

Symbolism and Social Critique in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*

Emma Rodriguez

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F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* stands as one of the most enduring works of American literature, capturing the glamour and disillusionment of the Jazz Age while offering a profound critique of American society. Set in the summer of 1922, the novel follows the mysterious millionaire Jay Gatsby and his obsessive pursuit of Daisy Buchanan, a pursuit that ultimately leads to tragedy. While the surface narrative presents a story of doomed love and lavish parties, Fitzgerald crafts a more complex examination of the American Dream's corruption during the 1920s. Through carefully constructed symbolism, he reveals the moral bankruptcy hiding beneath the era's glittering surface. Fitzgerald employs three recurring symbols—the green light, the eyes of Doctor T.J. Eckleburg, and the Valley of Ashes—to critique the moral emptiness underlying the American Dream in 1920s society. These symbols work together to expose how material success, rather than representing achievement and happiness, often masks spiritual desolation and the exploitation of others. By examining these symbols and their interconnections, we can understand how Fitzgerald transforms a tragic love story into a devastating critique of American capitalism and class stratification.

The Green Light: Desire, Illusion, and the Unattainable Dream

The green light at the end of Daisy's dock serves as the novel's most prominent and multifaceted symbol, representing both Gatsby's personal longing and the broader American pursuit of an idealized future. Nick Carraway, the novel's narrator, first observes Gatsby reaching toward this distant light: "he stretched out his arms toward the dark water in a curious way, and, far as I was from him, I could have sworn he was trembling" (Fitzgerald 20-21). This image of Gatsby trembling as he reaches toward an unreachable goal immediately establishes the futility and desperation that characterize his quest. The green light becomes an object of worship, representing everything Gatsby believes he lacks and everything he believes will complete him. Yet Fitzgerald ensures that readers recognize the light's essential emptiness—it is merely a dock light, an ordinary navigational marker that Gatsby has invested with extraordinary meaning.

The green color itself carries multiple layers of significance. Most obviously,

green represents money and wealth, the means by which Gatsby believes he can win Daisy and achieve his vision of success. As literary critic Marius Bewley observes, “Gatsby’s dream is pervaded by the sense that wealth can purchase anything, including the past” (Bewley 14). Gatsby has indeed acquired tremendous wealth through questionable means, transforming himself from poor James Gatz into the mysterious millionaire. Yet the green light’s position across the bay, forever out of reach, suggests the insufficiency of mere wealth. No matter how much money Gatsby accumulates, the light remains distant. This distance represents the impossibility of his true goal—not simply winning Daisy, but recapturing the past and remaking reality according to his idealized vision.

Fitzgerald extends the green light’s symbolism beyond Gatsby’s personal dream to represent the American Dream itself. In the novel’s final paragraph, Nick reflects on the green light’s larger significance, connecting Gatsby’s yearning to the wonder felt by early Dutch sailors encountering the new world: “Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that’s no matter—tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther...” (180). This passage universalizes Gatsby’s experience, suggesting that his impossible pursuit mirrors America’s collective delusion. The green light becomes a symbol of how American culture encourages endless striving toward an ever-receding goal, promising fulfillment while ensuring continued dissatisfaction. Scholar Sarah Churchwell notes that “the green light embodies the paradox at the heart of the American Dream: it is both inspiring and destructive, both beautiful and cruel” (Churchwell 167). Fitzgerald thus uses this symbol to critique not just individual delusion but a fundamental flaw in American ideology—the belief that happiness lies always in the future, always just out of reach, requiring only more effort and more wealth to attain.

The Eyes of Doctor T.J. Eckleburg: Judgment, Abandonment, and Lost Values

The billboard featuring Doctor T.J. Eckleburg’s enormous, faded eyes overlooking the Valley of Ashes provides another crucial symbol in Fitzgerald’s critique. These “blue and gigantic” eyes “look out of no face, but, instead, from a pair of enormous yellow spectacles which pass over a nonexistent nose” (23). The image is unsettling—eyes without a face, watching but not acting. The billboard’s description emphasizes its artificiality and decay; it is “faded” and “brood[s] on over the solemn dumping ground” (23-24). This faded, commercial image of eyes suggests how moral vision and spiritual authority have deteriorated in the modern world that Fitzgerald depicts.

