

## **The Great Gatsby**

F Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925),<sup>1</sup> is a classic tale of tragic love driven by delusion and dream in a moneytheistic age, a reality that is still, even more so, with us. It is a glimpse at the decadence of the Roaring '20s in the US (or the "Jazz Age," as he calls it), an allegory of a carefree and careless materialistic society, where people are measured by wealth, and what or whom they have.<sup>2</sup> This consumer crowd has excised the divine and found "all Gods dead," wrote Fitzgerald in *This Side of Paradise* (1920, ch 5). They worship success and youth, and the Town Tattle is the bible in every American home. Money, then, is the new God and capitalism the new religion.

For concerned Buddhists, *The Great Gatsby* is a chilling reminder of an urbanized money-centred Buddhism in our times where the Buddha is dead, where wealth and merit define a Buddhist, where its priests are avid consumers, and its followers a carefree and careless crowd (the way that Gatsby sees his world). Perhaps, some in this crowd have faced such personal hurt that they have simply become deaf, blind and numb to others who are suffering or even speak of it. Such people are "different," so they are to be ignored or avoided, as it were.

For, it is a crowd, rutted in wealth, class and face, a club that we must merit to join, or we would be politely ignored or religiously left to our karma (how Daisy and Tom ignore Gatsby even in death). In such silent darkness, even a firefly, a tiny light, shines and shows the way: that light is Nick Carraway,<sup>3</sup> who is us when our eyes really see and our hearts are moved with goodness.

In chapter 2, the huge all-seeing faceless eyes of the oculist Dr T J Eckleburg peer from a towering billboard. This is the seeming omnipotence of materialism and omnipresence of consumerism of the asura<sup>4</sup> crowd. We can, on the other hand, positively take this as the Dharma-eye that sees how things turn out in the end: the two "eyes" are impermanence and unsatisfactoriness, and the facelessness is non-self, that every thing is without any essence. They remind us of a larger vision of life. As readers and practitioners, we are privileged to be such an all-seeing eye: we know Gatsby's thoughts and actions, and their outcome.<sup>5</sup>

In the 2013 movie (directed by Baz Lurhmann), Jay Gatsby's (Leonardo DiCaprio) secretly and relentlessly courts Daisy Buchanan (Carey Mulligan), whom he knows 5 years back, but lacking means, has to miss her to seek his fortune to win her then, by which time she is already married to Tom (a cold-hearted, aristocratic bully).<sup>6</sup> After amassing a great fortune over those years, Gatsby buys "that house so that Daisy would be just across the bay." There, he patiently waits, throwing ostentatious parties, so that she might "'come over' some afternoon to a stranger's garden" (78).<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Public domain book: [http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/f/fitzgerald/f\\_scott/gatsby/](http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/f/fitzgerald/f_scott/gatsby/).

<sup>2</sup> See Reflection, "Keep what you cannot lose," R205b 3022: [link](#).

<sup>3</sup> Note also how Nick, as narrator, is ever-present in the story, and yet seems to be above everyone and everything: cf [Candûpama Sutta](#) (S 16.3), SD 38.2. In the end, he leaves all Gatsby's world and all that he stands for: he renounces the world, as it were.

<sup>4</sup> On [the asura](#), see Reflection, "To have or to be," R166, 2010: [link](#).

<sup>5</sup> For a critical study, see eg R Beuke, *American Icon: Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby in critical and cultural context*, Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Art reflects reality here. In 1918, Fitzgerald was engaged to Zelda Sayre, but broke the engagement because he was unable to support her. In 1920, when Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise* was published successfully, they married. The marriage was tempestuous; Fitzgerald was himself alcoholic. Zelda's mental health deteriorated, and had to be institutionalized in 1930. Fitzgerald himself died of a heart attack at only 44.

<sup>7</sup> Page references are to *The Great Gatsby* [1925], NY: Scribner 2004. See ch 4: [http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/f/fitzgerald/f\\_scott/gatsby/chapter4.html](http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/f/fitzgerald/f_scott/gatsby/chapter4.html).

Gatsby is “Great” because he is like God – as far as moneytheism (money-worship) goes. Like the western God, he needs the love of Daisy (the world). The irony is that true love is the one thing that neither power nor wealth can really buy or attract. All that Gatsby can do is to try to show his love excessively. Without this love, Gatsby is not Gatsby, just as an unloved God ceases to exist, and all the work attributed to Him (such as creating the universe and man) would have been in vain. God and gods die when they have no worshippers.<sup>8</sup>

The party-goers in Gatsby’s palatial mansion in fictional West Egg (home of the new rich) in Long Island have never seen Gatsby, and do not know who he really is. Except for Nick (from the Midwest), that is, a poor young neighbour and Daisy’s cousin, who becomes his confidant, who grows to love and care for him (and the only one to do so). The movie version has Nick exclaiming that Gatsby has “more money than God.” Nick is like a Buddha figure who sees all in the world, and shares his wisdom with us.

