Deceitful Traces of Power: An Analysis of the Decadence of Tom Buchanan in *The Great Gatsby*

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When Ernest Hemingway first published *The Snows of Kilimanjaro* in *Esquire* (1936), the story contained an explicit reference to F. Scott Fitzgerald's relationship with the rich:

The rich were dull and they drank too much . . . they were dull and they were repetitious. . . . He remembered poor [Scott Fitzgerald] and his romantic awe of them and how he had started a story once that began, 'The rich are different from you and me.' And how someone had said to [Scott], Yes, they have more money. But that was not humorous to [Scott]. He thought they were a special glamorous race and when he found they weren't it wrecked him just as much as any other thing that wrecked him. ([1939] 1967, 72)

Having read the text and spent a sleepless night worrying about his part in it, Fitzgerald urged Hemingway not to print his name in the story.¹ Having required this of him, he also enclosed the following comment: "Riches have never fascinated me, unless combined with the greatest charm and distinc-
tion" ("Fitzgerald to Hemingway, August, 1936," in Fitzgerald 1963, 311). Hemingway's remarks about Fitzgerald clearly show the degree of bitterness that was now present in his relationship with his old Paris friend; moreover, they also demonstrate his apparent forgetfulness, or, at least, his fragmentary knowledge of Fitzgerald's work. For in 1925, Fitzgerald had launched one of his sharpest and most devastating attacks on the upper classes, in the form of his character Tom Buchanan, the Long Island millionaire in *The Great Gatsby* ([1925] 1991). Shortly after finishing the novel, Fitzgerald expressed his satisfaction with the character in a letter to Maxwell Perkins: "I suppose he's the best character I've ever done—I think he and the brother in *Sail* and Hurstwood in *Sister Carrie* are the three best characters in American fiction in the last twenty years" ("Fitzgerald to Perkins, December 20, 1924," in Fitzgerald 1963, 173). Certainly, Tom Buchanan is one of the pivotal characters in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Whereas its eponymous central character embodies the stereotype of the self-made man who has risen from nowhere, Buchanan represents the type of millionaire that is anchored in a solid tradition of socially acceptable (because inherited) wealth, and of the power derived from it. As Tony Tanner points out: "Buchanan is no more grounded in, or significantly related to, ancient American history than Gatsby" (1990, xii). His social exterior, which primarily consists of an awareness of his own wealth and the respectability that he derives from it, provides him with a fixed identity, in sharp contrast to Gatsby, who is forever seeking to create his own personality afresh. In many ways, Tom Buchanan embodies the decadence of the upper classes. As the twin notions of decline and decay lie at the heart of the novel, I suggest that an analysis of the various facets of Tom Buchanan's wealth and character are instrumental in understanding the limits of Fitzgerald's fascination with riches, and also the reasons behind an attraction that lead Malcolm Cowley to denominate some of his works within the category of the romance of money (Cowley 1973, 19).

**The Imperfect Millionaire**

At the beginning of the novel, Nick Carraway's description of Buchanan becomes a vehicle for cataloguing his status as a millionaire by inheritance:
His family were enormously wealthy—even in college his freedom with money was a matter for reproach—but now he’d left Chicago and come east in a fashion that rather took your breath away: for instance he’d brought down a string of polo ponies from Lake Forest. It was hard to realize that a man in my own generation was wealthy enough to do that. (Fitzgerald [1925] 1991, 9–10)

In a few lines Carraway furnishes the reader with essential information by mentioning the source of Buchanan’s income as well as his spending habits. Thus, his enormous inheritance renders him the diametrical opposite of the self-made man, a concept forged at the end of the nineteenth century. The concept of the self-made man lays emphasis on the fact that the millionaire is the product of the laws of natural selection and, in that struggle for survival, his money becomes a token of his successful adaptation to the environment. As Graham Summer argues:

The Millionaires may fairly be regarded as the naturally selected agents of society for certain work. They get high wages and live in luxury, but the bargain is a good one for society. This assures us that all who are competent for this function will be employed in it, so that the cost of it will be reduced to the lowest terms. (1914, 90)

Unlike the social Darwinists who used Jean Lamarck’s doctrine of inheritance to prove that the successful individual passed his economic virtues on to the following generation, the new millionaires emerging from the Gilded Age promulgated the myth of the self-made man. This myth stressed the notion that the most important goal was individual betterment. This could be achieved by a combination of sustained hard work and strength of character, no matter how obscure one’s social origins were. As J. F. Wall said, it was an essential part of the American dream to believe that the most fit sons in the race for material success were sired by fathers who had failed in that race (1970, 380). The genius associated with the creator of wealth was a product of the slums rather than of comfortable colonial mansions. Andrew Carnegie ponders on this idea in “The Advantages of Poverty”:
Let one select the three or four names, the supremely great in every field of human triumph, and note how small is the contribution of hereditary rank and wealth to the short list of immortals who have lifted and advanced the race. It will, I think, be seen that the possession of these is almost fatal to greatness and goodness, and that the greatest and best of our race have necessarily been nurtured in the bracing school of poverty—the only school capable of producing the supremely great, the genius. (1962, 64)

