notes, “All national cultures have their masterplots” and “[i]t is tempting to see these masterplots as a kind of cultural glue that holds societies together.”² In the wake of the Great Recession and its aftermath, the American dream was severely shaken to its core, and our cultural glue along with it. Yet, it was in the glory of the Roaring Twenties that F. Scott Fitzgerald prophetically and poetically mapped the then relatively new coherence system of Freudian psychology onto the prevailing masterplot of the American dream in a way that presents a dystopian twist on the Horatio Alger story. In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald dramatically depicts people full of desire who are destined to fall short of their dreams. Through *Gatsby*, Fitzgerald calls his American readers to reconsider their prized cultural myth through a Freudian lens as they seek to construct their own national and personal life narratives.

¹ H. Porter Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 47.

² *Ibid.*

This paper seeks to deepen the psychoanalytic approach to *Gatsby* advocated by Adam Meehan, Ronald Berman, and certain other critics and to specifically explore how Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic framework serves as a coherence system that collides with the traditional understanding of the American dream and helps to explain our frustration in the quest to apprehend our particular national holy grail even to the present day, regardless of any materialistic success or excess achieved. *Gatsby's* dreams, hopes, struggles, and frustrations are emblematic of our national plight as we are haunted by the promise of the past even as we pursue perfection in the future.

One fruitful way to understand the enigma of Fitzgerald's classic novel is by viewing it through the lens of the psychoanalytic theory developed by Freud. This paper will consider how Freud's coherence system of the human psyche, which drives the internal motivations of Fitzgerald's main characters, provides extraordinary explanatory power for understanding one of the great American novels. Seeing Jay Gatsby and Tom and Daisy Buchanan in Freudian terms can provide a deeper understanding not only of the novel, but of American culture and the frustrations that are so often found in reaching for the American dream in our own day.

Freud's Pervasive Psychological Presence

In August 2017, *The New Yorker* published an article by Louis Menand entitled "The Stone Guest: Can Sigmund Freud Ever Be Killed?" The article notes that psychoanalytic theory reached its peak in the late 1950s, but had begun to fade by the late 1960s.³ From the perspective of science and medicine, the credibility of Freud's psychoanalytic theories and modes of therapeutic treatment were increasingly called into question. By 1980, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, which is used by the American Psychological Association for the diagnosis of mental disorders, had "scrubbed out almost every trace of Freudianism," and a study published in *American Psychologist* in 1999 indicated that psychoanalytic research had been almost ignored over the past several decades.⁴ Yet, Freud's theories had tremendous influence beyond the field of psychiatry and continue to have a powerful influence to the present day. As Menand notes,

³ Louis Menand, "The Stone Guest: Can Sigmund Freud Ever Be Killed?," *The New Yorker* (28 August 2017): 77.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 78.

“even as writers were discarding the more patently absurd elements of his theory—penis envy, or the death drive—they continued to pay homage to Freud’s unblinking insight into the human condition. That persona helped Freud to evolve, in the popular imagination, from a scientist into a kind of poet of the mind.”⁵ Whether his theories could be verified by rigorous scientific research and clinical experience or not, Freud’s analysis of humanity’s plight and the metaphors he used to describe it resonate with how many people understand themselves.

In a 2017 blog post on *Psychology Today*’s website, entitled “Freud is Everywhere,” Harold Blum states that Freud “profoundly changed our understanding of humanity, thought and culture” such that although “[c]ontested and criticized, Freudian theory still permeates Western culture and scholarship.”⁶ Blum argues that Freud’s basic concepts about how the human mind functions, including that most of the mental life takes place outside of conscious awareness, have stood the test of time. Blum contends that Freud’s influence is so significant that “[i]t is no longer possible to see a play or other work of art without drawing upon Freud’s penetrating vision.”⁷

Why has Freud’s influence remained so enduring despite vigorous attempts to debunk his insights? In *Life Stories: The Creation of Coherence*, Charlotte Linde indicates that the most common coherence system discovered in her research was that of Freudian psychology.⁸ Linde defines a coherence system as “a system that claims to provide a means for understanding, evaluating, and constructing accounts of experience.”⁹ Humans seems to have an inherent need for models that help to explain why they think the way they think and do the things they do. As Linde indicates, Freudian psychology provides a reasonable claim to completeness in terms of explaining “most or all realms of experience, not merely local areas of life.”¹⁰ She noted three common components of the popular version of Freudian psychology: (1) the splitting of the self into component parts that are in disagreement; (2) the notion that

⁵ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁶ Harold P. Blum, “Freud is Everywhere,” *Psychology Today Blog* (5 May 2017).

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Charlotte Linde, *Life Stories: The Creation of Coherence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 166.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 164.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 165.

real causes are to be found in childhood experiences; and (3) the notion of levels of personality, some of which are deeper than others.¹¹ Menand notes that many scholars have tried to explain why Freud's model of the mind has been so popular, and he cites Tanya Luhrmann's assessment that it is because "alternative theories were worse."¹² When it comes to explaining ourselves to ourselves, Freud has few rivals, especially in a secular and capitalistic culture that may be less likely to embrace alternative and relatively complete coherence systems like religion and Marxism.

