

## On James Gatz in a Toga or a Similarly-Fashioned Garment Representative of Classical Antiquity

We're approaching the centennial anniversary of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* next year and this, for some reason, seems to many a fantastic impetus to reignite the fierce debates of the book's content, writer, characters, and, most centrally, its status as an American classic. Question number one on the minds of literary critics and high-schoolers alike (these two groups bearing more in common than one would imagine) essentially boils down to this: is the book worth it? Is *The Great Gatsby* a staple of the American literary tradition or is it the ravings of a classist alcoholic who's got us all fooled? The opinion of this author, and the ensuing essay, is of the former.

First and foremost, the nature of a "Classic" must be defined. What separates literature from drivel, why does my lit teacher have posters of this book around her room, and why do I get approving nods if I'm seen reading *Gatsby* in public? George A. Kennedy, an American scholar of classical literature elucidates the origins of the literary hierarchy: "A classic is a book, or any other work of art, accepted as being exemplary or noteworthy... Such classification began with the Greeks' ranking their cultural works, with the word canon (ancient Greek κανών, kanōn: 'measuring rod, standard'). Moreover, early Christian Church Fathers used canon to rank the authoritative texts of the New Testament, preserving them, given the expense of vellum and papyrus and mechanical book reproduction, thus, being comprehended in a canon ensured a book's preservation as the best way to retain information about a civilization. In contemporary use, the Western canon defines the best of Western culture" (Kennedy). Noteworthy authors, many of whom have had the privilege of induction into the Western canon, such as Italo Calvino and Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve, have shared the following thoughts: "The classics are those books which come to us bearing the aura of previous interpretations, and trailing behind them the traces they have left in the culture or cultures (or just in the languages and customs) through which they have passed," (Popova) and from Sainte-Beuve, "The idea of a classic implies something that has continuance

and consistency, and which produces unity and tradition, fashions and transmits itself, and endures” (Sainte-Beuve.) So, we can ascertain the following from these definitions: a Classic is a book both linguistically and culturally noteworthy, authoritative of its subject matter, emblematic of its time, containing themes that transcend itself and its culture, and above all, *worth printing*. This is the checklist from which I will be operating to comment on *The Great Gatsby*.

On *The Great Gatsby*'s linguistic and cultural significance, there is not much that has not been said in the near-century since its publication. Even its fiercest detractors, such as Kathryn Schulz, in her article "Why I Despise the Great Gatsby" cannot help but to praise its writing, "[*The Great*] *Gatsby*... is focused and deliberate: a single crystal, scrupulously polished... It is an impressive accomplishment... restrained, intelligent, beautifully constructed" (Schulz). Its supporters include Ernest Hemingway, who, in his 1964 memoir, *A Moveable Feast*, frequently refers to the book as "a very fine novel" (Hemingway 174). One needs only to read a few of Fitzgerald's passages to understand this praise, "But his heart was in a constant, turbulent riot. The most grotesque and fantastic conceits haunted him in his bed at night. A universe of ineffable gaudiness spun itself out in his brain while the clock ticked on the wash-stand and the moon soaked with wet light his tangled clothes upon the floor. 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" (Fitzgerald 105). Such poetic, deliberate yet spastic prose sticks out wonderfully from the background of the Lost Generation, distinct from Hemingway's stocky and straight sentences, or Ezra Pound's "clarity, precision, and economy of language," (Academy of American Poets) and exerts an obvious influence on the succeeding Beat Generation, Keruoac and Ginsberg.

This is where the second defense of *Gatsby* appears, in the societal and cultural context it both provides and expounds upon, "He was balancing himself on the dashboard of his car with that

resourcefulness of movement that is so peculiarly American—that comes, I suppose, with the absence of lifting work or rigid sitting in youth and, even more, with the formless grace of our nervous, sporadic games. This quality was continually breaking through his punctilious manner in the shape of restlessness. He was never quite still; there was always a tapping foot somewhere or the impatient opening and closing of a hand” (Fitzgerald 68). The Roaring, interwar 20s in which the novel is both written and set was among the most turbulent, fantastical, surreal yet grittily corporeal, opulent but impoverished time in America. *Gatsby* is the 20s personified, a rich party host with an honest, corrupted spirit, spoiled by wealth and love. The novel’s themes involve mostly the corruption inherent to the amassing of wealth, the stark contrast of class distinction, the hypocrisy of institutional America, and the intangibility of the American Dream. Tom Buchanan, the novel’s pseudo-antagonist, is an old-money jock whose hobbies include casual alcoholism, infidelity, and domestic abuse. The novel’s titular protagonist attempts to “buy into” the American Dream through thoroughly illegitimate and dishonest means in order to win back his high-school sweetheart, the Southern Belle of Daisy Buchanan, whose being is reduced to less than a figment of *Gatsby*’s imagination, and whose presence is represented by an incorporeal green light in the air across from *Gatsby*’s dock, “Possibly it had occurred to him that the colossal significance of that light had now vanished forever. Compared to the great distance that had separated him from Daisy it had seemed very near to her, almost touching her. It had seemed as close as a star to the moon. Now it was again a green light on a dock. His count of enchanted objects had diminished by one” (Fitzgerald 100).

While the themes of *Gatsby* are particular to its time, they also possess a fantastical transcendence. The lost lovers, the elaborate plan to win back the sweetheart, the honest man corrupted beyond repair by his fortune, these themes persist within the Western canon and throughout our own lives. *Gatsby* is a thrilling, captivating, transcendent novel, and I find this claim to be unfalsifiable. There is a counterclaim to be made, that essays like these based on critical thought and analysis are not responsible for the addition or removal of a work into the literary tradition or the western canon. There is a claim to be made that the Classics began in publication rooms, by powerful men with powerful tastes and powerful

printing machines, that Scribner and Penguin classics are the unseen deciders of our time. However, in light of the previous considerations of Calvino and Sainte-Beuve, I consider classicism to be a product of intellectuality. *Gatsby* is among not only the greatest American novels, an icon of our national literary tradition, and taught not only in literature but history classes, but I believe to be defensible as one of the greatest novels of all time.

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"Pound's own significant contributions to modern poetry included his role in the Imagist

movement, the founding of literary magazines, and his efforts to help fellow poets,

including T.S. Eliot and James Joyce." Poets.org,

<https://poets.org/poet/ezra-pound#:~:text=Pound's%20own%20significant%20contributions%20to,in%20Pound's%20words%2C%20%E2%80%9Ccompose%20in.>