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Paper Title: The Importance of Symbolism and Parallelism in *The Great Gatsby*

The Great Gatsby, written by F. Scott Fitzgerald, is a famous and highly beloved work partly because there seems to be a symbol packed into every sentence. On a first read, it is simple to understand but a second read allows the deeper meaning to be realized. His writing gives life to objects that would normally be static. It seems as if every paragraph was handpicked and pieced together like patchwork because of the smooth sounding, beautiful flow of the words on the page. Using subtle repetition and a parallel structure with every image relating in some way to the action of the novel, Fitzgerald portrays the complexity of the novel within a moment. Matthew J. Bruccoli describes the book as “An intricately planned book—a book in which, the symbols, the images connect up in meaningful ways,”¹. First time readers would never pick up on the fact that every individual paragraph in itself helps to determine the fate of the book. Fitzgerald’s style includes using foreshadowing to anticipate later events while also including metaphors, imagery, symbols, and personification to develop his characters, rather than direct characterization.

Fitzgerald brings his first object to life in the first chapter when he personifies Tom and Daisy Buchanan’s lawn. As Nick, Daisy’s cousin and the narrator, arrives at the house, he notes, “The lawn started at the beach and ran towards the front door for a quarter of a mile, jumping over sun-dials and brick walls and burning gardens,”². On a first read of *The Great Gatsby*, a reader would think of this sentence as beautiful imagery and nothing more, but in reality, every noun that the lawn jumps over has a much deeper meaning. The sun-dials represent time, but more specifically, they represent the time that Jay Gatsby wants to go back to. His dream is to go back in time to how things used to be between him and Daisy, when they were young in love, and before she married Tom. The use of the verb jumping is significant because it insinuates that Gatsby can beat the clock and just leap over all the lost time with Daisy that he has experienced. Next, the brick wall represents the obstacle that Gatsby had to overcome in order for Daisy to be interested in him. Daisy could never marry Gatsby because he came from no money, so in an effort to get her back, he found ways to gather money together in order to please her. It took him five long years to gather the amount he would need and throughout this time, he never stopped loving her. Once he comes into her life to try and win her back, Gatsby is faced with another brick wall to overcome, her husband Tom. The last image of burning gardens suggests the parties that are held in his gardens throughout the summer. The only reason that he holds these parties is because of the burning desire that he has to catch a glimpse of Daisy, see how she has changed and what she might be up to. During a party later on in the novel when Gatsby and Daisy are together, “[Nick] sat watchfully in the garden. [Daisy

¹ Bruccoli, Matthew J. "Class VI: The Great Gatsby, Part 1." Classes on F. Scott Fitzgerald. Columbia: Thomas Cooper Library, U of South Carolina, 2001. 80-97. Rpt. in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*. Ed. Lawrence J. Trudeau. Vol. 311. Farmington Hills, MI: Gale, 2015. 20th Century Literature Criticism Online. Web. 25 Apr. 2016, p 183.

² Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. New York: Scribner, 2013. Print, p 6.

said it was good to have him there] ‘In case there’s a fire or a flood,’”³. Minor details like this one prove that there is nothing that the author includes in his work that will not become important or symbolic at another time.

It’s no coincidence that Tom’s body type can easily be compared to a brick wall; Fitzgerald uses this double entendre to add to the seamlessness of his novel. Throughout the novel, whenever Tom is mentioned some reference to brutality inevitably follows shortly afterward, but the most obvious description of this character trait is on page seven, directly after Nick describes the lawn when he notices Tom standing on the front porch. The narrator observes that “Not even the effeminate swank of his riding clothes could hide the enormous power of that body,”⁴. The author uses the word ‘effeminate’ to capture the direct contrast of Tom’s body type with the meaning of the word, while showing that not even feminine clothes can mask the manliness of this character. Readers can justify this description because Nick observes that Tom has “A great pack of muscle shifting when his shoulder moved under his thin coat,” and “A body capable of enormous leverage—a cruel body.”⁵ Not even Nick, who later describes himself as “One of the few honest people that I have ever known,” has anything nice to say about Tom⁶. This description of himself helps to verify the truth behind the description of Tom he provides along with all the events that happen in this novel.