Freud's Influence on Fitzgerald

Freud's book *The Interpretation of Dreams* was originally published in 1899, approximately twenty-six years before the initial publication of *Gatsby*. In "American Dreams and 'Winter Dreams': Fitzgerald and Freudian Psychology in the 1920s," Ronald Berman provides a detailed explication of how Freudian psychology was highly influential on Fitzgerald's literary works of the time. More generally, he cites Peter Gay's assertion that from the 1920s on Freud's 'new thought overcame its initial opposition and began to permeate not only social sciences but literature' to the point that Freud's "ideas simply became atmospheric" and were "appropriated wholesale."¹³ While citing many specific examples from Fitzgerald's oeuvre in the 1920s, Berman sees Fitzgerald's short story "Winter Dreams," which is usually viewed as a precursor to *Gatsby*, as the work where "he brought to bear his own version of the new, Freudian psychology."¹⁴ Berman argues that the protagonists in Fitzgerald's works from the 1920s are "intensely self-conscious" and "try to explain themselves to themselves—and also, without much success, to others . . . try[ing] to remake themselves on the basis of ideas about selfhood."¹⁵

In "Repetition, Race, and Desire in *The Great Gatsby*," Adam Meehan argues that "*Gatsby* lends itself remarkably well to psychoanalytic interpretation."¹⁶ While Meehan seeks to explore

¹¹ Ibid., 167.

¹² Menand, 76.

¹³ Ronald Berman, "American Dreams and 'Winter Dreams': Fitzgerald and Freudian Psychology in the 1920s," *The F. Scott Fitzgerald Review* 4 (2005): 51.

¹⁴ Ibid., 50.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Adam Meehan, "Repetition, Race, and Desire in *The Great Gatsby*," *Journal of Modern Literature* 37, no. 2 (Winter 2014): 77.

the issue of race in *Gatsby* from a psychoanalytic perspective, he notes that “there remains much to be said about the novel’s psychodynamics.”¹⁷ This paper seeks to further explore the novel from the perspective of Freudian psychology before making application to narrative theory and the manner in which we construct our own identities. Fitzgerald’s characters embody Freudian concepts like narcissism, the Oedipal Conflict, and the internal struggle between the id, the ego, and the superego.

The Great Narcissist

In *The Metamorphoses*, Ovid tells the tragic tale of Narcissus, “A son so charming even as a baby, / That he inspired girls with thoughts of love.”¹⁸ His comeliness was such that “both boys and girls looked to him / To make love, and yet that slender figure / Of proud Narcissus had little feeling / For either boys or girls.”¹⁹ Narcissus captivated girls, women, boys and men until “one boy, love-sick / And left behind, raised prayers to highest heaven: / ‘O may he love himself alone,’ he cried, / ‘And yet fail in that great love.”²⁰ Nemesis heard the boy’s prayer, and deep in the forest Narcissus finally fell in love when he beheld his own image in a clear, still pool of water. Completely enthralled by the mirror image of self that could not be grasped, Narcissus tragically died of hunger and heartbreak.

In his essay “On Narcissism: An Introduction,” Freud argues that it is natural for all children to exhibit narcissism. He suggests that “the charm of a child lies to a great extent in his narcissism, his self-sufficiency and inaccessibility”²¹ However, normal adults demonstrate that their former megalomania has been restrained and their infantile narcissism has disappeared.²² In “The Great Narcissist: A Study of Fitzgerald’s *Jay Gatsby*,” Giles Mitchell argues that Fitzgerald’s novel “contains insuperable evidence that *Gatsby* is a pathological

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ovid, “Echo and Narcissus,” in *The Metamorphoses*, translated by Horace Gregory (New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., 2001), 95.

¹⁹ Ibid., 96.

²⁰ Ibid., 97.

²¹ Sigmund Freud, “On Narcissism: An Introduction,” in *Collected Papers* Vol. IV, translated by Joan Riviere (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1959), 46.

²² Ibid., 50.

narcissist.”²³ Mitchell notes that in a person with normal narcissism the ego-ideal provides meaning and self-esteem; however, “in the narcissist, the ego-ideal becomes inflated and destructive because it is filled with images of ‘perfection and omnipotence.’”²⁴ Gatsby creates an ideal image of himself and a complementary idealization of the consuming object of his desire, Daisy Buchanan.

Gatsby’s self-recreation begins with changing his given name of James Gatz.²⁵ Nick Carraway, as narrator, describes Gatsby’s creation of an idealized self as follows: “The truth was that Jay Gatsby, of West Egg, Long Island, sprang from his Platonic conception of himself. He was a son of God . . . So he invented just the sort of Jay Gatsby that a seventeen year old boy would be likely to invent, and to this conception he was faithful to the end.”²⁶ For Plato, the external world one connects with through the senses is not the real world; rather, the real world is the world of forms, of ideals that one can only approach through the interior world of rational thought and imagination. Thus, Gatsby turns inward to find what he deems is his true and idealized self and rejects what his mere outward circumstances would dictate.

Gatsby saw his parents as “shiftless and unsuccessful farm people” and “his imagination had never really accepted them as his parents at all.”²⁷ This lack of attachment to his parents has profound significance in Freudian terms and dooms Gatsby to seeking a substitute mother and reenacting the Oedipal Conflict. Gatsby strikes out from his parents at the age of sixteen, leaving the farm in North Dakota and becoming a clam-digger, salmon-fisher, and whatever else will earn his keep on the shore of Lake Superior. Lois Tyson notes that “from a psychoanalytic perspective, Gatsby’s invented past is more than just a ploy to pass himself off as a member of the upper class; it’s also a form of denial, a psychological defense to help him repress the memory of his real past.”²⁸ Like Ovid’s Narcissus, Gatsby’s self-love is fueled by the affections of women: “He knew women early and since they

²³ Giles Mitchell, “The Great Narcissist: A Study of Fitzgerald’s Jay Gatsby,” *American Journal of Psychoanalysis* 51, no. 4 (1991): 387.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 388.

