

Abstract

The Great Gatsby and Icarus: Explaining the Parallels and Problems of an Entropic Universe

This thesis examines the unique relationship between F. Scott Fitzgerald's twentieth-century *The Great Gatsby* with the poet Ovid's first-century "The Story of Icarus and Daedalus." The two accounts parallel each other in their plots, characters, and, most significantly, themes. Isolation, a dramatic rise, illegitimate means of ascension, and a drastic fall are all found in both stories, as is the idea of entropy. Entropy is the principle that everything has a tendency toward decay, something that is still evident even today. This thesis then examines both accounts in light of Aristotle's model for tragedy and the tragic hero as found in *The Poetics*. This study then serves to teach all readers about the literary merit of *Gatsby* as a tragedy, and ultimately, the intended message of both Ovid's myth and Fitzgerald's novel about surviving in a world characterized by entropy, messages that are equally relevant to our world today.

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Literature Review

In “The Eyes of Dr. Eckleburg: A Re-examination of ‘The Great Gatsby’”, author Tom Burnam discusses what potentially is lacking from F. Scott Fitzgerald’s greatest work. Both literary critics and Fitzgerald himself admitted to misgivings about this novel, feeling that it was lacking in some way, although no definite conclusion was ever reached about what exactly was missing from this narrative. Burnam explores and addresses the suggested deficiencies of this work, but in the end, refutes these notions and claims that the greatest fault of the work is in its multiplicity of meanings, that there is, in fact, too much.

At the beginning of his article, Burnam asserts that there is much “more in *The Great Gatsby* than a protagonist, a plot, and a green light” (7). He focuses on the symbolism outside of the overt theme of the novel. In particular, he examines the potential of the ever-staring eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg (as seen in the optometrist’s advertisement) and the strangeness of the conversation between Nick Carraway and Jordan Baker about her inability to drive an automobile, when ultimately it is Daisy, accompanied by Gatsby, who runs down Myrtle Wilson. Burnam goes as far as stating that the “overt theme of *The Great Gatsby* has little to do...with the novel’s use of symbol”(8) and that the subdominant motif, in many ways over powers the intended theme of the work. With this being the case, Burnam states that it is then implied that Fitzgerald could not have been entirely aware of what he was doing as he crafted the novel.

According to Burnam, this implication criticizing Fitzgerald is also supported by the voice of the narrator. It is nearly impossible for a reader to believe that one as simple as Nick Carraway, a young bond salesman, could have articulated the magnificent prose that

characterizes the work. Instead, the reader sees Fitzgerald clearly seeping through various passages, particularly those in the third chapter, describing Gatsby's party.

Thus the novel may very well involve not merely the theme which Nick presents in his own character, but also another which may be called, for lack of a better name, the 'Fitzgerald theme.' And it is toward the latter, I believe, that almost all the symbolism in *The Great Gatsby* is directed. (Burnam 8)

It is this duality of themes, according to Burnam, that is the greatest shortcoming of the novel, although Fitzgerald himself never recognized this particular fault.

However, Fitzgerald did find several other weaknesses in his greatest work. Burnam cites several of Fitzgerald's letters, where he admits that it lacked something, although Fitzgerald could not consistently define what it was. In a letter to fellow writer, John Peale Bishop, Fitzgerald described *The Great Gatsby* as "blurred and patchy" and said "I never at any one time saw him clear myself—for he started out as one man I knew and then changed into myself" (qtd. in Burnam 9). In a different letter, that same year, Fitzgerald admitted to Edmund Wilson that his worst fault was that he "gave no account (and had no feeling about or knowledge of) the emotional relations between Gatsby and Daisy from the time of their reunion to the catastrophe" (qtd. in Burnam 9).

Burnam dismisses the latter misgiving completely, with the belief that if those emotional relations had been included, the novel would have been worse off. The sentimentality would have cheapened the novel as a whole and also would have contradicted the point of the Carraway theme regarding the attitudes and behaviors found in the East. At the same time, Burnam does not give full credit to the notion that the fault of the novel is a lack of consistency in Gatsby's character (as Gatsby becomes Fitzgerald).