By and large, hereditary wealth had endowed its possessors with negative traits. With this in mind, Carnegie voices the following questions: “Why should men leave great fortunes to their children? If this is done from affection, is it not misguided affection?” (19). In fact, money earned without labour was an invitation to corruption in the eyes of a Republican nation and it was assumed that hereditary wealth had caused the decline of Europe. Drawing again on Andrew Carnegie’s writing we can understand the full implications of this issue. For he states explicitly that, “instances of millionaires’ sons unspoilt by wealth . . . are rare” (20). What Carnegie had in mind was that the millionaire, although by definition wealthy, should never forget the relationship between his wealth and the community from which his income was derived; “the duty of the man of wealth: to set an example of modest, unostentatious living, shunning display or extravagance” (25). The generation of Carnegie, John D. Rockefeller, Enoch Pratt, and James J. Hill was aware of the dangers of hereditary wealth because, as Wall points out, they feared the consequences of dynastic wealth that would restrict the list of entrants more than they welcomed the possibility of society evolving towards perfection if social advancement depended upon a closed society (1970, 380). Dynastic wealth was indeed seen as alien both to the productive process and to the progress of society. In light of this tradition, we can appreciate that Carraway’s first impressions of Tom Buchanan are designed to portray the latter, because of his extravagant use of wealth as much as the fact that it is inherited (the latter automatically renders him the antithesis of the self-made man). In the 1920s, the hereditary millionaire had become simply a consumer who had laid aside his role as a producer. As I shall show below, the novel develops this aspect of Buchanan’s personality in detail.
Carraway's subsequent description of Buchanan's habits and features serve to show the status of the latter as a millionaire. The first time that Carraway meets Buchanan, he appears "in riding clothes . . . standing with his legs apart on the front porch" (Fitzgerald [1925] 1991, 10). Both his sport clothes and his relaxed pose suggest a way of life that has nothing to do with the actual creation of wealth by means of productive labour. Indeed, Buchanan's only real interests (his string of polo ponies, for example) seem to be identical to those associated with the European aristocracy, men of gentle breeding who maintain liveries of horses. Buchanan fits into the category of the leisure class, a term coined by Thornstein Veblen (1934). The leisure class consists of a group of individuals who live on the fruits of the industrial community rather than within it. Their main features, as depicted by Veblen, are their manifest consumption and their equally obtrusive leisure. Both of these features denote the respectability of the millionaire and emphasize that he can allow himself to waste his money and time on idle amusements and unnecessary goods, whereas the rest of the industrial population has to perform manual work in order to survive (Veblen 1934, 70).

The Instinctual Leisure Class

Carraway's subsequent descriptions of Buchanan's activities accentuate his links with this class, especially in his association of Buchanan's life with sports. A rugby player at the university and now a polo player, Buchanan's wealth allows him to play sports everywhere. In fact, sports rather than business seem to determine his activities and movements throughout the world. Thus, he "drifted here and there unrestfully wherever people played polo and were rich together" (Fitzgerald [1925] 1991, 10). Sports play an essential role in Veblen's description of the leisure class. According to his theory, this class had their origins in feudal society, when labour was no longer honoured by the community. In such a community, the leaders were hunters and warriors and, as such, they were excused from menial chores. Since this period, fighting had been a common way of life for this class, and Veblen insisted that the modern enjoyment of sports, especially athletic games, among the upper classes in the pecuniary age could be seen as evidence of a combative instinct: "Sports . . . afford an exercise for dexterity
and for the emulative ferocity and astuteness characteristic of predatory life” (1934, 255). This explains why Buchanan is very often associated with physical violence. Thus, during a party in his New York apartment he breaks the nose of his mistress, Myrtle, in one of his outbursts of brutality. Moreover, when Carraway meets him walking on the street, he cannot fail to notice that

he was walking ahead of me along Fifth Avenue in his alert, aggressive way, his hands out a little from his body as if to fight off interference, his head moving sharply here and there, adapting itself to his restless eyes. (Fitzgerald [1925] 1991, 166)

Carraway shows Buchanan in a permanently warlike attitude, like that of a predator even in a moment of apparent ease such as a stroll along the street. In Buchanan’s descriptions, there is much to echo Veblen’s reference to the leisure class as the class most likely to display bold aggression and an alert sense of status. Thus, Carraway refers to a conversation with Buchanan during their college days in which the combination of the latter’s stance and tone of voice appear to convey the following message: “‘Now, don’t think my opinion on these matters is final,’ he seemed to say, ‘just because I’m stronger and more of a man than you are.’” (11). Buchanan is always eager to affirm his physical superiority over everyone else, although his affirmations are often expressed in terms that show evidence of a dubious sort of reasoning. For Veblen, behind the cloak of virtue with which the members of the leisure class envelop their lives, there lurks a type of person whose manners bear close resemblance to those of a barbarian. The explanation for this lies in the fact that in the past the sort of individual who had gained entrance to this class “was gifted with clannishness, massiveness, ferocity, unscrupulousness” (1934, 236). These were the qualities that counted in order to acquire full membership into the highest social class, and, for Veblen, these qualities still endure in the supposedly civilized members of the leisure class.