²⁵ F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1995), 104.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Lois Tyson, *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 46.

spoiled him he became contemptuous of them."²⁹ Gatsby's self-absorption when awake is complemented by his dreams when asleep.

Freud views dreams as having tremendous significance. As he indicates, "the dream is not meaningless, not absurd, does not presuppose that one part of our store of ideas is dormant while another part begins to awake. It is a perfectly valid psychic phenomenon, actually a wish-fulfillment."³⁰ Gatsby's fervid aspirations, which continually spin around in his mind even when he lays down his head at night, seem to merge into his dreams:

The most grotesque and fantastic conceits haunted him in his bed at night. A universe of ineffable gaudiness spun itself out in his brain . . . Each night he added to the pattern of his fancies until drowsiness closed down upon some vivid scene with an oblivious embrace. For a while these reveries provided an outlet for his imagination; they were a satisfactory hint of the unreality of reality, a promise that the rock of the world was founded securely on a fairy's wing.³¹

Whether awake or sleeping, Gatsby's Platonic imagination continues to construct his idealized self by believing that he can become whatever his mind conceives.

Sensing that an "instinct toward his future glory" was leading him, the young Gatsby left Lake Superior for a time and went to St. Olaf College in Minnesota, but only lasted there two weeks because he became "dismayed at its ferocious indifference to the drums of his destiny, to destiny itself."³² Gatsby could not understand how the professors and other students did not immediately recognize his greatness, and he despises the demeaning janitor's work that was the means to pay his way through college. Here again, the Horatio Alger masterplot is overturned. Hard work and discipline is too slow and unglamorous a path to greatness for Gatsby. Why slog through four years of study and menial work when you can just say you attended

²⁹ Fitzgerald, 104.

³⁰ Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, in *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud*, translated by A. A. Brill (New York: Random House, Inc., 1966), 208.

³¹ Fitzgerald, 105.

³² Ibid.

Oxford? However, Jordan Baker, Daisy's friend, detects the lie because "He hurried the phrase 'educated at Oxford,' or swallowed it or choked on it as though it had bothered him before. And with this doubt his whole statement fell to pieces."³³ Freud would argue that it was natural for Gatsby to trip over his tongue as he suppressed the truth; his subconscious will not allow total repression of the truth.

The only suitable match for a great male narcissist is the perfect woman. Mitchell argues that "[t]he narcissist desperately needs objects that will mirror and thus validate the ego-ideal's images of perfection and omnipotence."³⁴ Daisy was a beautiful, rich young debutante of eighteen when Lieutenant Gatsby met her in Louisville before he shipped overseas to Europe to fight in World War I. Her beauty, charm, and mellifluous voice made her "by far the most popular of all the young girls in Louisville" such that "all day long the telephone rang in her house and excited young officers from Camp Taylor demanded the privilege of monopolizing her that night."³⁵ Yet, it was Gatsby who ended up dominating her attention and affection. Part of Daisy's charm for Gatsby lies in her wealth. After Gatsby explained the special character of Daisy's voice, Nick reflected that "It was full of money—that was the inexhaustible charm that rose and fell in it, the jingle of it, the cymbals' song of it . . . High in a white palace the king's daughter, the golden girl . . ."³⁶ Gatsby's unsatisfied desire for perfection is symbolized by the green light at the end of Daisy's dock in East Egg.

However, his quest for perfection in Daisy could not square with reality. Ultimately Gatsby was not exultant when he finally renewed his love affair with Daisy after being apart for several years, as Nick recognized:

I saw that the expression of bewilderment had come back into Gatsby's face, as though a faint doubt had occurred to him as to the quality of his present happiness. Almost five years! There must have been moments even that afternoon when Daisy tumbled short of his dreams—not through her own fault but because of the colossal vitality of

³³ *Ibid.*, 69.

³⁴ Mitchell, 393.

³⁵ Fitzgerald, 79.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 127.

his illusion. It had gone beyond her, beyond everything. He had thrown himself into it with a creative passion . . . No amount of fire or freshness can challenge what a man will store up in his ghostly heart . . . as she said something low in his ear he turned toward her with a rush of emotion. I think that voice held him most with its fluctuating, feverish warmth because it couldn't be over-dreamed—that voice was a deathless song.³⁷

The dream realized is the dream dead on arrival. No real flesh-and-blood woman could live up to Gatsby's fantasies, no matter how extraordinary. He had over-dreamed.

Eventually, Daisy realizes she can never meet Gatsby's grandiose expectations. When he continues to ask her to say that she never loved her husband, Tom, she finally cries out, "Oh, you want too much! . . . I love you now—isn't that enough? I can't help what's past."³⁸ Ultimately, what knocks Daisy's image off the pedestal Gatsby set her on is that she dared to love someone other than him even once. All along he was "really worshipping himself in the mirror of Daisy's symbolism."³⁹ The mirror has been shattered. She is not perfect after all and his dream is dead. As Mitchell indicates, "The ultimate narcissistic crisis is the sense of loss caused by the discovery that the object is in fact *only* a mirror . . . When he realizes that the image is not what he thought it was, he loses his person-as-mirror and is left with only a mirror, that is, *with nothing*."⁴⁰ To lose the ideal image of Daisy was also to lose the ideal image of himself. Gatsby's dream was behind him in the nostalgia of a seemingly perfect moment that could never be recaptured.

