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**Symbols in the Great Gatsby by Frederick Millett**

Posted on [February 20, 2013](http://excellence-in-literature.com/american-lit/e3-resources/symbols-in-the-great-gatsby-by-frederick-millett) by [Rebecca](http://excellence-in-literature.com/author/rebeccashealy)

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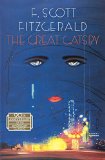
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**Symbols in *The Great Gatsby***

**by Frederick C. Millett**

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Perhaps F. Scott Fitzgerald’s greatest work, *The Great Gatsby* is not only a  
great story, but an insight into the flaws of real life during the “Roaring  
Twenties.” His book has been considered by many a symbol for the “Jazz  
Age,” a time of extraordinary wealth and promise, but Fitzgerald’s novel is  
much more than that, presenting the truth behind the twenties and  
creating an atmosphere which has earned a permanent place in  
American literature. Fitzgerald’s novel works on many different levels,  
giving us unforgettable characters and events on one, as well as referring  
to the problems of American wealth and spirituality on another. However,  
what is the main point of the book? And most importantly, what on earth  
is that mysterious green light? Those questions, as well as many others will  
be answered in this analysis, which will discuss the underlying meaning and  
symbolism behind *The Great Gatsby*.

“I didn’t call to him, for he gave a sudden intimation that he was content  
to be alone – he stretched out his arms towards the dark water in a curious  
way, and, far as I was from him, I could have sworn he was trembling.  
Involuntarily I glanced seaward – and distinguished nothing except a  
single green light, minute and far away, that might have been the end of  
a dock. When I looked once more for Gatsby he had vanished, and I was  
alone again in the unquiet darkness.” (16)

So ends the first chapter of *The Great Gatsby* and brings to our attention  
the first symbol in this book – that mysterious green light. In our first  
acquaintance with the light, we see Gatsby reaching out for it, almost, in  
a way, worshiping it. We find out later that this green light is at the end of  
Daisy’s dock, and is a symbol for Gatsby’s dream and the hope for the  
future. Green is the color of promise, hope, and renewal – so it is fitting that  
Gatsby’s dream of a future with Daisy be represented physically in the  
novel by this green light. Later, in the final chapter of this novel, Fitzgerald  
compares Gatsby’s green light to the “green breast of the new world”  
(115), comparing Gatsby’s dream of rediscovering Daisy to the explorer’s  
discovery of America and the promise of a new continent. However,  
Gatsby’s dream is tarnished by his material possessions, much like America  
is now with our obsession with wealth. The means corrupt the end, and  
Gatsby’s dream dies because of Daisy, Gatsby, and Tom’s carelessness  
and superficiality, as does Gatsby for the same reasons.

At the end of the first chapter we are given the green light, a symbol for  
the hope and promise of the future. At the beginning of the second  
chapter, however, we are introduced to the “foul wasteland” of the  
present. Fitzgerald calls it a “valley of ashes” (16), where only the eyes of  
Dr. T.J. Eckleburg look over it from a billboard nearby. This section of the  
novel can be interpreted as the foul, material-driven world that the main  
characters live in, and which helps to destroy Gatsby’s dream. The eyes of  
Dr. Eckleburg symbolize in this chapter advertising and materialism gone  
mad, one of the central themes of the plot. Later in the book, right before  
the climax, Daisy tells Gatsby that he reminds her of an advertisement. This  
statement confirms that Daisy does not like Gatsby for himself, but for the  
superficial illusion he represents. On a larger scale, it is through advertising  
that the material aspects of the American Dream are revealed. Hence, it  
only makes sense that Fitzgerald would use references to advertising  
throughout the course of his novel. Also in advertising, eternal youth,  
wealth, and beauty are constantly emphasized, which goes along with  
Gatsby’s youthful dream of Daisy and explains why Fitzgerald never has to  
develop his characters. Fitzgerald’s novel is only one big advertisement,  
with all the characters involved living with eternal youth, wealth, and  
beauty that never develop in part because advertisements never  
develop.