There are other factors of personality that Buchanan shares with Veblen’s leisure class, and these also serve to highlight his chicanery, as the following description of the behaviour of Buchanan and his wife, Daisy, reveals:
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. (Fitzgerald [1925] 1991, 167)

This quote is interesting because it shows two levels of carelessness. Firstly, there is the carelessness shown by smashing things up, and then, a retreat into "vast carelessness." This retreat implies that they are careless of the consequences of their actions, which is a sign of social power. Thus, the initial thoughtlessness is compounded with the callousness of one who knows his actions hold no personal consequences for him, and is not capable of recognizing the misery that he has inflicted upon others as such. The Buchanans behave irresponsibly and thereby bear out Veblen’s opinion that force, fraud, and chicanery are the province of the leisure class (1934, 273–74). These features survive in the leisure class during a pecuniary era. It is no wonder that Veblen believes that the man who belongs to this class may be treated as a delinquent:

The ideal pecuniary man is like the ideal delinquent in his unscrupulous conversion of goods and persons to his own ends, and in a callous disregard of the feelings and wishes of others and of the remoter effects of his actions. (1934, 237)

Finally, Tom Buchanan’s relationship with the economic forces of production strengthens his links to the leisure class, and draws attention to the perils presented by the power of the latter and the influence which it exerts upon all levels of society. These issues are developed in an episode during which, after Buchanan has asked Carraway about his job, they engage in the following dialogue:

"What are you, doing, Nick?"
"I'm a bond man."
"Who with [sic]?"
I told him.
"[sic] Never heard of them," he remarked decisively.
This annoyed me.
"You will," I answered shortly. "You will if you stay in the East"
(Fitzgerald [1925] 1991, 13)

At the beginning of the novel, Carraway mentions that everybody he knew was employed in the bond business; even his uncles and aunts have heard of it and have recommended that he should get a job in it. Therefore, within this context, Buchanan’s answer puts him at the same distance from the dealers, and probably in the same frame of reference as the aunts and uncles, who know only slightly more about the bond business. Carraway shows the narrowness of Buchanan’s social sphere, and his lack of experience outside the confines of the parochial world that he has been a part of until his move east. Admittedly, Buchanan could be said to be looking after his own affairs by only paying attention to the trading conducted by the big established firms, who would be likely to give him the best long-terms returns (with the lowest risk) on his inherited wealth. However, Veblen emphasises the gulf that separated the leisure class from the immediate productive process. This causes him to designate the leisure class as predatory because its activities have little to do with the actual creation of wealth through productive labour and, in this respect, Buchanan certainly conforms to the criteria of the leisure class, for, in all except the broadest terms, he clearly has no idea of the workings of even secondary industries such as the bond trade. Veblen even goes so far as to state that “the office of the leisure class in social evolution is to retard the movement and to conserve what is obsolescent” (1934, 198). Therefore, the preeminence of the leisure class represents a symbol of social decay, and, in this light, Buchanan’s aggressive manners, chicanery, and obsession with sport prove not only his personal degeneration, but also highlight his place as a handicap to the progress of society.

Prescriptive Morality and Decadence

Buchanan’s muscularity provides us with a new context to understand the novel. Carraway in his description of Buchanan, places considerable emphasis on his physical traits:
“Not even the effeminate swank of his riding clothes could hide the enormous power of that body—he seemed to fill those glistening boots until he strained the top lacing and you could see a great pack of muscle shifting when his shoulder moved under his thin coat. It was a body capable of enormous leverage—a cruel body.”