The grandiosity and self-absorption of narcissism is also accompanied by a feeling of omnipotence. As previously noted, Gatsby conceived of himself as a son of God, and thus "he must be about His Father's Business, the service of a vast, vulgar and meretricious beauty."⁴¹ When Nick cautions Gatsby that he should not ask too much of Daisy because one can't repeat the past, Gatsby cries with incredulity, "Can't repeat the past? . . . Why of course you

³⁷ Ibid., 101.

³⁸ Ibid., 139-40.

³⁹ Mitchell, 389.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 394.

⁴¹ Fitzgerald., 104.

can!”⁴² He was determined to “fix everything just the way it was before.”⁴³ Gatsby believes that if Daisy will only say that she never loved Tom that it will effectively erase the four-plus years of their marriage. The past is a threat to Gatsby’s ideal image of himself; it must be devalued or erased or it will have power over him. The Freudian theme of the tendency to repeat traumatic experiences in a hopeless attempt to successfully resolve them is seen in Gatsby’s life. The search for a replacement mother figure and the Oedipal Conflict are at the heart of this drive for repetition.

Reaching for Motherly Love

The child’s relationship to the mother is of profound significance in Freudian psychoanalytic theory. According to Jacques Lacan, the *Mirror Stage* occurs when the child is between six and eighteen months of age. It is the stage where “the infant now develops . . . a sense of itself as a whole rather than a formless and fragmented mass.”⁴⁴ This period is characterized by the child’s perception of “a world of fullness, completeness, and delight because with the child’s sense of itself as a whole comes the illusion of control over its environment, of which it still perceives itself as an inseparable part, and over its mother, with whom it feels it is in a union of mutual satisfaction: my mother is all I need and I am all my mother needs.”⁴⁵ This feeling is so intensely satisfying and powerful that it becomes deeply rooted in our subconscious and we long to recover the sensations throughout our lives thereafter. As a child continues to develop, she progresses from the preverbal *Mirror Stage* of perception and images (*Imaginary Order*) to what Lacan calls the *Symbolic Order*, the stage where language becomes “first and foremost a symbolic system of signification, that is, a symbolic system of meaning-making.”⁴⁶ This stage marks the first time when the child understands itself as separate from its intimate union with the mother, in particular, and the rest of the world in general. According to Lacan, “this separation constitutes our most important experience of loss, and it is one that will haunt us all our lives. We will seek substitutes great and small for that lost union

⁴² Ibid., 116.

⁴³ Ibid., 117.

⁴⁴ Tyson, 26.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 27.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

with our mother.”⁴⁷ This explains why Gatsby so deeply longs to recover the past, not just the moment of epiphany before he kissed Daisy for the first time, but the feelings to which that transcendent moment pointed back in the *Mirror Stage* of childhood.

As A. B. Paulson indicates, in *Gatsby* “mothers are conspicuous by their very absence,” but the void is at least partly filled by the presence of three prominent breasts in the text.⁴⁸ The first breast image occurs when Lieutenant Gatsby is preparing to meet Daisy Fay on an autumn night five years before the narrative present. Gatsby was walking to Daisy’s house when he experiences the following surreal vision:

The quiet lights in the houses were humming out into the darkness and there was a stir and bustle among the stars. Out of the corner of his eye Gatsby saw that the blocks of the sidewalks really formed a ladder and mounted to a secret place above the trees—he could climb to it, if he climbed alone, and once there he could suck on the pap of life, gulp down the incomparable milk of wonder.⁴⁹

The image of climbing a ladder ascending as it were to God is Neoplatonic. As Anthony Gottlieb notes: “Our mental journey towards the One is a return, a journey home. Not only is it a pilgrimage back to the source of our existence, it also involves a discovery of our true selves. Plotinus says that ‘When the soul begins again to mount it comes not to something alien but to its very self.’”⁵⁰ Plotinus likened the rising up toward the One to climbing a ladder. Gatsby’s Platonic image of himself includes being a son of God.

In Freudian dream interpretation, “Steep inclines, ladders, and stairs, and going up or down them are symbolic representations of the sexual act.”⁵¹ A nursing infant cannot discern the difference between itself and its mother; they are in essence one from the baby’s perspective. Later, in the Oedipal Conflict stage of development, the

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ A. B. Paulson, “The Great Gatsby: Oral Aggression and Splitting,” *American Imago* 35 (1978), 312.

⁴⁹ Fitzgerald, 117.

⁵⁰ Anthony Gottlieb, *The Dream of Reason: A History of Philosophy from the Greeks to the Renaissance* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2016), 381.

⁵¹ Freud, *Interpretation of Dreams*, 372.

son typically takes the mother to be the object of his erotic wishes and desires to take the place of his father.⁵² As Paulson notes, “Gatsby pursues a source of nourishment in which the self and the world merge, fuse, and expand to colossal proportions.”⁵³ Gatsby experiences an epiphany that involves a return to the most basic origins of oneness symbolized by a nursing infant, sexual intercourse, and a Plotinian ascent to God all tied into one.