However, Burnam does admit that this idea is closer to the root of the problem. In the end, he claims that it is not that something is missing at all. Burnam attributes the feeling that something is missing to the perpetual confusion of themes and also “the duality of the symbol-structure” (10). The shortcoming is that the work is being pulled in two different directions. If *The Great Gatsby* had simply focused on either Carraway’s theme or on Fitzgerald’s theme, it would have been “incomparable”, but by “revealing perhaps a little too much of the person who created it, it becomes somewhat less sharp, less pointed, more diffused in its effect” (10).

Fitzgerald’s identification with Gatsby was a major point of interest in this article, as well as those by several other critics. The need for order amongst the chaos and the view of money as a means to happiness were prevalent ideologies to both Fitzgerald and Gatsby. In the end, both men died young and full of potential, but they “had lost the old warm world, and paid a high price for living too long with a single dream” (qtd. in Burnam 12). Lionell Trilling thought that Jay Gatsby, not only represented Fitzgerald, but also “is to be thought of as standing for America itself” (qtd. in Burnam 12). That is to say that the pursuit of order and, most importantly, of happiness are characteristic of not only Jay and Fitzgerald, but also of our nation and perhaps our human nature.

In his article “The Structure of *The Great Gatsby*”, Kenneth Eble reveals a complete disagreement with the ideas that Burnam suggests about the shortcomings of the novel. Burnam suggested that *The Great Gatsby* had more content and complexity than most critics would give it credit for and also claimed that this complication was the result of at best haphazard, and at worst lazy writing which then caused a loss of sharpness or efficacy. Eble asserts just the opposite. According to him, “directness and simplicity are fundamental

characteristics of the novel” (5). Eble also views time and the deliberate placement of events within the text as one of Fitzgerald’s most essential tools in giving the work both shape and meaning, thoughts which are also echoed by Jeffery Steinbrink.

Eble analyzed the structure of the novel by viewing it particularly through the lens of time. He presents a detailed outline of how the novel is oriented, which is not necessarily chronological. Eble claims that there is evidence of a pattern “of movement and withdrawal, and at the center, a moment of dead calm, possession”(7). In fact, he goes on to argue that the entirety of the novel is a mirror of the last sentence of the work: “And so, we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past” (qtd. in Eble 7), that is to say that the text surges forward into the future, but at the same time, revisits and dwells in the characters’ pasts. Those pasts are inescapably tied to the present and ultimately to the future or destiny of each of the characters as well.

Eble spends a fair portion of his argument focused on the literal and figurative center of the novel: the scene in which Daisy and Gatsby meet again in chapter five. This scene has a sense of utter stillness. The hesitancy and the awkwardness are practically tangible. This is the first time that readers get to see both Gatsby as he created himself to be contrasted with the real Gatsby of the past, and also this is the first time that Gatsby himself must face his two identities being brought together. In the aftermath of this scene, Gatsby broadly gives his central speech to Nick Carraway: “ ‘Can’t repeat the past?’ he cried incredulously. ‘Why of course you can!’ ” It is a moment of both potential and risk.

The way Eble describes it parallels the flip of a coin. With the flick of a finger, the coin is sent into the air, but it slows to a stop as it reaches the highest point of arch, Daisy and Gatsby’s reunion, and begins its descent. It then gains momentum up until it crashes to

the ground, so accordingly, after this point in chapter five, the work only gains momentum up until the car accident and the moment in which George Wilson murders Gatsby. Then in chapter nine, “the forward movement of the novel stops...and is told as it lives in Nick Carraway’s memory two years later.” The reader arrives yet again in the past as he or she is exposed to the copybook maxims of a young James Gats, long before he was the great Jay Gatsby.

Eble cites his own detailed examination of the structure of *The Great Gatsby* as evidence of what he calls the greatest virtue of the novel: “the tight invariability of its construction” (7). The deliberate and consistent manner in which the book was organized creates the unique sense of timeless that has led it to be canonized. Despite so many aspects being tied to the era of the Jazz Age, or even specific dates, the novel is successful in creating a sense of timelessness as a result of “matching the swiftly on-going narrative with a less swift but powerful movement into the past” (7).

