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Fitzgerald's THE GREAT GATSBY

In F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Gatsby goes to spectacular lengths to try to achieve what Nick Carraway calls "his incorruptible dream" (155), to recapture the past by regaining Daisy Buchanan's love and getting her to tell her husband, Tom, that she never loved him (111). For much of the novel, Gatsby seems likely to succeed, not only because his efforts are so extraordinary, but because Daisy's marriage seems so miserable and corrupt that she must surely be looking for the chance to escape. But Daisy herself proves to be corrupt and thus perfectly suited for marriage with Tom, with whom she shares membership in an exclusive society from which Gatsby is barred. Whenever Fitzgerald emphasizes the resilience of Tom and Daisy's corrupt marriage, he relies on a recurring image: He portrays Tom and Daisy together, side by side, framed by a square or rectangle of artificial light.¹

The image first occurs late in the opening chapter. Although at this point Fitzgerald hasn't yet established the possibility that Daisy might leave Tom for Gatsby, he has clearly shown how miserable Daisy seems within her marriage. When the narrator, Nick Carraway, attends a small dinner party at Tom and Daisy's mansion, Daisy publicly blames Tom for a bruise on her knuckle, suggesting physical violence (12). She calls him "a brute" and "hulking," repeating the latter word immediately after he "crossly" says he doesn't like it (12). She belittles his ideas, twice winking at Nick during Tom's comments about a book he claims to have read (13-14). Then she abruptly leaves the dinner table to retrieve Tom after he has left to answer a telephone call, evidently from his lover, Myrtle Wilson (14-16), and when Daisy is alone with Nick, she complains bitterly about her marriage and her life (17-18).

Yet the instant she finishes her complaint, Nick "felt the basic insincerity of what she had said," and a moment later she looks at Nick "with an absolute smirk on her lovely face, as if she had asserted her membership in a rather distinguished secret society to which she and Tom belonged" (18). Therefore almost from the beginning of the novel, Fitzgerald hints that despite or perhaps because of the corruption in the marriage, Daisy is content to be married to Tom. And when Nick leaves for the night, Fitzgerald uses the square of arti-

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ficial light to frame an image emphasizing Tom and Daisy's basic compatibility with one another. At their front door, they "stood side by side in a cheerful frame of light" (20). Tom and Daisy speak like a happy couple, agreeing with one another and referring to themselves as a unit:

"We heard you were engaged to a girl out West"

"That's right," corroborated Tom kindly "We heard you were engaged" (20)

By the time we encounter the second instance of the frame of light, near the end of chapter 6, Gatsby has become Daisy's lover. Once again the image occurs at the conclusion of a party, this time one of the larger, wilder parties that Gatsby throws. Again events of the evening underscore problems in the marriage, problems that by now suggest that Daisy may indeed leave Tom and end up with Gatsby. She spends a considerable portion of the evening dancing with and talking alone to Gatsby, whereas Tom spends much of the evening pursuing a woman he has met (106-07). Besides being irritated with each other's flirtatious behavior, Daisy and Tom are both disdainful of the other's potential lover: Daisy describes the woman Tom pursues as "common but pretty" and sarcastically offers him a pencil to write down the woman's address (107). Tom describes the party as a "menagerie" and says of Gatsby, "A lot of these newly rich people are just big bootleggers, you know" (109). But this snobbishness, although expressed through bickering, ultimately unites Daisy and Tom within the "distinguished secret society" Gatsby cannot penetrate. Although Daisy defends Gatsby when Tom mocks his party, she too is "offended" and "appalled" by the party's garish, drunken-Broadway atmosphere and joins her husband in a mutual distaste for Gatsby's world. At the end of the evening, standing side by side framed in "ten square feet of light" emanating from Gatsby's front door, Tom and Daisy leave together, and Gatsby admits to Nick, "She didn't like it. [. . .] I feel far away from her" (110-11).

When at the end of chapter 7 the frame of light appears for the third and final time, it is at the close of a day in which Gatsby has forced the love triangle to its inevitable crisis. Once again he at first seems likely to succeed: Daisy's facial expression and tone of voice have made Tom sense that she loves Gatsby (119), and Daisy calls Tom "revolting" after he obliquely acknowledges having had a succession of adulterous affairs (132). But when Gatsby takes the ultimate step of asking Daisy to tell Tom that she has never loved him, her immediate reaction makes clear that "she had never, all along, intended doing anything at all" (133) about leaving Tom. When Tom brings up the shady means by which Gatsby has made his fortune, Gatsby's chances of winning Daisy are dead, not because Daisy now finds Gatsby immoral, but because Gatsby is now firmly established as a mere social-climbing bootlegger, in contrast to Tom and Daisy who were born into wealth. When Tom learns of Gatsby's relationship with Daisy, his initial reaction is indignation

that “Mr. Nobody from Nowhere” could threaten his marriage (130). And in the end, Daisy thinks much the same way Tom does, rendering Gatsby’s dreams hopeless.

Although this encounter is disastrous for Gatsby, worse is to follow. Driving back to Long Island in Gatsby’s car, Daisy accidentally runs over and kills Myrtle Wilson. With violence hanging in the air, Gatsby is reduced to hiding in the bushes near Tom and Daisy’s house, hoping to protect Daisy in the event that, as he says to Nick, her husband “tries to bother her about that unpleasantness this afternoon” and “tries any brutality” (145). Although his concern for Daisy’s safety is undoubtedly genuine, Gatsby may also hope for an outburst from Tom, because Gatsby’s only remaining chance to win Daisy would be if Tom were to drive her away through violence.

But when Nick goes up to the house to “see if there’s any sign of commotion” (145), he comes to “a small rectangle of light” at a window and finds Tom and Daisy framed within that light, sitting together, his hand covering hers, and Daisy nodding in agreement as he speaks (146). Once again, the artificial light frames a scene portraying Tom and Daisy as well matched, united in mutual corruption. Nick observes, “There was an unmistakable air of natural intimacy about the picture, and anybody would have said they were conspiring together” (146).

Judging from later events, perhaps Tom and Daisy *were* “conspiring together.” Daisy evidently allows Tom to believe that Gatsby was driving when Myrtle Wilson was killed. And when Tom encounters Myrtle’s husband, who is armed and deluded with grief into thinking that whoever ran over Myrtle had been her lover and had killed her deliberately, Tom directs him to Gatsby’s house. Myrtle’s husband then murders Gatsby and commits suicide. Thus, whereas Tom and Daisy and their marriage survive, Gatsby is killed for running over Myrtle—something Daisy did—and for being Myrtle’s lover—something Tom was. It is ironic that despite the repeated imagery of Tom and Daisy together in a frame of light, in the end it is Gatsby who is framed by Tom and Daisy

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NOTE

1. For a contrasting analysis of this image pattern, one correlating the pattern with the novel’s themes related to the American Dream and the first European explorers’ encounter with the American wilderness, see Lawry

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