Yet, this amazing ecstasy of wonder precedes rather than follows his actual encounter with Daisy, which is described in the following terms:

His heart beat faster and faster as Daisy’s white face came up to his own. He knew that when he kissed this girl, and forever wed his unutterable visions to her perishable breath, his mind would never romp again like the mind of God. So he waited, listening a moment longer to the tuning fork that had been struck upon a star. Then he kissed her. At his lips’ touch she blossomed for him like a flower and the incarnation was complete.⁵⁴

To kiss Daisy in all her beauty and charm is a descent for Gatsby, an incarnation, which in some way detracts from his deity while giving life to the object of his desire. Gatsby rejected his own mother and father, finding them beneath his Platonic image of himself. In his first true love, Daisy, he seeks an Oedipal mother.⁵⁵ Tyson cites Lacan’s explanation that “it’s because the kind of fulfillment we seek, though we don’t realize that we’re seeking it, is that feeling of completeness, plenitude, and union with our mother / our world that disappeared from conscious experience when we entered the Symbolic Order, that is, when we acquired language.”⁵⁶ This explanation fits well with Gatsby’s epiphany.

The rending of Gatsby’s vision is symbolized by another breast. When Daisy accidentally runs over her husband Tom’s mistress, Myrtle, the carnage is witnessed by the first two men who arrive on the scene: “when they had torn open her shirtwaist still

⁵² Sigmund Freud, *Five Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, translated and edited by James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1990), 51.

⁵³ Paulson, 313.

⁵⁴ Fitzgerald, 117.

⁵⁵ Paulson, 324.

⁵⁶ Tyson, 27.

damp with perspiration they saw that her left breast was swinging loose like a flap.”⁵⁷ Paulson argues that Myrtle and Daisy represent the Freudian concept of splitting that is tied to unconscious fantasies about the mother.⁵⁸ Both Daisy and Myrtle represent the mother figure, but in different ways. The splitting of the object choice related to the mother is seen in the juxtaposition of Daisy as the ‘nice girl’ and Myrtle as the ‘bad girl.’ As the good mother, Daisy is unreachable, idealized, and inviolate. Myrtle on the other hand is one of those common but pretty women toward whom Tom Buchanan is continually drawn. Such women can be psychically debased as sexual objects.⁵⁹ Myrtle and Daisy taken together “actually comprise the mother who—because she has been split as an object—can be simultaneously preserved as an unreachable, respected woman, at the same time as she is possessed and degraded as a sexual object.”⁶⁰ This explains why Tom desires with all his might to possess both women.

The third symbolic breast mentioned comes near the end of the novel. Following Gatsby’s death, Nick sprawls out on the sandy beach at West Egg and contemplates the meaning of what had transpired as he looks across the Sound towards New York:

[He] became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors’ eyes—a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby’s house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder.⁶¹

For a brief moment, Gatsby’s epiphany allowed him to suck on the metaphysical pap of life and gulp down the milk of wonder. The desire to recover the incomparable oneness with the mother on

⁵⁷ Fitzgerald, 145.

⁵⁸ Paulson, 320.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 322.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Fitzgerald, 189.

earth turned out to be unreachable for all the main characters in *Gatsby*. Nick sees this drama playing out on a national and cultural level as well. The American dream is more than raising oneself up by your own boot straps; it is about the desire to be captivated and united with something wonderful, incomprehensible, and much bigger than oneself. Like Gatsby and his stairway to heaven, Nick imagines that the Dutch sailors who had first sighted the inviolate coastline of the New World were enchanted by the hope of a new motherland that seemed to open its pristine arms to them and flower just for them like Daisy had blossomed when Gatsby kissed her in that magical moment. Nick feels their wonder, but also realizes that “the Virgin Land, soon [will] be torn and ravaged by the greedy and devouring eyes for whom it flowers.”⁶²

Yet, with his “extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness”⁶³ such as Nick had never found in any other person, Gatsby continued to believe “in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us.”⁶⁴ It is with such hope in mind that “we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past”⁶⁵ . . . our individual past as infants, children, and adolescents and our collective past as a people founded on the hope of new wonders in an unknown world. Nick contemplated “Gatsby’s wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of Daisy’s dock. He had come a long way to this blue lawn and his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know it was already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night.”⁶⁶ The dream is illusive because we seek it in our future, but we can only find it in our past.

Until we can come to terms with the past, Freud cautions that we are destined to repeat the trauma over and over again . . . beating on against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past indeed. As Freud indicates, “in every sense a dream has its origin in the past. The ancient belief that dreams reveal the future is not indeed entirely devoid of truth. By representing a wish as fulfilled the dream certainly leads us into the future; but this future, which the dreamer accepts as his present, has been shaped in the likeness

⁶² Paulson, 330.

⁶³ Fitzgerald, 6.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 189.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

of the past by the indestructible wish.”⁶⁷ The wonder of the past remains alive in one’s memories, preserved in dreams and giving birth to hopes of a transcendent and wonder-filled future—the holy grail of perfection, completeness, and eternity. As Peter Brooks indicates, “Repetition, remembering, reenactment are the ways in which we replay time, so that it may not be lost. We are thus always trying to work back through time to that transcendent home, knowing of course that we cannot.”⁶⁸ *Gatsby* was convinced he could repeat the past, and he ardently seeks to do so.