Eble praises the novel’s structure not only for the final result that we see in the published editions, but also for the painstaking care and diligence that characterized its construction. Many of the details of the layout that Eble praises did not come to be until after the book was in galley proof. The most crucial change that Fitzgerald made, according to Eble was in taking the true story of James Gats from chapter eight, to the beginning of chapter six, just after the static center of the work (8). This allowed that moment of stillness to last just a bit longer in the mind of the reader. Fitzgerald was also then placing it just before the party scene, where Gatsby begins to realize the vanity of his dreams, causing this particular flashback to have the greatest possible amount of impact.

While the majority of the changes made in the galley proofs are the transposing of materials and the rewriting of scenes involved those transpositions particularly in the central chapters of the novel, Eble also commends the small changes that Fitzgerald made throughout the entirety the novel to achieve his highly polished style. The changes that Eble references in particular are “ ‘Silhouette’ for ‘shadow,’ ‘vanished’ for ‘gone,’ ‘soiled’ for ‘spotted’ ” and other phrases such as “ ‘corky but rather impressive claret’ for ‘wine’ ” along with many others. Eble gives such extensive examples because “such small changes add up to that Fitzgerald stylistic touch which can only be defined satisfactorily by citing passages” (8).

Jeffery Steinbrink wrote “Boats Against the Current: Mortality and the Myth of Renewal in *The Great Gatsby*”, focusing on the rise and fall of Jay Gatsby in light of his uniquely optimistic attitude and vision for the future in an obviously entropic universe. Steinbrink, like Burnam, declares that there is a multiplicity of meanings in this novel and that the reader is inevitably pulled in two different directions: “toward the naïve hope that the best of life is yet to come, and toward the realization that such circumstances as give life meaning lie buried in an irrecoverable past” (157), a juxtaposing of the desires of the heart and the knowledge of the head.

According to Steinbrink (and echoing the ideas of Lionell Trilling), entropy characterized not only the world of the novel, but rather all of America, and the universe as a whole. With the loss of the Jeffersonian dream and the innocence of the world before the Great War, it became evident to writers, philosophers, and scientists alike, that there was a trend toward disorder, that the world was like a clock with an ever loosening mainspring, that chaos was unavoidable (Steinbrink 158). The possibilities and potential of the New

World had been completely diminished and even the “dream that technology would provide a means to happiness” (158) dwindled and was replaced by a nightmare that technology would bring about our demise even more quickly. This doctrine of inevitable social decline and degeneration had an obvious impact on Fitzgerald’s work. Steinbrink states that this is an obvious reminder that “the course of human experience...is best described as a downward glide... that regeneration and renewal are myths, at best metaphors, rather than real possibilities of actual life” (158). As a result, the characters of *The Great Gatsby* who oppose or ignore this aspect of reality are incredibly young, incredibly foolish, or both.

The most obvious character that resisted this ideology was Jay Gatsby himself. Gatsby represented a pre-war idealism that was wholly insupportable, but he “adopts the myth of regeneration as the single sustaining principle of his existence”(Steinbrink 161). He fought tirelessly and solely to regain the past; he dreamt of regaining a time when he and Daisy could have and would have been. Everything he did was in an effort to realize this impossible dream. This idealism was both a blessing and a curse. (162) Gatsby’s hopes and expectations for his life were going in a direction perpendicular to the entropic decline, which caused his fall to be that much more poignant.

Nick, Jordan, and Daisy also adopted such an ideology, even if only temporarily. Nick moved East with the hope of a new career and new social circles and claimed “life was beginning over again with the summer” (qtd. in Steinbrink 160). Despite being the most cynical of Fitzgerald’s characters, Jordan also echoed that same notion when Daisy asked what they would do with themselves for the next day or for the next thirty years and Jordan told her not to be morbid, but that “Life starts all over again when it gets crisp in the fall”

(qtd. in Steinbrink 161). Daisy believes that little embellishments to her life and surroundings should be enough to revive the meaning of life. She and Tom moved about often, always in search of the next great thing with a certainty that it did exist and they would find it. With each of these moments, Fitzgerald allows the reader to “entertain the hope that it is possible to make a ‘fresh start’—to undo the calamities of the past or to relive its quintessential moments” (Steinbrink 159).