Upon completion of the novel, readers understand that this paragraph describing Tom turns out to be important foreshadowing of the events to follow. Nick’s original observation that Tom appears to “Always be leaning aggressively forward” is relevant for his future actions when Nick goes with Tom to visit his mistress in the city and she refuses to stop taunting Tom with Daisy’s name⁷. Unable to deal with whatever internalized thoughts Myrtle’s chanting brings to him, he breaks Myrtle’s nose by “Making a short deft movement...with his open hand,” proving his aggressive nature that Nick previously described⁸. This action is animalistic, so it only makes sense that the author should include an image of a dog immediately before this event occurs. Previously in the chapter, Myrtle and Tom pass a man selling dogs on the street, and Myrtle tells the man that she would “Like to get one of those police dogs” and then asks him if he has any of the sort⁹. It is interesting that of all types of dogs, she would want a police dog and then in the same day, she seems to need one to protect her. Fitzgerald’s attention to minor details such as this one seems to produce foreshadowing before every major event while also making the story come full circle. Another one of the original observations that proves foreshadowing is that Tom is “Capable of enormous leverage”¹⁰. The power behind Tom’s slap to Myrtle’s face illustrates one type of ‘leverage’, but the word can also be used to foreshadow the unbreakable grip that Tom has on Daisy in their relationship. Readers will later find out that Daisy will always return to the privileged life that Tom’s wealth ensures, even if that means living with a man who does not love her completely and wholeheartedly, as Gatsby

³ Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. New York: Scribner, 2013. Print, p 105.

⁴ Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. New York: Scribner, 2013. Print, p 7.

⁵ Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. New York: Scribner, 2013. Print, p 7.

⁶ Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. New York: Scribner, 2013. Print, p 59.

⁷ Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. New York: Scribner, 2013. Print, p 7.

⁸ Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. New York: Scribner, 2013. Print, p 37.

⁹ Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. New York: Scribner, 2013. Print, p 27.

¹⁰ Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. New York: Scribner, 2013. Print, p 7.

does. In the words of Scott Donaldson in his journal "Possessions in *The Great Gatsby*", "Even discounting how much there is of it, Tom's 'old money' has a power beyond any that Gatsby can command. His wealth and background win the battle for Daisy."¹¹

We are unclear of the reason that Tom gets so riled up by Myrtle's actions, but some critics think it may have to do with the class difference between Myrtle and Daisy. Myrtle tries to put on a front that she is of higher class than she actually is by changing her outfit constantly and declaring that her dress is "Just a crazy old thing that she slips on when she doesn't care how she looks," but it becomes clear that she is of lower class than Daisy when, due to the alcohol she has consumed, lets her guard down and reveals her true way of speaking¹². When vocalizing a list of tasks she needs to accomplish the next day, she says, "I got to write down a list so I won't forget all the things I got to do."¹³ According to Scott Donaldson in his journal, "The 'I Got' idiom betrays Myrtle's origins."¹⁴ Myrtle's true class is also exposed by the detail of her life that she is unaware her sister has shared with Nick. According to Catherine, "'She really ought to get away from [her husband]. They've been living over that garage for eleven years.'"¹⁵ There is the possibility that Tom cannot bear to hear a woman who lives over a garage and is lower class than his wife even have the privilege of uttering her name. Cleverly, Fitzgerald hides this apparent class difference in the origins of each character's name; Daisy is derived from the name of a flower, while the origin of the name Myrtle is an evergreen shrub, which seems basic and beneath the beauty of the flower.

Along with the subtleties that define Myrtle's character is the foreshadowing that is also used to predict what will happen to her character as the plot unfolds. Among the things included in her list, Myrtle says that she needs to get an ash tray and a wreath for her mother's grave. In Donaldson's words, "The list itself—with its emphasis on ashes and dust—foreshadows her eventual demise."¹⁶ After a day of dealing with extreme heat and arguing, Daisy is driving Gatsby's car and Tom is driving his coupe back to East Egg, but they had switched cars on the way there. Myrtle, thinking that Tom is driving Gatsby's car, runs out into the middle of the street and Daisy hits her and kills her. The narration reads "Myrtle Wilson, her life violently extinguished, knelt in the road and mingled her thick dark blood with the dust," proving the foreshadowing in her need to buy an ashtray and a grave wreath¹⁷. At this point, Fitzgerald's previous mention of The Valley of Ashes and the Eyes of T.J Eckleburg take on their

¹¹ Donaldson, Scott. "Possessions in the Great Gatsby." *Southern Review* 37.2 (2001): 187-210. Rpt. In *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*. Ed. Lawrence J. Trudeau. Vol. 311. Farmington Hills, MI: Gale, 2015. 20th Century Literature Criticism Online. Web. 22 Apr. 2016, p 171.