The Battle for Motherly Love

The Oedipal Conflict comes to a head in Chapter 7 as Gatsby and Tom enter into battle for Daisy’s love. This struggle represents more than the competition of two men for a woman; it also symbolizes the internal struggle between the id, represented by Tom, and the ego, represented by Gatsby. The superego in the Jazz Age culture of wealth and decadence depicted in *Gatsby* seems subdued, yet it is still present as a sort of by-stander represented by a billboard near the valley of ashes where the eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg look down upon the dismal wasteland. Although Nick is always uneasy when he sees the billboard, it is George Wilson, Myrtle’s husband, who seems to connect the watchful gaze with God and thus with the super-ego. Yet, the superego seems to hold little sway over either Tom or Gatsby.

Tom appears to be the personification of the id in his aggressiveness and overt sexuality. He was one of the most powerful ends who ever played football at Yale and seems to be “forever seeking a little wistfully for the dramatic turbulence of some irrecoverable football game.”⁶⁹ Even as a thirty-year-old, he is sturdy with an enormously powerful body, “a cruel body.”⁷⁰ He seems to always be leaning aggressively forward in an irritable and quarrelsome way. Daisy describes him as “a brute of a man, a great big, hulking physical specimen of a —.”⁷¹ When Myrtle continues to say Daisy’s name in his presence despite his protests,

⁶⁷ Freud, *Interpretation of Dreams*, 549.

⁶⁸ Peter Brooks, “Freud’s Masterplot,” *Yale French Studies* 55/56 (1977): 299.

⁶⁹ Fitzgerald, 10.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

he makes a “short deft movement” and “broke her nose with his open hand.”⁷²

In addition to being physically abusive, Tom is a serial womanizer. Rather than trying to keep his trysts secret, he wants Nick and others to be aware of his mistresses as though at least half the pleasure were exhibiting his sexual prowess to others. Daisy remains his trophy wife, obtained when she was the most desirable woman in Louisville. Tom comes from a family of enormous and ostentatious wealth, which seems to act as a buffer that frees him from societal restraints to a large extent. If the scandal of his adulterous affairs becomes a little too much for comfort, they simply move to the next fashionable place. Meehan notes that “As a symbolic father figure, Tom stands in the way not only of Gatsby’s desire for Daisy, but of her desire for—or recognition of—him, which is crucial in his achieving his dream.”⁷³ Meehan argues that Gatsby’s symbolic castration takes place when Tom usurps his place in Daisy’s affections and marries her when Gatsby is deployed to Europe for World War I.

Having reconstituted himself as phallic symbol from a poor nobody into a wealthy, handsome, ostensibly educated, fashionable, mysterious, and debonair war hero, Gatsby renews his affair with Daisy almost five years later and repeats the Oedipal Conflict with Tom. As Meehan notes, “In this battle for recognition, Gatsby seeks to symbolically kill Tom—the father figure—so that he can decisively possess Daisy.”⁷⁴ The symbolic coup de grace can only come from Gatsby’s perspective if Daisy tells Tom that she has never loved him. In a hotel room in New York City, where Tom, Daisy, Gatsby, Jordan, and Nick have gone for an outing, the battle lines are set. Because Tom has spent time investigating Gatsby, he is well armed for the battle. When Jordan asserts that Tom must have found that Gatsby was an Oxford man, Tom incredulously retorts, “An Oxford man! . . . Like hell he is! He wears a pink suit.”⁷⁵ When Gatsby arrives at the hotel room, Tom says, “By the way, Mr. Gatsby, I understand you’re an Oxford man.”⁷⁶ Gatsby answers, “Not exactly” and then goes on to explain that he stayed at Oxford for five months in 1919 after

⁷² *Ibid.*, 41.

⁷³ Meehan, 87.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ Fitzgerald, 129.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 135.

the Armistice when some of the officers were given an opportunity to attend any of the universities in France or England.

Tom wants to continue probing Gatsby's history, but when Daisy tells him to control himself, Tom yells, "Self-control! . . . I suppose the latest thing is to sit back and let Mr. Nobody from Nowhere make love to your wife."⁷⁷ It is hard to imagine words that could be more devastating to a narcissist like Gatsby. At Gatsby's impassioned prompting, Daisy reluctantly says that she never loved Tom. However, after Tom's counter-interrogation about special times they shared together, Daisy admits that she did love Tom once, but indicates that she loves Gatsby, too. When Tom tells Daisy to sit down, his "voice groped unsuccessfully for the paternal note,"⁷⁸ which confirms his role as Oedipal father. After Daisy admits that she loved Tom once, he says, "I'm going to take better care of you from now on,"⁷⁹ which again sounds a paternal note.

Having thwarted Gatsby's attempt to get Daisy to deny her love for him, Tom returns to the verbal assault against Gatsby's identity and character by associating him with Meyer Wolfsheimer and the illegal sale of alcohol during Prohibition from "drug-stores" Wolfsheimer and Gatsby bought together. Gatsby unsuccessfully parries the blow, and Nick indicates that for a moment Gatsby bore the expression of someone who had killed a man. Castration anxiety, which Tyson indicates is "perhaps best understood as fear of demotion to the powerless position occupied by females,"⁸⁰ seems to hit him full force. He tries to recover, denies everything, and attempts to defend himself against accusations that Tom had not even made yet. However, it was of no use because "with every word [Daisy] was drawing further and further into herself, so he gave that up and only the dead dream fought on as the afternoon slipped away."⁸¹ In the Oedipal Conflict, Tom triumphs and wins the mother figure again. He also is ultimately responsible for Gatsby's death as he tells the crazed and grief stricken George Wilson that it was Gatsby who had killed his wife by hitting her with his car.