However, immediately in the novel, Fitzgerald uses Tom to serve as a classic manifestation and proof of entropic theory in human form. On page six of the novel, he is described as “one of those men who reach such an acute limited excellence at twenty-one that everything afterward savors of anticlimax” (qtd. in Steinbrink 161). He is the first example of the perpetual decline and inevitable fall. The far more significant fall is that of Gatsby. Steinbrink specifically referenced Gatsby’s line in chapter six about the certainty of being able to repeat the past connecting it with the scene in the hotel in New York when Daisy cries that she “can’t help what is past” (qtd. in Steinbrink 165) This ends all of Gatsby’s hopes for the future; he needed Daisy to ignore the limitations of time with him, but her comment soiled his dream. Gatsby cannot manipulate time; he cannot “fix” things as Wolfsheim fixed the World Series.

After this scene, the death of Gatsby follows quickly, almost mercifully. “He is not given time to contemplate his fall or to learn very much from it” (Steinbrink 166). There is scarcely even time for despair to get its grips on him. So then, it becomes the responsibility of Nick to apply the lesson meant for and created by Gatsby’s fall. Reinforcing Eble’s claims about the structure of the novel, Steinbrink asserts that Nick is “driven toward this integrative view of past and present both by his penchant for honesty and by a sense of the

connectedness of time" (167). Nick admires the scope of Gatsby's vision and all the sincerity with which he devotes himself towards its realization, but Nick also acknowledges that Gatsby was ignorant of both the enormity of the task before him and that his efforts were destined to fail.

The reader then finds that the illusions presented by this myth of renewal do give a momentary comfort, but "to surrender to the myth of rejuvenation is to deny both the nature of reality and the chance for a modicum of contentment" (Steinbrink 161). We see both Gatsby's greatness as well as his monumental foolishness and Nick's determination "to examine the interplay of vision and restraint, of timeless imagination and historical reality, in the hope of striking a proper balance between the two" (Steinbrink 168). Steinbrink concludes his essay by bringing these ideas together: to live successfully, one must be in a state of "equilibrium between resistance to the current and surrender to its flow...and [accommodating] the lessons of his past to his visions of the future, giving in to neither" (168).

In "The Theme and the Narrator of *The Great Gatsby*", Thomas Hanzo asks the reader to critically compare the experiences and attitudes of Jay Gatsby with that of Nick Carraway. Although Hanzo does not presume that his view of Nick will revolutionize the interpretation of this novel, he does go so far as to say that "Fitzgerald's intention cannot be clarified nor the significance of his achievement grasped, without our sharing with Nick the trial of his self and the activity of his conscience in that society of which Gatsby is only the most notable part" (61).

Fitzgerald giving Nick's character free reign to reveal himself and his history as he opens and concludes the novel, rather than going immediately to Gatsby supports this

assertion. Nick gives himself a sense of authority as a narrator as he explains why he has been inclined to reserve judgment and by further admitting that there was eventually a limit to his tolerance all in the first chapter (Hanzo 62). Nick's candor is more evident in his revealing and pointing the reader to a time of his life when he was not without fault, in order to give Gatsby the credit he is due.

These two men were wholly different people which is what Hanzo would argue gives additional value and weight to the story that Nick is obliged to tell. Specifically, readers can look at the way in which Nick describes Gatsby.

'Gatsby... represented everything for which I have unaffected scorn' but 'There was something gorgeous about him, some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life...' Gatsby had 'an extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness.' Gatsby, Nick says, 'turned out all right in the end.' (qtd. in Hanzo 66)

Nick felt that he and others lacked this "romantic readiness" and that they were incapable of seeing the world as they once had before the War. As a result, it wasn't Gatsby that Nick regarded as foolish, but rather the corruption that surrounded the dream which Gatsby had so tirelessly adhered to (Hanzo 66).