¹² Donaldson, Scott. "Possessions in the Great Gatsby." *Southern Review* 37.2 (2001): 187-210. Rpt. In *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*. Ed. Lawrence J. Trudeau. Vol. 311. Farmington Hills, MI: Gale, 2015. 20th Century Literature Criticism Online. Web. 22 Apr. 2016, p 170.

¹³ Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. New York: Scribner, 2013. Print, p 36.

¹⁴ Donaldson, Scott. "Possessions in the Great Gatsby." *Southern Review* 37.2 (2001): 187-210. Rpt. In *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*. Ed. Lawrence J. Trudeau. Vol. 311. Farmington Hills, MI: Gale, 2015. 20th Century Literature Criticism Online. Web. 22 Apr. 2016, p 170.

¹⁵ Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. New York: Scribner, 2013. Print, p 35.

¹⁶ Donaldson, Scott. "Possessions in the Great Gatsby." *Southern Review* 37.2 (2001): 187-210. Rpt. In *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*. Ed. Lawrence J. Trudeau. Vol. 311. Farmington Hills, MI: Gale, 2015. 20th Century Literature Criticism Online. Web. 22 Apr. 2016, p 170.

¹⁷ Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. New York: Scribner, 2013. Print, p 137.

symbolic meaning. The whole incident happens right in the middle of the valley of ashes where “Ash gray men...stir up an impenetrable cloud, which screens their obscure operations from your sight,” just as it was pretty unclear why Myrtle would run out in the middle of the road¹⁸. Although Daisy fails to tell Tom that she was the one driving, T.J. Eckleburg’s eyes saw the whole thing and they know the truth. In the end, Myrtle’s husband concludes, ““God knows what you’ve been doing. You may fool me, but you can’t fool God!””¹⁹ As he says this, he is looking straight into the eyes of T.J. Eckleburg. This reveals that the eyes did not only witness the accident; they also witnessed the affairs, the deceit, and the corruption behind each character. The author cleverly includes this line near the end of *The Great Gatsby* in order to ensure that all of his readers understand the symbolism and importance behind the eyes that stand high over the city and see everything.

Whatever the reason for Tom breaking Myrtle’s nose, it shows that women are delicate and are the object of Tom’s brutality. Further proving this point are the personification and metaphors that exist in the description of Daisy and her friend, Jordan Baker on the couch. Nick compares the two women to “Anchored balloon[s]”, adding that “Their dresses were rippling and fluttering as if they had just been blown back in after a short flight around the house.”²⁰ Juxtaposing this beautiful imagery is the quotation, “Then there was a boom as Tom Buchanan shut the rear windows and the caught wind died out about the room, and the curtains and rugs and the two young women ballooned slowly to the floor.”²¹ With this description, readers get this feeling that the women are carefree and fragile, floating along in this dreamlike state. Once Tom enters the room, the ‘boom’ that he creates by slamming the windows pops the two female balloons and brings everything back to reality, their dresses and the curtains included. Along with the description of his body, the description of his actions works to predict that all this brutality will culminate in some way later in the novel.

In the same way that Fitzgerald crafts the words “leverage” and “cruel body” to have two possible meanings, “the caught wind [that] died” when Tom shut the window also has another interpretation. The wind can also represent Gatsby, who is caught on Daisy. He spent a long time gathering up the money he would need in order for her to marry him, and then he bought a lavish mansion just across the bay from her so he could impress her with his newly found wealth. Upon finding out that she is married and has a child, he is devastated, but he still has hopes of returning to the past. According to Nick, “He talked a lot about the past, and I gathered that he wanted to recover something, some idea of himself, perhaps, that had gone into loving Daisy. His life had been confused and disordered since then, but if he could return to a starting place and go over it all slowly, he could find out what that thing was.”²² The dying wind symbolizes the fact that he is so close to achieving his dream. Gatsby gets a taste of it, and it seems as though he is going to be able to fly away with her like a balloon, but he does not quite reach it because Tom sends Daisy and Gatsby’s short love affair back to reality. The paragraph with the balloon and the boom describes the book at large because everyone is in the same dreamlike state throughout the novel. Gatsby’s parties, which provide this mystical

¹⁸ Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. New York: Scribner, 2013. Print, p 23.