As the supreme manifestation of the ego, Gatsby felt at liberty to shape his Platonic self by changing his life narrative, selectively

⁷⁷ Ibid., 137.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 138.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 140.

⁸⁰ Tyson, 25.

⁸¹ Fitzgerald, 142.

weaving together fact and fiction to create a self that could win Daisy's affection and thus validate his existence. As a son of God and artist of the soul, he feels at liberty to let his imagination run free to create an idealized image of himself. To take Tom's wife Daisy for his own was merely to set right a terrible mistake, to go back in time and "fix everything just the way it was before."⁸² He had returned to recover the idea of himself that had gone into loving Daisy.⁸³ Ultimately, Daisy is but the mirror in which he seeks to recapture the epiphany of perfect self-love and oneness with the universe once again. As Narcissus died next to the pool of water, his mirror of self-love that was his undoing, so Gatsby dies in his swimming pool after his mirror image is disturbed. Nick thought to himself that Gatsby had "paid a high price for living too long with a single dream."⁸⁴ Gatsby invested so much in that single perfect dream that it seems that the death of the dream had to be the death of him.

Reimagining the American Dream

What does Gatsby have to teach us about the cherished masterplot of the American Dream? As Abbott notes, masterplots are "stories that we tell over and over in myriad forms and that connect vitally with our deepest values, wishes, and fears."⁸⁵ In *Gatsby*, Fitzgerald superimposed Freud's then relatively new masterplot on the old masterplot of the Horatio Alger story. Marius Bewley argues that "*The Great Gatsby* offers some of the severest and closest criticism of the American dream that our literature affords . . . The theme of *Gatsby* is the withering of the American dream."⁸⁶ However, the dream still seems somehow alive at the conclusion of *Gatsby*.

As narrator, "Nick casts young Jimmy Gatz in the role of Alger boy-hero."⁸⁷ In fact, the schedule Gatsby wrote down on the back cover of a *Hopalong Cassidy* book at the age of sixteen indicates his commitment to self-improvement in a manner

⁸² Ibid., 117.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 169.

⁸⁵ Abbott, 46.

⁸⁶ Marius Bewley, "Scott Fitzgerald's Criticism of America," *The Sewanee Review* 62, no. 2 (1954): 223.

⁸⁷ Jeffrey Louis Decker, "Gatsby's Pristine Dream: The Diminishment of the Self-Made Man in the Tribal Twenties," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 28, no. 1 (1994): 62.

reminiscent of an earlier real life American hero, Benjamin Franklin. Jeffrey Louis Decker indicates that Jimmy's itinerary is "conspicuously devoid of moral questions. Instead, Fitzgerald's boy-hero focuses on the enhancement of self-image" and "his general resolves focus more on external presentation of self . . . than on Franklin's interest in cultivating the virtuous inner person."⁸⁸ Although the resolution to be better to his parents has moral implications, there seems to be an emphasis on external perceptions rather than internal character. During the five years he spent yachting around the world with Dan Cody, Gatsby was able to assimilate the mannerisms of the wealthy class to which he aspired to become a part.

After leaving home, Gatsby seems industrious enough, but his premature departure from St. Olaf College shows his impatience for achieving his dreams. He is still basically a "nobody from nowhere" when he meets Daisy at age twenty-seven. There are so many deceptions built into Gatsby's re-creation of his life history that discerning truth from façade can be difficult. However, his heroism in war seems likely to be genuine. Yet, he is essentially penniless when he arrives in New York after trying to reconnect with Daisy after the war. The American dream in all its mythical glory must have seemed like a cruel joke as he was begging for work after faithfully serving his country in war.

When Gatsby strikes up a relationship with Wolfsheim, "entrepreneurial corruption, accented by the language of nativism, competes with and ultimately foils the traditional narrative of virtuous American uplift."⁸⁹ The archetype of the self-made man in the mode of Horatio Alger is reimagined by Fitzgerald in a way that is more in keeping with Jazz Age morality and reality. As Decker indicates, "Fitzgerald's appropriation of the Alger formula reflects the fact that the traditional ideal of virtuous uplift, recently associated with the melting-pot model of immigrant success, was undercut by a growing interest in get-rich-quick schemes and a declining commitment to assimilating new arrivals during the Roaring Twenties. In this social climate, the moral efficacy of Alger's respectable 'rags to riches' stories began to lose their appeal in America."⁹⁰ The longstanding American formula for success through hard work and virtuous character has been transformed into a tale in

⁸⁸ Ibid., 63.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 52.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 62.

which the decadent scions of the robber barons seek to guard their hegemony of class and racial superiority against the nouveau riche upstarts that were often immigrants of non-Nordic descent.

Gatsby is the exemplar of the new cult of personality that is based on image-making and competitiveness. As Decker notes “the apparent excesses of the personality craze contributed to the diminishing authority of the myth of the self-made man in the Twenties. The resultant crisis in an American national identity is represented by Fitzgerald through the figure of Gatsby.”⁹¹ Despite this bleak picture of corruption of American values and seeming degradation of the American dream, Fitzgerald seems to offer hope, not that conditions will become better, but that the American spirit as epitomized by Gatsby will keep seeking to fulfill the dream.