Hanzo takes care to draw up a full comparison of both Jay Gatsby and Nick Carraway as they were at the beginning of the summer of 1922 and also in the aftermath. In the beginning, Gatsby has wealth and Nick has little to his name but a decent reputation back home in the Mid-West. Gatsby is completely alone even while his house is filled with people; Nick makes even unwanted friends easily. Gatsby is mysterious and obsessive, but Nick is quite sane and his life is utterly ordinary. The reader sees that Gatsby has adopted

the sophistication and the corruption of the East while Nick strives to hold on to the simple virtue of his Mid-Western ideals (Hanzo 62).

Gatsby and Carraway do not maintain their initial characteristics through the entirety of the novel. Nick recognizes how he has been taken in by the ideals and glamour of the East. This is shown in the irresponsibility of his love affair with Jordan Baker and also in willingly allowing himself to be used by Gatsby in the pursuit of Daisy. Nick is hesitant to end his relationship with Jordan and refuses to confront Gatsby about this fault, but he does recognize that he cannot ignore or escape the negative and violent consequences of the cynicism and selfishness of Jordan and Gatsby, as well as Tom and Daisy (Hanzo 64). Nick rightfully fears the destructiveness of the hedonism of the East. By the end, we see Nick reverting to his original morality. He recognizes his own guilt, moves back to his secure Mid-West roots, and again wishes the world to “stand at a sort of moral attention forever” (qtd. in Hanzo 68) and have “a sense of fundamental decencies”(qtd. in Hanzo 65) ingrained in its nature. Essentially, by the end of the story, Nick had learned that in truth morality has always been ridged and that the past always was and would permanently be behind him.

One cannot say as much for Gatsby, he learns nothing in the course of the summer, or if he does, it is not until after his doom is clearly inevitable. Gatsby is determined that he can remake the past, that he can bring back fully what might have been. By the end of the novel, it is clear that this is not the case. However, Hanzo would argue that Nick’s character does not consider this a fault in Gatsby, only in the dream that he dedicated himself to (65). Nick actually idolizes Gatsby’s capacity of will: “a tremendous energy to accomplish certain purposes, and a self-imposed delusion which makes those purposes meaningful” (Hanzo

66). The past simultaneously pushes him into the future and holds him back from the present. So we must conclude that Fitzgerald did not isolated a single function of the past, but rather he uses the past as both a loss and also as a source of strength.

In the end, according to Hanzo, Nick discovered that truthfully, and especially in the case of Gatsby, “the power of will without the direction of intelligence is a destructive power, that there must be some real end beyond the satisfaction of private desire...to justify the expenditure of life” (67). To live well, one must want something better than or at least other than “the old warm world” which is lost permanently in the past; he or she must allow for the limitations of the past and also understand the importance of having a morality that goes beyond personal interests.

Like Kenneth Eble, Roger Lewis in “Money, Love, and Aspiration in The Great Gatsby” focuses on the complexity and duality of the ideals and identities of each major character and also the themes. Lewis also pays special attention to the unique relationship of love and money in contrast with the more common separation of the two concepts in the majority of American fiction. This separation of love and money was especially prevalent before World War I (Lewis 41). It rose out of American ideals that declared that individual effort counted and that a man could rise by his own efforts. Moreover, the vision of perpetual rising was both achievable and unable to be tainted.

World War I destroyed this dream, but the ideals faded more slowly. As a result the 1920s were the ideal time for writing legendary works (Lewis 42). Sandwiched between an optimistic American dream and a jarring reality, the “doubleness” of Fitzgerald’s novel was not only expected, but it was effective in chronicling the changes of both the characters and American society at this time.