Buchanan’s main characteristic is precisely his muscularity, which makes him “a man of physical accomplishments” rather than a man of the mind. His strength serves to heighten his tendency towards brutality. Daisy describes him as “a big hulking physical specimen” (15). Throughout the novel, Buchanan is described as a massive body directed by a simple mind. Thus, Carraway refers to Buchanan’s reaction when he discovers that his wife may have a lover by commenting: “There is no confusion like the confusion of a simple mind” (117). During his description of his last meeting with Buchanan, he stresses the latter’s lack of mental maturity: “I felt suddenly as though I were talking to a child.” In contrast, Gatsby is described as a man with “a lot of brain power[,]” engaged “in improving his mind” (157, 162). Judging by his “GENERAL RESOLVES [sic],” Gatsby appears extremely keen to learn useful knowledge after the fashion of Benjamin Franklin: “read one improving book or magazine per week” (161). In order to explain the disparity of mind and muscularity which these two characters display, I shall turn to Henry L. Mencken’s interpretation of Nietzsche. Fitzgerald was familiar with Mencken’s The Philosophy of Nietzsche (1908), and he read the book before writing The Great Gatsby. In Mencken’s book, as in the novel, the idea of civilization and the causes of its decay receive a great deal of attention. Mencken interpreted the concept of civilization in Nietzsche’s writing as the dynamic tension between three castes: “The first class comprises those who are obviously superior to the mass intellectually; the second includes those whose eminence is chiefly muscular, and the third is made of the mediocre” (163). Common to each class is a particular notion of morality as well as of perfection.

There is much in common between Buchanan and the members of this second class. To the second class belong the guardians and keepers of order and security “—above all, the highest types of warrior, the judges and
defenders of the law” (164). The novel shows that Tom Buchanan embodies a combination of warrior attributes (his brutality and muscularity), together with an obsessive ‘lip-service’ to law and order, in spite of his infidelity and the often criminal expression of its brutality. An example of this tendency is to be found in Buchanan’s defence of family values: “Nowadays people begin by sneering at family life and family institutions and next they’ll throw everything overboard” (Fitzgerald [1925] 1991, 122). In his attack on Gatsby, Buchanan emphasises the illegal sources which lie behind the former’s wealth and flamboyance: “‘Who are you anyhow?’ broke out Tom. ‘You’re one of that bunch that hangs around with Meyer Wolfshiem’” (125). In his defence of the “status quo,” which, as a useless millionaire, he depends on, Buchanan attempts to appear morally upright in a negative sense, by trying to unmask Gatsby’s activities as a bootlegger, who collaborates with Wolfshaim, a paid-up member of the underworld.

Gatsby falls into the category of the first caste: that of the rulers. “Its members accept the world as they find it and make the best of it” and “their delight [lies] in self governing” (Mencken 1908, 163). Like Gatsby, who breaks with his past by reinventing himself (as Carray points out, “the truth was that Jay Gatsby, of West Egg, Long Island, sprang from his Platonic conception of himself” [Fitzgerald [1925] 1991, 93]), these individuals of the first caste are the creators of their own values and pay no heed to law and conventions. As Mencken said of this type of man, “his joy is in combatting and in overcoming—in pitting his will to power against the laws and desires of the rest of humanity” (1908, 169). In relation to the members of this first caste, the common man “is almost entirely lacking in this gorgeous, fatalistic courage and sublime egotism” (170). That Carray perceives this spirit to be an integral part of Gatsby’s character is demonstrated by the following description of him: “There was something gorgeous about him, some heightened sensitivity to the premises of life” (Fitzgerald [1925] 1991, 6). He represents an affirmation of life and all its possibilities without paying heed either to norms or to social prescriptions. Driven by his desire to possess Daisy at any price, his “vitalistic dream,” Gatsby becomes a gangster, thus displaying his lack of “conventional” morality.

Efficiency is the other essential attribute of the ruling class. As I have mentioned, the novel emphasises that Gatsby is a highly efficient individual who
even uses his spare time to study electricity; even at his parties, he is always alert to telephone calls relating to his business affairs, whereas Buchanan receives calls only from his mistress and seems to be reluctant to learn anything new about economic life. In Mencken's interpretation of Nietzsche, this attribute is essential in order to understand fully the differences between the first and second caste. The second caste are an inefficient class in terms of their control of the wealth of the world. The aristocracy belongs to the second caste, and, in order to protect its position,

it hedges itself about with purely artificial barriers. Next only to its desire to maintain itself without actual personal effort was its jealous endeavour to prevent accessions to its ranks. (1908, 166)

Mencken also remarks that Nietzsche favoured what he considered to be the true aristocracy, which was a class with a high regard for efficiency. Moreover, what would prevent a society from falling into decadence was that "there should always be, ... a free and constant interchange of individuals between the three castes of men" (166). Here we see the issue at the very heart of The Great Gatsby: the confrontation between a man of the second caste and a newcomer from the third caste now raised to the caste of the rulers. Nick Carraway's choice of Gatsby as the representative of the American dream implies that it is an amoral ideal, because Gatsby has acquired his wealth through criminal activities. Moreover, he has no compunction about appearing in public with gangsters such as Wolfshiem. Given this element of amorality at the core of the society depicted by Mencken and Fitzgerald, Gatsby's emergence as Buchanan's antagonist is justified. We can find the key to this issue, when at the end of the novel, Nick Carraway reflects upon Gatsby's failure by utilising the following description of Manhattan Island:

As the moon rose higher the inessential houses began to melt away until gradually I 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 tress that had made way for Gatsby's house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams. (Fitzgerald [1925] 1991, 168)
Clearly, the beginning of the American civilization involved conquest, aggression, and destruction. There is an element at the very birth of the American civilization which goes hand in hand with amorality and dreams. The "fresh, green, breast of the new world" is connected with rape and aggressive masculinity. The vanished trees represent the dominion of man over nature as an limited will to power, while the fact that they "pandered in whispers" to this human dream shows how deeply the amorality of aggression and conquest is rooted: the trees, according to the narrator, almost invite their own end by simply growing there. As Tony Tanner says in his analysis of this paragraph, "Fitzgerald knows, of course, exactly what he is doing. He wants to show America desecrated, mutilated, violated" (1990, 1). Carraway links Gatsby with the American past by stressing elements of violent desire at the heart of the American dream. Implicitly, the source of Buchanan's riches are included in this, albeit that they are protected by law and morality, because, of all the characters in the novel, he is certainly the most grounded in and ancestrally related to American history. Critics have remarked on Fitzgerald's artistic success in transposing this paragraph from the first chapter of the novel to its end. Yet it is significant that Fitzgerald had previously placed this paragraph at the beginning of the novel shortly after Nick Carraway had visited Buchanan's "red-and-white Georgian Colonial mansion," for this original placement serves to link the source of both Gatsby's and Buchanan's riches to forces of aggression and exploitation. Buchanan uses the defence of law and order to hide his decadence and, implicitly, his amorality. Additionally, the novel's representative of the American West, Dan Cody, shares the same lack of morality, which is portrayed as a feature of its original corruption. When he returns to the east, Dan Cody is "the pioneer debauchee, who during one phase of American life brought back... the savage violence of the frontier brothel and saloon" (Fitzgerald [1925] 1991, 95). As C.W.E. Bigsby indicates, "the West has long since been corrupted by the forbears of Buchanan, Gatsby and even Carraway" (1971, 133). Moreover, the conclusion of the book suggests that the urge to conquer and dominate is endemic in the entire American psyche.
Appropriating Racism

Another piece of Buchanan’s decay can be found in his defence of racist ideas. In the course of a dinner at East Egg, he bursts out:

“Civilization’s [sic] going to pieces, . . . I’ve gotten to be a terrible pessimist about things. Have you read ‘The Rise of the Coloured Empires’ by this man Goddard?”

“Well, it’s a fine book and everybody ought to read it. The idea is if we don’t look out the white race will be—will be utterly submerged. It’s all scientific stuff; it’s been proved.” (Fitzgerald [1925] 1991, 16)

As Mick Gidley (1973) points out, Goddard is an amalgam of the names of two race thinkers: Madison Grant (1865–1937) and Lothrop Stoddard (1883–1950). The book that Buchanan is referring to is The Rising Tide of Color, written by the latter in 1920. However, during the course of the conversation quoted above, Buchanan appropriates the main points of Grant’s argument: “This idea is that we’re Nordics . . . and we’ve produced all the things that go to make civilization—oh, science and art and all that. Do you see?” (16). The primacy of the Nordic race over all others had been put forward by Madison Grant in his book The Passing of the Great Race (1918). Grant argued that due to a process of natural selection, the Nordic race had achieved a status which made it entirely responsible for all progress and civilization. Its roots were in the Baltic regions where the harsh environment had imposed upon the inhabitants a rigid elimination of defects, which eventually created the fittest possible race. The Nordic race had expanded through the world, creating the roots of civilization in the south of Europe and America. Grant stressed that for any nation, the amount of Nordic blood was a fair measure of its strength in war as well as its standing in civilization. Wherever it went, the Nordic race marked a new vigorous period of higher civilization. The thesis of Grant rests upon the idea that “physical features” denote superior “mental and spiritual qualities,” and that material success and political dominance are in themselves evidence of racial superiority (1918, 39, 43, 81–82, 188–97).
Later in the novel, during his argument with Gatsby, Buchanan uses the "intermarriage between black and white" (Fitzgerald [1925] 1991, 122) as a sign of the decay of various social and cultural institutions. Buchanan seems to echo Stoddard's interpretation of the peril presented to America by the expansion in numbers of its black population, a thesis which made his reputation as the most popular American racist of the 1920s. In *The Rising Tide of Color*, Stoddard expresses great concern as to the possibility that the United States might follow the same course as South America, where, in his view, the white race had degenerated by mixing its blood with that of the Indian. Using this paradigm, he envisioned the expansion of the black race as a return to primitive barbarism. Bearing this in mind, it is no wonder that Tom Buchanan is attracted to Stoddard's theories, since the latter associates mixed blood with political anarchy, using the examples of South America and the decline of the Roman Empire (Stoddard 1971, 168). As an unproductive member of society, Buchanan needs to defend his social position. As a hereditary millionaire, he is conscious of the importance of tradition and social order as devices by which to retain his position. His racist remarks also contrast with the eruption of the Harlem Renaissance and the search for wider recognition undertaken by many black intellectuals at that time who sought for dignity within American society. Buchanan simply cannot cope with the idea of change in society.