George Wilson, the garage owner who lives in the Valley of Ashes, provides the most explicit interpretation of the eyes’ symbolic meaning. After his wife Myrtle’s death, Wilson stares at the billboard and tells his neighbor Michaelis, “God sees everything,” to which Michaelis responds by noting that Wilson is referring to the advertisement’s eyes (159-60). Wilson’s confusion between a faded billboard and divine judgment reveals the spiritual bankruptcy of his

world. In a society obsessed with commercial images and material success, even God becomes indistinguishable from advertising. The eyes do not belong to a benevolent deity but to a long-forgotten advertisement for an optometrist, an ironic detail that emphasizes how commercialism has replaced authentic spiritual values.

Yet the eyes' position overlooking the Valley of Ashes also suggests a kind of cosmic witness to moral corruption. They watch impassively as Tom Buchanan and Myrtle Wilson conduct their affair, as George Wilson suffers his humiliation, and as the society's refuse accumulates in the wasteland below. Literary critic Lionel Trilling argues that "the eyes represent what remains of moral conscience in a world that has largely abandoned genuine moral judgment" (Trilling 245). The eyes see everything but do nothing, suggesting a universe where traditional moral order has collapsed. God, if present at all, exists only as a decayed commercial image, unable or unwilling to intervene in human affairs. This absence of meaningful moral authority allows characters like Tom and Daisy to act with impunity, crushing those beneath them socially and literally, as when Daisy strikes and kills Myrtle with Gatsby's car.

The eyes' yellow spectacles add another layer of meaning. Yellow, which appears repeatedly in the novel, represents both wealth and corruption—the Buchanans' house contains "two young women in white [...] buoyed up as though upon an anchored balloon" against yellow windows (8), and Gatsby's car, the vehicle that kills Myrtle, is described as "a rich cream color, bright with nickel, swollen here and there in its monstrous length with triumphant hat-boxes and supper-boxes and tool-boxes" with "a labyrinth of wind-shields that mirrored a dozen suns" (64). The yellowed spectacles through which Doctor Eckleburg's eyes observe the world suggest that even judgment itself has been tainted by materialism. Everything, including morality, becomes colored by wealth and commerce in Fitzgerald's vision of 1920s America.

The Valley of Ashes: Industrial Waste and Human Cost

The Valley of Ashes, the desolate wasteland lying between West Egg and New York City, represents the dark underbelly of American prosperity. Fitzgerald describes it as "a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens; where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and, finally, with a transcendent effort, of men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air" (23). This description transforms industrial waste into a nightmarish landscape where even humans become indistinguishable from the ashes surrounding them. The Valley represents the human and environmental cost of the very wealth and luxury that characters like Tom and Daisy enjoy. As scholar Matthew Bruccoli notes, "The Valley of Ashes is the necessary consequence of the Buchanans' privilege—it is where the waste of their consumption accumulates" (Bruccoli 89).

The Valley's inhabitants, particularly George and Myrtle Wilson, embody the

exploitation underlying the American class system. George runs a failing garage, covered in the same gray ash that coats everything around him. Nick observes that George is “a blond, spiritless man, anaemic, and faintly handsome” who “was his wife’s man and not his own” (25). The ash has literally drained him of vitality and identity. His wife Myrtle desperately seeks escape through her affair with Tom Buchanan, attracted by Tom’s wealth and power. Yet this attempted escape only leads to her destruction, as she is struck and killed while running toward what she believes to be Tom’s car. Her death in the Valley of Ashes—the place she was trying to flee—becomes grimly symbolic. Those trapped in the underclass cannot escape; their attempts to reach for the green light, to achieve the American Dream, result only in their own destruction.