Later on in *The Great Gatsby*, George Wilson, after seeing his wife die in a  
tragic car accident, gives the eyes of Dr. T.J. Eckleburg a whole new  
meaning. Wilson, a very non-religious man, compares the doctor’s eyes to  
those of God, watching over him through the “foul dust” and desolate  
wasteland in which the novel is set. This is only one of many religious  
overtones mentioned or hinted at by Fitzgerald throughout *The Great*  
*Gatsby*. At the end of the first chapter, we see Gatsby reaching out for  
the green light, almost in the attitude of a worshiper. This is the first  
suggestion Fitzgerald gives us that Gatsby’s quest for Daisy is more than  
just a physical endeavor, but a spiritual one as well. During the flashback  
in chapter seven, when Gatsby first met Daisy, his mind is compared to  
the mind of God, which will never act the same again if he kisses her. A  
chapter earlier, Nick writes the following concerning why Gatsby  
changed his name:

“He was a son of God – a phrase which, if it means anything, means just  
that – and he must be about His Father’s business, the service of a vast,  
vulgar, and meretricious beauty. So he invented just the sort of Jay Gatsby  
that a seventeen-year-old boy would be likely to invent, and to this  
conception he was faithful to the end.” (63)

Gatsby, by changing his name, in a way creates himself anew, making his  
life more like that of God. In chapter eight, we find two instances of  
religious imagery. Daisy is compared to the “Holy Grail” and Gatsby’s  
dream is like a knight’s quest, showing once again the dream’s  
nature. Also in this chapter, we see Gatsby, after the car accident,  
looking over Daisy from her yard, trying to protect her. His watch over her  
window is compared to a vigil, and while Nick talked to Gatsby that night,  
he sensed that his presence was ruining the “sacredness” of the moment.  
However, Gatsby’s vigil was over nothing – Daisy was never in her room  
that night – much like Gatsby’s dream is over a nonexistent person. The  
Daisy he met and fell in love with years ago is not the same person  
anymore, and as much as Gatsby thinks that he can repeat the past, in  
the real world it is proven to be impossible. On one level, Fitzgerald gives  
us Gatsby’s dream as a spiritual quest, but on another level, we find out  
that this is yet another reason why his dream fails. His faith is misplaced,  
because the object of his quest is nothing more than Daisy Buchanan. In  
turn, Fitzgerald is saying that the spirituality of America is misplaced  
because of our obsession with material wealth, which creates a sort of  
national delusion.

When the early explorers first came to America, escaping the corruption  
of their old world in search of the promise of a new world, they traveled  
from east to west. Now, America itself is corrupted, so the characters in  
*The Great Gatsby* travel from west to east – in search of wealth and  
sophistication – leaving the moral values and stability of the west behind. It  
is this eastern part which is called a “valley of ashes” by Fitzgerald, a place  
where morals are left out and only superficial, material-driven people can  
live in peace. Fitzgerald uses this change in direction as a symbol for the  
deterioration of American ideals and the American Dream, helping to  
prove that our quest for wealth and sophistication is corrupting our  
culture, and causing us to live in a wasteland of morals – an ash heap of  
civilization.

All these previous symbols – the green light, the ash heap, and the east  
and west – have one thing in common: change. Change is apparent in  
both the action and the underlying meaning and symbols of the novel.  
From the basic storyline, we find three major instances of change. First, all  
major characters change where they live, with Tom and Daisy a prime  
example – moving frequently from place to place throughout their life  
before arriving at East Egg. Also, Gatsby changes his name, which allows  
him to start his life from scratch and make it more like that of God – all in  
the ultimate goal of attaining Daisy. And finally we have the changing of  
the seasons, which symbolically correspond to changes in the storyline  
during *The Great Gatsby*. On one level, Fitzgerald writes these elements of  
change in the action of the novel, but on another level, he hints at  
change symbolically.The green light is a symbol for hope and promise – a  
hope that the “ash heap” of the present will change to that of a great  
future, where dreams come true and the American Dream is realized.