Paradoxically, the fact that he appropriates this ideology only serves to underscore his weakness. The Nordic race may embody vigour as well as mental and spiritual energies in Grant's and Stoddard's peculiar interpretations, but the fact is that these qualities are totally absent from Buchanan's life, an irony which serves only to lampoon his apparent power. Indeed, the stark contrast between what Buchanan pretends to be (a vigorous individual who embodies the creativity of the Nordic race) and what he really is (a millionaire lacking in imagination and intellect who owes his privileged position in society to the efforts of previous generations), serves to throw his decadence into sharp relief. For Buchanan represents a type of man without a future, as Carraway describes him: "A national figure in a way, one of those men who reach such an acute limited excellence at twenty-one that everything afterwards savours of anti-climax" (Fitzgerald [1925] 1991, 9). This man who once possessed "an acute limited excellence" shows his deficiencies
by appropriating this particular ideology. Stoddard emphasises that "an instinctive vitality" had put the Nordic race in its position of privilege because the "greater or less degree of vigour in people depends on the power of its vital instinct." (1971, 168). Yet that vital instinct, if not utterly lost, as it undoubtedly is in the case of the character Wilson, is certainly wavering in Buchanan's case. He is not aware that the decadence of civilization lies not so much in the external threats of the new riches nor in the expansion of the blacks, as in himself and his own inefficiency.

When Order Unmasks Chaos

One of the greatest artistic achievements of the novel lies in the association of the main characters (Buchanan and Gatsby) with specific environments. On the one hand, Buchanan's East Egg Georgian mansion overlooking the bay represents order. Its French windows, sun-dial lawns, and brick walls suggest respectability and a continuity with the past. On the other hand, Gatsby's West Egg environment is closer to a "fantastic dream," a grotesque El Greco picture in which only drunkenness, carelessness, distortion, and chaos appear to thrive, and, moreover, with no sense of continuity. Yet, East Egg, behind its facade of order, is much closer to West Egg than it appears to be at first sight.

During the night of the car accident which kills Myrtle Wilson, Nick Carraway returns to Buchanan's East Egg mansion after an absence of three months. Looking through the blinds, he manages to spot Daisy and Tom "sitting opposite each other at the kitchen table with a plate of cold fried chicken between them and two bottles of ale" (Fitzgerald [1925] 1991, 136). It is a scene which denotes a strange intimacy, which becomes stranger because it has occurred shortly after, and, we infer, has been caused by the tragic death of an innocent woman. Buchanan is intently talking at Daisy, and the fact that neither of them have touched the chicken or the ale leads Carraway to believe that they are both "conspiring together" (136). The fact that neither has partaken of the superficially 'homely' element of the scene (that is, their supper) renders the meal an aesthetic rather than a functional requirement, contrived, like their conspiracy itself, to give their destructive relationship a veneer of stability. Thus, they are, ironically, alienated from
the very substances which appear initially to convey a domestic cosiness. Finally, the conspiracy is acted out when Wilson kills Gatsby at the swimming pool and then commits suicide.

Carraway finds the proof of his suspicions when he accidentally and unavoidably meets Buchanan in the street, after everything has appeared to come to a conclusion. When he asks about what Buchanan said to Wilson during the afternoon of the accident, the latter's answer is revealing:

"I told him the truth" he said. "He came to the door while we were getting ready to leave... He was crazy enough to kill me if I hadn't told him who owned the car..." He broke off defiantly, "What if I did tell him? That fellow had it coming to him. He threw dust into your eyes just like he did in Daisy's but he was a tough one. He ran over Myrtle like you'd run over a dog and never even stopped his car." (166)

By telling Carraway that he informed Wilson who the car belonged to, Buchanan reveals his active role in Gatsby's holocaust. His complicity in the crime shows the wealthy inhabitant of East Egg to be a covert agent of chaos to a far greater degree than anyone from West Egg that we meet during the course of the novel. Under the brick walls and colonial order lies the seed of chaos. If West Egg is unconventional and grotesque in Carraway's eyes, East Egg is no less disturbing, and is possibly more dangerous, since it has a misleading veneer of stable order. Moreover, Buchanan's revenge accentuates the main features of his social decay. His destruction of Gatsby, which avoids any direct confrontation through the subtle means that he employs, and his subsequent denial of any responsibility for his actions display a degree of cunning and sophisticated contrivance which are the exclusive province of Nietzsche's class of "resentment." The theme of resentment was introduced by Nietzsche in his Genealogy of Morals (1910), which Fitzgerald read during his composition of the novel (Sklar 1967, 151). For Nietzsche, resentment is directly associated with decadence, being a revenge perpetrated by weak persons on their superiors. This form of premeditated revenge represents a compensation for their lack of any proper outlet for vital action (1910, 10).