Lewis cites Nick's opening in the novel as the first example of "doubleness". He senses because of his father's advice, that he is too quick to condemn and ought to instead reserve his judgment, but in the next paragraph he ties his "cynical, guilty disapproval [to] the New York that the book is about to portray" (Lewis 42). He keeps a foot in the past to honor the traditions of his family, but also lives his own life, keeping a foot firmly in the present. In his candid judgments, Nick does make an exception for Gatsby despite his obvious interest in vanity, wealth, and all that the East has to offer; to Nick, Gatsby is the pure embodiment of the older, more humane America, although ironically so (Lewis 43). Nick's inconsistency in attitude can also be seen in his portrayals of the other characters in the story.

Lewis thinks that Daisy, as perfect as she seems to Gatsby, is enveloped by doubleness as well, specifically because of how Nick chooses to portray her. When the reader first meets Daisy, it is immediately after being confronted with Tom's cruelty and the contrast causes her to appear all the more enchanting. The reader is instantly drawn into the "excitement in her voice that... was difficult to forget: a singing compulsion, a whispered 'Listen,' a promise...of exciting things" (qtd. in Lewis 44). We see Daisy as Gatsby saw her. But as soon as we are fully submerged in the magic and romance of her demeanor, Nick "pulls us back. 'The instant her voice broke off...I felt the basic insincerity of what she had said'" (qtd. in Lewis 44) Without Nick's sensibility, reader could easily miss the insincerity that cheapens and complicates her character.

Finally, Lewis brings our attention to the doubleness of the great Gatsby himself. It is previewed by the irony of Nick's considering him to be representative of the old American ideal despite the fact that Gatsby is a perfect example of the lifestyle of the East.

As a result of Jay Gatsby's platonic conception of himself, he is both a moneymaker and a hopeless romantic (Lewis 44). The lack of an external force in his platonic conception or self-creation denies the potential of a greater meaning or purpose, the only context that he has is his past. Gatsby sees his money as the way to regain the romance of this past; it is both absurd and touching (Lewis 43). Although his romantic expressions toward Daisy are sincere, he uses his wealth to show his feelings, throwing glorious parties and showing Daisy his beautiful shirts, assuming that this would be enough. His ignorance of the limitations of money is fascinating. According to Lewis, Gatsby sees that the pursuit of money is a substitute for love (51), which resonates in his comment to Nick that "[Daisy's] voice is full of money," (qtd. in Lewis 50).

His doubleness is further exposed in his shifting identities, which are unsettling. Lewis draws particular attention to the reputations that supersede the man at his own party. His identity shifts "according to which party guest one listens to, but most of the identities, even the one that turns out to be 'true,' have something of the unreal or fantastic about them" (Lewis 46). Even in death, he did not have a truthful or singular identity. He exemplifies the rootlessness that many faced in the post war world.

There are also contradictions in the themes and morals of the novel that Lewis draws the reader's attention to. There is a sense of morality even greater than Nick's commentary on the values of the East versus the West; Fitzgerald's use of the word "non-olfactory" tells the reader clearly that Gatsby's money smells. It is the result of bootlegging and other illegal activities; it reeks of corruption (Lewis 52). Gatsby fails to realize that the illegitimacy of his means only serves to compromise even further the potential end he might have with Daisy, but to the reader it becomes very clear that "you cannot win the

ideal with the corrupt, and you cannot buy integrity or taste with dollars” (Lewis 52). When Daisy experiences one of Gatsby’s parties, she is repulsed rather than attracted. However, the reader’s only window to this morality is Nick, who at times is overwhelmed by the glamour of it all. He excuses the foolishness of Gatsby’s dream for its romanticism and lets the reader see how this Eastern world truly glitters. Nick somehow makes his opinions and judgments clear without being didactic, perhaps because of his own failure to avoid the temptations, he encourages the reader to take time to examine the world that he ends up condemning.

Lewis uses all of this to help us approach the problematic function of money, particularly old money and new money. Gatsby’s reverent comment about Daisy’s voice being like money is something that we could never hear from Tom. Money is a fact of Tom’s life. It is not a source of allurements. He knows that with his considerable fortune he can buy any material thing, but that it will be just that: material. There is no greater meaning or purpose, but it is a very stable substitute for love. To Gatsby, it is just the opposite. It is powerful and attractive. Increasing his wealth is the foundation of his plan to get Daisy back. He sees money as a means to a perfect vision of the world with endless possibilities. Gatsby saw the money he procured as a promise of his illusions being realized.