Overlooking this ash heap of the present are the eyes of Dr. T.J. Eckleburg,  
which change in meaning throughout the novel. In chapter two, they  
symbolize materialism and advertising gone mad, showing how corrupt  
the American Dream and American idealism have become. However,  
later in the novel his eyes are compared to those of God – changing their  
meaning to a more spiritual one – symbolizing how American spirituality  
has been corrupted by our quest for wealth and material possessions. We  
also see a change in travel in Gatsby – from the traditional east-west  
direction to the opposite movement from west to east – which symbolizes  
the corruption in America today. People now move from stable, moral  
environments in the west to the lavish, highly superficial wealth of the east  
– an east which is characterized by Fitzgerald as the ash heap of  
civilization. With all this change in *The Great Gatsby*, only one character  
changes throughout the course of the novel: Nick. Gatsby cannot  
change because his life is based on a dream he set for himself as a youth  
and Tom and Daisy cannot develop because their life is one big  
advertisement, living in eternal youth, beauty, and wealth. Nick however,  
changes a great deal throughout the novel – which we see most  
prominently in two statements he makes. At the end of chapter three,  
Nick states:

“Everyone suspects himself of at least one of the cardinal virtues, and this is  
mine: I am one of the few honest people that I have ever known.” (39) 155

He later corrects this statement, during a conversation with Jordan Baker,  
saying: “I’m thirty. I’m five years too old to lie to myself and call it honour”  
(113). He develops enough in this story to realize that he is not above the  
rest of the characters, and is capable of lies and superficiality as well.  
What saves, or sets Nick apart from the rest, however, may have been his  
realization of his thirtieth birthday. At the climax of the novel, Nick kind of  
awkwardly throws in the fact (right in the middle of the big argument) that  
it’s his thirtieth birthday. However, this is actually a relevant detail for the  
conversation. The age of thirty is symbolic for the passing of youth – or the  
passing of innocence. Hence, the turning point in Nick’s life occurs  
simultaneously with the turning point in Gatsby’s – the termination of his  
youthful dream. Some could even say that Nick’s character develops in  
that statement on that day alone – with his passing of youth. It is fitting that  
Nick be the only character that Fitzgerald develops in *The Great Gatsby*,  
because as the narrator, Nick uses symbols of change to correspond to his  
own character development.

All the following symbols in *The Great Gatsby*, when put together, give us  
the main theme or point that Fitzgerald is trying to make – that American  
idealism and spirituality have been corrupted by material possessions and  
wealth. Gatsby’s dream fails because of his material wealth he must  
possess to accomplish it. In this respect, Gatsby fails before he even  
begins – showing the unforgiving nature of a land characterized by  
Fitzgerald as a wasteland of ashes. This “ash heap” is the present, the  
terrible time where *The Great Gatsby* takes place – a time which all hope  
is lost for the future, and Gatsby’s sacred green light becomes nothing  
more than just a light at the end of Daisy’s dock.

“Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgiastic 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 … And one fine morning –

So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the  
past.” (115)

Ceaselessly into the past, because the future is far too grim to imagine.  
Hope is lost, but that’s no matter, we will still keep trying – and who knows,  
one day maybe we can accomplish our dreams.

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

*Editor’s Note: Many thanks to Mr. Millet for graciously granting permission for us to reproduce this article, which was originally hosted* [*at Michigan State University*](https://www.msu.edu/%7Emillettf/gatsby.html)*.*

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[](http://excellence-in-literature.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/F_Milletpic.jpg)Frederick Millett is a graduate of Michigan State University and the University of New Hampshire School of Law (formerly Franklin Pierce Law Center).  While in law school, Mr. Millett worked as an intern at the Southern Center for Human Rights (SCHR) in Atlanta, Georgia, where, among other things, he worked on and helped write the reply brief for the Supreme Court case, *Snyder v. Louisiana*, 128 S. Ct. 1203 (2008).  He is now an attorney at [Fitzpatrick, Cella, Harper, & Scinto](http://www.fitzpatrickcella.com/?t=3&A=2161&format=xml&p=2429) in New York, where he practices intellectual property law.  Mr. Millett is the author of the following publications:

* [“Will the United States Follow England (and the Rest of the World) in Abandoning Capital Punishment,”](http://law.unh.edu/assets/images/uploads/publications/pierce-law-review-vol06-no3-millett.pdf) 6 *Pierce L. Rev.* 547 (2008).
* [“Saving Lives: My Externship Experience at Atlanta’s Southern Center for Human Rights,”](http://law.unh.edu/assets/images/uploads/pages/magazine-2008-vol12-no1-winter.pdf) *Pierce Law Magazine*, Winter 2008.
* “The Death Penalty Increases Murder,” in WRITING THE CRITICAL ESSAY: THE DEATH PENALTY 37–44 (William Dudley ed., Thomson Gale 2006).

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