Whereas, for the true aristocrat, self-affirmation springs from a triumphant affirmation of his own demands, the slave requires that all objective stimuli
be capable of action; therefore, "his action is a reaction" (35). During much of the novel Buchanan acts as a passive individual. Even his eventual action is only responsive, whereas Gatsby creates his own self in a burst of initiative that marks the beginning of his social rise. Moreover, although a gangster, Gatsby is still capable of an aristocratic form of honour. Although he has the possibility of escaping to Chicago, he decides to stand by Daisy after the accident. However, Buchanan, who is driven by a slave morality and is obsessed with preserving his reputation and possessions, never runs risks. Satisfied by his revenge, Buchanan returns to his former passive state, enveloped in the security of the comforts of his colonial mansion. In his revenge and in his inability to forget, he shows his ressentiment, and the very essence of the slave mentality which characterizes his decadence.

Tom Buchanan confirms Carnegie's suspicions of hereditary wealth as an element of decadence in American society. In fact, heritage, in both a social and a biological sense, represents the key to understanding his personality as well as his place in the novel. His social heritage places him in the position of a member of the leisure class, that is, mainly as a consumer rather than a creator of wealth for society. His own inefficiency explains his conservative position, for he is afraid of both the power of the newly rich, such as Gatsby, and of the political transformations which may emerge from the proliferation of new races in society. Above all, he is portrayed as a delinquent protected by social conventions which conceal his misdeeds, who tries to camouflage his misbehaviour by appealing to a moral order.

Buchanan, Gatsby, and Fitzgerald: Wealth and The American Dream

The features of Jay Gatsby's personality described in this article serve to contextualize his sudden arrival in a wider sense. Buchanan represents the individual who is unsuited to the labours of ordinary life. His extreme moral degeneration gives new meaning to the role that Gatsby plays. Although he is, in the broader terms of his society, a delinquent, Gatsby embodies a series of virtues that are totally lacking in the America of which Tom Buchanan is paradigmatic, such as vitality, efficiency, loyalty, and the necessity of a realisable dream. What the novel suggests is that in a world dominated by millionaires such as Buchanan, it becomes more and more difficult for men like
Gatsby, whatever their mistakes and deficiencies, to climb the social ladder without partaking of the corruption that is associated with the leisure class. In the long run, it seems probable that Buchanan’s class would dictate the rules of the society to which Gatsby aspires, thus making it hard for such self-made men to escape its corrosive influence.¹⁹

Tom Buchanan’s brutal amorality overshadows Gatsby’s selfishness and his disregard for any principles, and highlights the latter’s eventual acceptance of responsibility (he chooses to stand by Daisy in the aftermath of the accident), which ultimately renders him vulnerable. Additionally, Buchanan’s extreme, yet curiously unmanly brutality (exemplified when he breaks Myrtle’s nose at the party) reveals him as a debauched member of the leisure class. This has the effect of making Nick Carraway stress the hints of honesty in Gatsby (as when he emphasises how “grateful” he feels when Gatsby makes it clear that he actually did go to Oxford) and of ignoring the more obscure aspects of the latter’s past, but only in the company of Buchanan. Carraway’s acceptance of his friend’s dubious methods of captivating Daisy is another aspect of this personal loathing for Buchanan, and of his need to defend Gatsby against the brutality with which the former is synonymous within the context of the narrative.

Much of the novel’s treatment of the power which is derived from money reveals the continuities in Fitzgerald’s thought regarding the role of wealth in America, from This Side of Paradise (1948) to The Great Gatsby.²⁰ The position of Buchanan, as well as that of Gatsby, reveals the possibilities that wealth can create in society, and that each individual is responsible for the uses to which he puts his capital. Consequently, the inconsistency between what Buchanan would like to be perceived as, and what he actually is, does not necessarily imply that Fitzgerald condemns the importance of wealth in society. Preoccupied with this seeming dichotomy, Fitzgerald started to write the novel on 25 August 1924. In May 1921, he wrote the following letter from Rome to Edmond Wilson:

God damn the continent of Europe. [sic] It is merely antiquarian interest. Rome is only a few years behind Tyre and Babylon. . . . I think it’s a shame that England and America didn’t let Germany conquer Europe. It’s the only thing that would have saved the fleet of tottering old wrecks
. . . . You may have spoken in jest about New York as the capital of culture but in 25 years it will be just as London is now. Culture follows money and all the refinements of aestheticism can’t stare off its change of seat (Christ! what a metaphor). We will be the Romans in the next generations as the English are now. (1963, 326–27)