In his essay “Fitzgerald’s Triumph,” Gale H. Carrithers, Jr. examines how gestures in *The Great Gatsby* and the intentions behind them answer the two most pertinent questions in life: “Who am I?” and “What is the nature of the world?” He claims that Fitzgerald makes a clear commentary on the implications of the answers based on concrete and particular things in the novel (303). Along with the old adage that actions speak louder than words, the reader sees each character establish the most genuine aspects of his or her identity by

being truly “present” in the text and by making these dramatic gestures, whether physical or vocal. “Gestures are objective, precise, public, arguable—the exact opposite as Nick says, of emotions, which are subjective, vague, personal, inarguable” (Carrithers 304).

Fitzgerald, through the words of Nick Carraway, allows for the assumption that “personality is an unbroken series of successful gestures” (qtd. in Carrithers 304). For this reason, Carrithers spends considerable time expounding on the gestures of Gatsby, Tom, and Nick. Gatsby’s first significant gesture is his smile (Carrithers 305). It created an undeniable sense of hope for the future and a feeling that he had a great deal of charity towards whoever observed the smile, even the drunk party guests who were unaware that this smiling gentleman was their host. A second gesture of Gatsby’s that Carrithers refers to is Gatsby’s placing himself “between Nick and Wolfsheim and the worlds they represent” (305). The third, and perhaps most significant of Gatsby’s gestures is a verbal one. Of Tom and Daisy, “he says, ‘Of course she might have loved him just for a minute...In any case, it was just personal’ (p. 152). This successfully implies, as Nick ironically hints, a willful and colossal conception of the self and one’s destiny” (Carrithers 305).

As a “big rich, high-ivy, football and polo bum, a ‘national figure,’ a pack of muscle,” (Carrithers 305) Tom’s most stereotypical gesture is in his pushing people where he wants the “play” to go: Nick into the house, off of the train, or to the apartment, all of which he does with success, but the reader also sees his gestures functioning unsuccessfully, particularly in regards to what he wants from Daisy. Unfortunately, Tom’s ultimate and perhaps only redeeming gesture is not one that the reader gets to witness, but the recollection of him carrying Daisy down from the Punch Bowl was enough to pull her back from Gatsby’s pursuit (Carrithers 306).

Nick's great gestures are all primarily vocal. Even from the beginning of the novel, there is a certain duality found in his descriptions. He is simultaneously inside of an event, partaking in the enjoyment or being victimized by the occurrence, and also removed from the event, viewing it analytically and often, critically. His contradictory style is meaningful and arguably his gestures even though vocal are the most successful of the three men. So, according to Carrithers, "in characterization by gesture, the reader may begin to see something of the variety of Fitzgerald's individuals."

In contrast, the reader's attention is also simultaneously drawn to the identities (or lack there of) of the partygoers. In a swirl of names and relations and trivial details, the reader finds themselves more confused about the guests than before he or she was introduced to any of them. The identifications that readers receive through news and society fail to give a legitimate identity to anyone, or if it does, it does so damningly. The true nature of the people at the party is barely visible, but yet we know. The indefiniteness is best summed up in this passage: "Sometimes a shadow moved against a dressing room blind above, gave way to another shadow, an indefinite procession of shadows, that rouged and powdered an invisible glass" (qtd. in Carrithers 309). Despite the flurry of movement, there were no real gestures, because there was not a clear intention in any of the movements.

Carrithers does admit that even purposeful gestures are not enough to truly capture and explain one's character. In Fitzgerald's constant referrals to the East and the West and the East Egg and the West Egg, the reader sees that setting and context both shape and expose a person's identity as well. All five of the main characters of this novel are, at their roots, Midwesterners and according to Nick, "possessed some deficiency in common which

made us subtly inadaptably to Eastern life" (qtd. in Carrithers 314). Their background shaped them and as a result, none of them found what they were looking for in the East; they could not escape the rootlessness of life after the War. They wandered into New York to find the ideal less than they had hoped and that their dreams had been soiled by the passing of time (Carrithers 314). The characters that we know best are the ones who we see in both in the past and present and in private and public settings, intimate conversations and parties.