Gatsby’s smile is perhaps the most famous smile in English literature. At first blush, it reminds us of the Buddha’s smile. Gatsby’s smile, however, exudes self-confidence, especially on account of his immense wealth. The Buddha’s smile, on the other hand, is simply an expression of his self-free awakened bliss. Appearances deceive, and we are blessed if we see through them.

When Gatsby kisses Daisy for the first time, he knows that “his mind would never romp again like the mind of God... At his lips’ touch she blossomed for him like a flower and the incarnation was complete” (110 f). This is, of course, a worldly love, driven by lust, and his wealth and parties a mating call. A true meditator’s bliss, on the other hand, brings us a suprasensual ecstasy so that we have no more desire or need for bodily pleasures. Hence, the Buddha constantly smiles.

The story’s climax is the Plaza Hotel suite scene, where Gatsby comes close to winning Daisy’s love. Tom and Gatsby get into a verbal duel, each trying to outdo the other with pitch-perfectness. Tom derides Gatsby, “You see, we are born different!” insinuating that Gatsby is not born rich; hence, he does not deserve a rich woman like Daisy.

The story takes a dramatic turn when Gatsby, arguing with Tom, gives in to “out-of-class” violence. In the movie version, however, director Baz Luhrmann and writer Craig Pearce have Gatsby act them out:<sup>9</sup> he shatters glasses and menacingly raises his fist against Tom “as if he had ‘killed a man’” – so betraying himself as not of the class he pretends to be! (ch 7).

Gatsby’s sudden violence – acting like a jealous God in all his fury – shocks Daisy (for the wrong reasons), and at once and literally drives her away from him. Ironically, Daisy, too, despite her beauty and charm, reveals herself to be merely a bored, shallow and unloving woman. Gatsby could only offer her love, but Tom gives her money, pleasure and power! This is like Buddhist merit-making without lovingkindness.<sup>10</sup>

Daisy, unable to accept the reality of the affray in the hotel, drives off in Gatsby’s fancy yellow Rolls Royce. Nick and Tom later learn that Gatsby’s car has struck and killed Tom’s mistress, Myrtle Wilson. Gatsby unwittingly but readily takes the blame for the tragedy. Daisy, however, is not really bothered with causing the death of Myrtle because she’s not a social elite, just a common woman.

Myrtle’s husband, George, wrongly thinks that the yellow car’s driver is his wife’s secret lover – he learns that Gatsby is its owner. He goes to Gatsby’s mansion and fatally shoots both Gatsby and then

---

<sup>8</sup> See Reflection “Buddhas die if we worship them,” R200 2011: [link](#).

<sup>9</sup> This director’s licence is warranted in a movie portrayal, whereas in the book, Gatsby violence is more easily conjured up in the reader’s mind.

<sup>10</sup> On [lovingkindness](#) (*mettā*), see [Brahma, vihāra](#), SD 38.5: On [dedicating merit](#) to the dead (ie the pretas), see [\(Saddha\) Jānussoni Sutta](#) (A 10.177/5:269-273), SD 2.6a & [Tirokuḍḍa Sutta](#) (Khṃ 7/6 = Pv 1.5/4 f), SD 2.7.

himself. Nick mourns Gatsby's death and prepares a small funeral for him, which almost no one, not even Daisy, attends. The press and media blame Gatsby for everything they could think of.

After killing Myrtle, Daisy reconciles with Tom, and they leave for a new city, where they continue as before, as if nothing has ever happened. "They were careless people, Tom and Daisy," Nick bitterly remarks, "they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money, their vast carelessness...."

If Gatsby's love is God-like, then Nick is most human in his love for Gatsby, for Nick is always there for him. Nick, despite his own failures and weaknesses, seems to be the only real human in the whole story. Hence, to Nick, Gatsby is an immaculate "son of God" (ch 6): out of love for Gatsby, Nick tells his story.

Gatsby's death leaves behind the inhumanity and hollowness of everyone and everything around him (except for Nick). Nick returns to the Midwest, deeply disillusioned, closing his story with these immortal words, "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past."

Gatsby's story loops our lives in every age. The names and language may be different; the occupations and preoccupations are the same, like shadows cast where there's light. The Gatsby in us works to impress others with what we have, and to have more. We try to love but do not know how.

The Daisy and Tom, two sides of the same bad coin, we look up to, even love, as friends, turn out to be worthless, more helpless than we are – rich in words but poor in spirit in our time of need – so that we are left all alone to "clean up the mess they had made ...". They are the epitome of cruel moral emptiness that pervades "the valley of ashes" that is West Egg.

Or perhaps we could be Nick – we should – for, he is the only one in the story who truly loves and is loved, watching everything and learning from his pains and theirs, so that we, who see and hear, would not make the same mistakes (at least), but better our lives and care for others.

R355 Simple Joys 256  
Piya Tan ©2014