¹⁹ Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. New York: Scribner, 2013. Print, p 159.

²⁰ Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. New York: Scribner, 2013. Print, p 8.

²¹ Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. New York: Scribner, 2013. Print, p 8.

²² Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. New York: Scribner, 2013. Print, p 110.

feeling along with the coupling of Daisy and Gatsby, Tom and Myrtle, and Jordan and Nick all come to a crashing halt after Myrtle breaks her nose and Gatsby dies.

Because Gatsby and Tom have exactly opposite personalities, Fitzgerald chooses to reveal their characters by describing two completely different characteristics. As opposed to Tom's cruel body, Gatsby's smile is personified. Upon his first meeting with Gatsby, Nick is captivated by his smile as readers can see by the following narration.

He smiled understandingly—much more than understandingly. It was one of those rare smiles that you may come across four or five times in life. It faced—or seemed to face—the whole external world for an instant, and then concentrated on you with an irresistible prejudice in your favor. It understood you just as far as you wanted to be understood, believed in you just as you would like to believe in yourself, and assured you that it has precisely the impression of you that, at your best, you hoped to convey.²³

This description, which comes on the very first day we meet Gatsby, almost fifty pages into the novel, gives readers the feeling that they know more about Gatsby than they really do. It seems as if readers learn so much about his character through this description, but in reality, there is so much about him that still remains unknown. The personification that goes along with Gatsby's character greatly contrasts the harshness of Tom's, making it evident that he is a warm, likable character and a true romantic. There is significance behind the words, "It understood you just as far as you wanted to be understood," because Gatsby himself only wants to be understood minimally. He tries to hide much of his past and seems mysterious to the people who surround him at his parties because he would rather them not have definite answers as opposed to finding out he is a phony and a bootlegger. Whenever he is asked or talking about his past, something seems a little fishy. According to Nick, "He hurried the phrase 'educated at Oxford,' or swallowed it, or choked on it, as though it had bothered him before."²⁴ Furthermore, his smile "Believed in you just as you would like to believe in yourself," which is important because Gatsby's dream requires him to be a believer in the possibility of bringing the past back to reality. Without the belief that this is possible, Gatsby would be a hopeless man. Matthew J Brucoli expands on Gatsby's belief in the past and Fitzgerald's inclusion of symbolism through his quote from "Class VI: The Great Gatsby, Part 1". When Daisy and Gatsby are in the midst of their reunion, "Gatsby is so nervous that he leans against the mantelpiece and knocks the clock off. It is a clock that doesn't work. This is Fitzgerald's symbol that Gatsby is engaged in a struggle with time."²⁵ Finally, it is only natural that his smile would "Assure you that it had precisely the impression of you that, at your best, your hoped to convey," because this is exactly what he is doing every time he throws a party and hopes to impress Daisy with the luxury of it all or brings her into his house to see all of his possessions, his countless shirts, and his fancy suits. Through everything, Gatsby is hoping that his best will be good enough for Daisy.

²³ Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. New York: Scribner, 2013. Print, p 48.

²⁴ Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. New York: Scribner, 2013. Print, p 65.

²⁵ Brucoli, Matthew J. "Class VI: The Great Gatsby, Part 1." *Classes on F. Scott Fitzgerald*. Columbia: Thomas Cooper Library, U of South Carolina, 2001. 80-97. Rpt. in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*. Ed. Lawrence J. Trudeau. Vol. 311. Farmington Hills, MI: Gale, 2015. 20th Century Literature Criticism Online. Web. 25 Apr. 2016, p 184.