Fitzgerald emphasizes the Valley’s role as a dumping ground, a place where society discards what it no longer wants. This includes not just physical waste but human lives. Tom uses Myrtle for his pleasure and then discards her; Gatsby uses Michaelis, the Greek restaurant owner who lives in the Valley, as an alibi. The wealthy pass through this landscape on their way to Manhattan’s pleasures, barely acknowledging its existence. When they do notice it, as when Nick and Tom stop at George Wilson’s garage, they regard its inhabitants with a mixture of contempt and indifference. The Valley represents how the American Dream functions as a zero-sum game: the wealth accumulated by some requires the impoverishment of others. The ashes are not just industrial waste but the remains of exploited lives and broken dreams.

The Valley of Ashes also connects to the novel’s broader themes of reality versus illusion. While West Egg and East Egg maintain facades of beauty and elegance, the Valley reveals the ugly truth behind these surfaces. It is the reality that the wealthy prefer to ignore, the actual foundation upon which their glittering world rests. As Nick travels between the Eggs and Manhattan, he must pass through the Valley, just as readers must confront this reality to understand the full implications of Fitzgerald’s critique. The Valley cannot be avoided or beautified; it stands as testimony to the moral and environmental devastation that accompanies unchecked capitalism and social stratification.

The Interconnection of Symbols: A Unified Critique

These three symbols do not function in isolation but work together to create a comprehensive critique of American society. The green light represents the alluring promise of the American Dream, the Valley of Ashes shows its terrible cost, and the eyes of Doctor T.J. Eckleburg witness both without offering judgment or redemption. Gatsby reaches for the green light from his mansion in West Egg, but to arrive at Daisy’s house, he would have to pass through or over the Valley of Ashes, the wasteland created by the very system that enabled his wealth. The eyes overlook this wasteland, seeing everything but powerless or unwilling to act. This spatial arrangement is not accidental; it maps the moral geography of Fitzgerald’s America.

The symbols also share a quality of insubstantiality and illusion. The green light is a “minute and far away” beacon that may represent nothing more than Gatsby’s self-deception (21). The eyes belong to a faded advertisement, empty of real vision or authority. Even the Valley of Ashes, despite its physical reality, seems dreamlike and unreal, described as a place where men “crumble” like the ashes around them (23). This pervasive unreality suggests that the entire social structure rests on illusions—the illusion of the Dream’s accessibility, the illusion of moral order, the illusion that society’s costs can be hidden away in forgotten places. When these illusions collapse, as they do in the novel’s violent climax, the results prove catastrophic.

Conclusion

Through the interrelated symbols of the green light, the eyes of Doctor T.J. Eckleburg, and the Valley of Ashes, Fitzgerald constructs a devastating critique of the American Dream and the society that sustains it. The green light embodies both the dream’s seductive appeal and its fundamental emptiness, representing goals that recede endlessly into the future. The eyes suggest a universe where moral authority has collapsed into commercial imagery, leaving only passive witnessing where active judgment should exist. The Valley of Ashes reveals the human and environmental wreckage that accumulates as the necessary consequence of others’ wealth and privilege. Together, these symbols expose how the American Dream functions as a beautiful lie that masks exploitation, spiritual emptiness, and moral corruption.

Fitzgerald’s symbolic method allows him to transform a particular story of doomed love in the 1920s into a timeless examination of American values and their contradictions. The novel’s tragic ending—with Gatsby dead, his dream revealed as impossible, and Tom and Daisy retreating into their protective wealth—suggests that the system Fitzgerald critiques remains fundamentally unchanged by individual tragedy. Nick’s final meditation on the green light universalizes Gatsby’s experience, implying that Americans collectively remain caught in the same pattern of yearning and disappointment. Nearly a century after its publication, *The Great Gatsby* endures precisely because Fitzgerald’s symbolic critique continues to resonate. The green lights still beckon, the valleys of ashes still accumulate beyond our view, and the faded eyes still watch without judgment as we pursue our impossible dreams.

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