As Bewley indicates, “*The Great Gatsby* is a dramatic affirmation in fictional terms of the American spirit in the midst of an American world that denies the soul.”⁹² Gatsby represents a new kind of mythical, romantic American hero for the modern age: one who is deeply flawed and psychologically haunted, yet whose greatest virtues are hope and perseverance against all odds to try to obtain the illusive dream. According to Bewley, Gatsby is “an embodiment . . . of that conflict between illusion and reality at the heart of American life; he is an heroic personification of the American romantic hero, the true heir of the American dream.”⁹³ Like Gatsby, Americans cling to the dream with longing, because it represents an ideal of ourselves that we do not want to lose. The present lies between the past and the future like the surreal valley of ashes between Long Island and New York. Though the present may sometimes cloud the vision of what we think we can be based on what we believe we have been, the golden past and future are not utterly obscured or forgotten by the “foul dust” floating in the wake of our dreams.⁹⁴

In “Fitzgerald’s Rendering of a Dream,” Kimberly Hearne discusses the connection between Gatsby’s dream and the American dream, which she argues “is ambiguous, contradictory, romantic in nature, and undeniably beautiful while at the same time grotesquely flawed.”⁹⁵ This ambivalence between extremes is seen in Nick’s

⁹¹ Ibid., 63.

⁹² Bewley, 243.

⁹³ Ibid., 226-7.

⁹⁴ Fitzgerald, 6.

⁹⁵ Kimberly Hearne, “Fitzgerald’s Rendering of a Dream,” *The Explicator* 63, no. 3 (2010): 189.

summary of *Gatsby* early in the novel where within a single paragraph he notes that Gatsby “represented everything for which I have an unaffected scorn” and yet “there was something gorgeous about him, some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life . . . an extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness . . .”⁹⁶ Gatsby is both repulsive and attractive to Nick, flawed and fantastic at the same time. Hearne suggests that “[f]or Fitzgerald the American dream is beautiful yet grotesquely flawed and distorted. No matter what idyllic picture we paint of America and all its promise, underneath the brightest of hues lies the stark white canvas of truth: No one is truly equal, and regardless of opportunities, someone is always struggling underfoot—inevitably, as one rises another falls.”⁹⁷ At the same time that Thomas Jefferson wrote in the Declaration of Independence that “[w]e hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” he owned slaves. Often our reality falls short of our ideals, yet we retain the ideals by repressing the past.

Some of the greatest rags-to-riches stories of men who later became great philanthropists are clouded by the environmental destruction, abuses of labor, and ruthlessness against competitors left in their wake. While the American dream connotes equality and unlimited possibilities, often it seems as near, but unreachable, as the green light on Daisy’s dock. Ash heaps of refuse lie between the glittering city and the waterfront mansions of the wealthy. From a psychoanalytic perspective, healing comes from bringing repressed trauma out of the unconscious into consciousness. Yet, while *Gatsby* may be a catharsis of sorts for Fitzgerald and our nation, it does not necessarily bring us any closer to our ideals. As Hearne indicates, “Though we live contrarily, Fitzgerald knows that there is greatness to our country and our idealism.”⁹⁸ At the end of *Gatsby*, Fitzgerald leaves his readers with a bewildering vision of hope persisting in the face of futility. We continue to pursue the beauty of the dream even though the ideal can never be fully achieved.

Interpreting Our Identity

Perhaps the most important narrative for each of us is the one that we tell ourselves about ourselves. As Jerome Bruner notes, “In the

⁹⁶ Fitzgerald, 6.

⁹⁷ Hearne, 191.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 193.

end, we *become* the autobiographical narratives by which we ‘tell about’ our lives.”⁹⁹ Humans selectively pull from the memories of their past experiences and emotions to stitch together the stories they tell themselves and others about themselves. According to Paul Ricoeur, “we never cease to reinterpret the narrative identity that constitutes us, in the light of narratives proposed to us by our culture.”¹⁰⁰ Our culture provides options for creating self-identity, including through its prevailing masterplots and associated types. When stories are internalized, they have the capability to transfigure the reader’s experience and lead to self-understanding.¹⁰¹ Ricoeur asserts that “[i]t is in this way that we learn to become the *narrator* and the hero *of our own story*, without actually becoming the *author of our own life*.”¹⁰² As previously mentioned, interpreting our own life story also involves coherence systems, which “provide people a vocabulary for creating a self.”¹⁰³

The masterplot of the American dream and a psychoanalytic coherence system inform how many Americans view their own lives. The unbridled optimism that keeps us rowing toward the ideals of the great dream collides with the strong current of a coherence system that is fundamentally pessimistic. Deep in our collective psyche, Americans continue to hear the echoing whispers of “a fresh, green breast of the new world” that pandered to “the last and greatest of all human dreams.”¹⁰⁴ While the dream may have been degraded and diminished, *Gatsby* suggests that we will continue to hope in and row toward the green light, the “orgastic future,” even as it recedes before us and the current bears us back ceaselessly into the past.

⁹⁹ Jerome Bruner, “Life as Narrative,” *Social Research* 54, no. 1 (1987): 15.

¹⁰⁰ Paul Ricoeur, “Life in Quest of Narrative,” in *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and Interpretation*, edited by David Wood (London: Routledge, 1991), 32.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 32.

¹⁰³ Linde, 189.

¹⁰⁴ Fitzgerald, 189.