In addition to Gatsby's smile, Nick is also captivated by Daisy's voice. Fitzgerald plays with contrasting images to make Daisy seem desirable and then undesirable when he writes, "For a moment the last sunshine fell with romantic affection upon her glowing face; her voice compelled me forward breathlessly as I listened—the glow faded, each light deserting her with lingering regret, like children leaving a pleasant street at dusk."²⁶ The words, "The glow faded" become symbolic after Gatsby's death when Daisy does not call or write to ask about him, proving that once captivating voice has now been extinguished. Also, she never uses her voice to tell Tom the truth about who was driving the car that killed Myrtle. Readers, seeing how careless Daisy actually is, lose their admiration for her by the end of the novel, feeling disappointed in the same way the children do as their playtime is interrupted by the settling dusk. In a conversation between Nick and Gatsby, the latter determines that "'Her voice is full of money.'"²⁷ Every character in this book is lured in by money. Being that it is money that lures people to Gatsby's parties and lack of money that lures Daisy away from Gatsby and into marrying Tom, it only makes sense that Nick and Gatsby are so captivated by her voice. Including this detail is another way in which Fitzgerald so excellently includes the theme of the entire book into a single sentence. On the topic of Daisy's voice, Barbara Hochman in her journal "Disembodied Voices and Narrating Bodies in The Great Gatsby" writes, "Despite his emphasis on the "inexhaustible" promise and "deathless" magic of Daisy's voice, Nick's descriptions not only include a sharp sense of inevitable endings, but also a finely differentiated sense of process or cycle in which Daisy's voice seems to crystalize and fade, fade and reemerge."²⁸ Hochman's quote shows the amount of scrutiny that needs to be put into every perfectly selected word of this novel because each word is bound to predict something else, just as the words "inexhaustible" and "deathless" predict that the voice will eventually follow its pattern and come to its "inevitable end".

In short, a conversation between Nick and Jordan regarding driving does a good job of summing up the entire novel, especially because the symbol of the car is so important. Nick accuses her of being "A rotten driver," and she replies that she does not need to be careful because "Other people are," showing the selfishness and carelessness that was so typical of Jordan and Daisy in this novel.²⁹ These two women are shown to be carefree in the beginning with the balloon image, and this same attitude is carried forth until the end when Daisy does not even bother to call after Gatsby dies. These two women are merely prototypes of most people during their time, who seemed to care about nothing but dancing and having a good time. Careless driving is described in this conversation, as Jordan drives about recklessly and almost hits a man working on the side of the street. This foreshadows to the climax of the novel when Myrtle becomes the victim of "The Death Car". Nick concludes, "They were careless people, Tom and Daisy—they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made."³⁰ This sums up the entire novel, addressing

²⁶ Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. New York: Scribner, 2013. Print, p 14.

²⁷ Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. New York: Scribner, 2013. Print, p 120.

²⁸ Hochman, Barbara. "Disembodied Voices and Narrating Bodies in the Great Gatsby." *Style* 28.1 (1994):95-118. Rpt. in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*. Ed. Lawrence J. Trudeau. Vol. 311. Farmington Hills, MI: Gale, 2015. 20th Century Literature Criticism Online. Web. 24 Apr. 2016, p 121.

²⁹ Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. New York: Scribner, 2013. Print, p 58.

³⁰ Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. New York: Scribner, 2013. Print, p 179.

Tom smashing up Myrtle's nose, which can be seen as a prerequisite for Daisy smashing up her entire body. The quote also addresses the fact that Nick is not really what sure what keeps the two of them together but it is definitely not love. Nevertheless, they always retreat back into that safety net that their marriage provides, which is why Gatsby never has a chance with Daisy. The fact that Tom and Daisy get to go back to their everyday life unaffected while Gatsby has to die represents that the hope Gatsby once had is dead, and further proves to show that everyone else must clean up the mess that Tom and Daisy have made.

Notes

1 Brucoli, Matthew J. "Class VI: The Great Gatsby, Part 1." Classes on F. Scott Fitzgerald. Columbia: Thomas Cooper Library, U of South Carolina, 2001. 80-97. Rpt. in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*. Ed. Lawrence J. Trudeau. Vol. 311. Farmington Hills, MI: Gale, 2015. 20th Century Literature Criticism Online. Web. 25 Apr. 2016

2 Donaldson, Scott. "Possessions in the Great Gatsby." *Southern Review* 37.2 (2001): 187-210. Rpt. In *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*. Ed. Lawrence J. Trudeau. Vol. 311. Farmington Hills, MI:Gale, 2015. 20th Century Literature Criticism Online. Web. 22 Apr. 2016.

3 Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. New York: Scribner, 2013. Print.

4 Hochman, Barbara. "Disembodied Voices and Narrating Bodies in the Great Gatsby." *Style* 28.1 (1994):95-118. Rpt. in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*. Ed. Lawrence J. Trudeau. Vol. 311. Farmington Hills, MI: Gale, 2015. 20th Century Literature Criticism Online. Web. 24 Apr. 2016.