Although these words have no direct reference to the stereotyped character who was later to become Buchanan, they show a number of similarities between Fitzgerald and his fictional protege; both uphold the power of money and the idea of amorality and imperialism as the bases of civilization and progress. However, if culture follows money, which implies the ability to put the latter to imaginative use, Gatsby, rather than Buchanan, should be associated with the highest social class. Fitzgerald’s words show his internal division when writing The Great Gatsby, which is illustrated by the opposing qualities of Gatsby and Buchanan: the repellence of Buchanan as a character sits well with the self-appraisal (shown above) of a reluctant imperialist who hates the intellectual connotations of his own imperialism. My conclusion is that, in The Great Gatsby, Fitzgerald has not broken free from his identification of power, money, and amorality as the roots of progress and civilization. Rather, in many respects, the book is a celebration of these elements of the United States. However, it should also be seen as a criticism of the individuals who wish to appropriate wealth without the concomitant cultural responsibility that Fitzgerald attaches to it, and the difficulties that this group create for those who are directly below them and who are attempting to improve their position, while also adhering to their moral code.21

In conclusion, The Great Gatsby can be seen not so much as an illustration of the decline of the Western world in general, or of American civilization in particular, but of individuals like Tom Buchanan, Daisy, and Jordan Backer. After all, luck, rather than the system, sustains the Buchanan’s “vast carelessness” and Gatsby’s death is due to sheer accident, and not because he is too weak to continue his fight against Buchanan. The whole novel is pervaded by ambiguity as regards the idea of the decadence of the West. Thus, as C. W. E. Bigsby comments, New York in the novel represents “corruption and graft but, with its towering white buildings, it seems to contain the essence of that pure dream of national and self-fulfilment”(1971, 134).22
These issues illustrate that whatever views of the American dream which Fitzgerald may have perceived during the writing of *The Great Gatsby*, he still adheres to his visions of 1921, to his celebration of amorality, power, and money. Nick Carraway's election of Gatsby as the representative of the American Dream is the greatest single proof of this. In this respect, *The Great Gatsby* occupies a position which is close to the halfway mark in Fitzgerald's intellectual development. In this novel, he is still far from attacking the corruption of the whole system and of the American dream with the all-pervasive bitterness of *Tender is the Night* (1934) and *The Last Tycoon* (1941). However, it would appear that by 1925 he had still not managed to rid himself of many of the ideas concerning the links between individualism, corruption, and capitalism which are present in *This Side of Paradise* and *The Beautiful and the Damned* (1950). This prompts me to conclude that *The Great Gatsby* represents a criticism of individual attitudes towards wealth rather than of the system itself, which, if it does not remain untouched, is not by any means completely destroyed.

Endnotes

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1. In the 1967 reprint, the name "Scott Fitzgerald" was changed to "Julian."
2. Roger Lewis has stressed Gatsby's paradoxical position of having no external context with which to endow his sudden arrival to the world of wealth with meaning (cited in Brucoli 1985, 47).
6. For the importance of consumerism in that period, see Donald R. McCoy (1973, 116–26), and Roland Marchand (1985).
7. For relevant studies on Veblen, see John P. Diggins (1978), Clare Virginia Eby (1994), and David Riesman (1953). On the influence of Veblen on Theodore Dreiser, an author close to Fitzgerald in respect of the importance he attached to wealth and consumer habits, see Eby (1993).
8. Richard Godden has also emphasised the relationship between the Buchanans and the leisure class focussing on Daisy (1990, 83).

10. As Thomas H. Pauly has pointed out Gatsby as a gangster was the very product of prohibition’s criminal conditions (1993, 225).

11. Susan Resneck Parr has particularly emphasised the lack of moral sense at the root of Gatsby’s mannerisms and wealth (cited in Brucoli 1985, 63).


14. Carl Degler has studied the scientific context from which the works of Grant and Stoddard emerged (1991, 48–55).


16. For the importance of Stoddard in relation to the idea of decline of the West, see Lewis Turlish (1971, 442–44).

17. On the context of Buchanan’s remarks in relation to the Harlem Renaissance, see Gidley (1973, 180). On Harlem and the Jazz Age, see Gilbert Osolsky (1965, 229–38). In 1927, there was an exchange between Leathrop Stoddard and Alain Locke (1927, 500-519); see as well, Mark Helbling (1994, 289-314).

18. Wilson represents the lowest degree of vitalism in the novel. As Nick Carraway comments on him after he has discovered that his wife might be having an affair with another man: “It occurred to me that there was no difference between men, in intelligence or race, so profound as the difference between the sick and the well.” (Fitzgerald 1990, 116).

19. As Marius Bewley has commented of Gatsby: “A great part of Fitzgerald’s achievement is that he suggests effectively that these terrifying deficiencies of Gatsby, ... are deficiencies inherent in contemporary manifestations of the American vision itself—a vision no doubt admirable, but stupidly defenceless before the equally American world of Tom and Daisy” (1963, 140–41).


22. The image of New York in the novel has been studied by Roland Bergman (1994, 85–109).

Works Cited