Carrithers sums it up perfectly when he says that this novel's exploration both of "the nature of action, and of the degree of meaningfulness that action can have, comes out of four interlocking structures: imagery, action, time, and an ironic relation between narrator and material" (316). These four structures are what allow Nick, and readers through him, to learn from his adventures of the summer of 1922. He realized that a meaningless death and even meaningless actions were among the greatest things to be feared. Nick also learned that love, commitment, and responsibility were crucial aspects of avoiding meaninglessness in life (Carrithers 317-8). *Gatsby* is the primary example of this: he proved his love and commitment to Daisy, as he accepted responsibility for both his and her actions, and died to pay her price for Myrtle's death.

Nick's exhibition of these values is much more moderate, but in the long run, it is more effective. He adheres himself to the loves, commitments, and responsibilities that are found in his home in the West and also to *Gatsby's* story, not in a morbid sense, but in a recognition of its potential. Carrithers, like Eble and Hanzo, focuses in on the importance of what Nick was able to learn. He closes his essay with the powerful idea that "the structure of the whole book is focused not on *Gatsby's* tragic world, but on Nick's world and ours...

We remain alive, trying like Nick to make sense out of the somber, El Grecoish distortions and proportions of our world" (320).

Thesis

When *The Great Gatsby* was initially published in 1925, it received some excellent reviews, but lacked the commercial success that F. Scott Fitzgerald had hoped for. While he did receive letters of commendation from contemporary authors, including T.S. Elliot and Willa Cather, literary critics were divided on whether or not the novel had any merit. Some critics, such as Harvey Eagleton, went as far as saying that it signaled the end of Fitzgerald's success (Lucey). Fitzgerald admitted to misgivings about the novel, but even he could not consistently define what it was that the novel lacked. Fitzgerald describes *The Great Gatsby*, in a letter to fellow writer, John Peale Bishop, as "blurred and patchy," and notes that "I never at any one time saw [Gatsby] clear myself—for he started out as one man I knew and then changed into myself" (qtd. in Burnam 9). In a different letter, that same year, Fitzgerald admitted to Edmund Wilson that his worst fault was that he "gave no account (and had no feeling about or knowledge of) the emotional relations between Gatsby and Daisy from the time of their reunion to the catastrophe" (qtd. in Burnam 9). He also thought that the lack of an admirable female character was an aesthetic flaw that resulted in the book's low readership.

Despite the minimal success after its initial publication, the book that F. Scott Fitzgerald himself had deemed a failure, *The Great Gatsby*, experienced a revival at the time of World War II, when the Council on Books in Wartime provided 155,000 copies of the novel to soldiers. The book was "as popular as pin-up girls," according to one G.I., and the positive reception across seas propelled to the book to postwar recognition as the great American novel (Beckwith). As a result of this revival, not only were there multiple film adaptations produced in the following decades, but the novel found a home in classrooms

across America. Today, it is considered an iconic literary classic and was voted the best twentieth-century American novel in 1998 by the Modern Library editorial board (Radcliffe Publishing House). It has received copious amounts of attention from teachers, students, and literary critics alike. It is considered a glittering time capsule that contains the magic and the glamor of the Jazz Age. It is an exemplary piece of writing that can be considered a model for all writing, both in its structure and in its style. Arguably the revival of *The Great Gatsby* in the mid-twentieth century and its current status as an American classic are linked to its exploration of the problem of the American Dream, the themes of loss and longing, and the role they play in the human experience.

While most critics would likely agree that *The Great Gatsby* addresses issues that are universal to humanity, there is still dispute on the strengths and weaknesses of the novel. In "The Structure of The Great Gatsby," Kenneth Eble praises the directness and simplicity of the short novel. He marvels at how the placement of events mirrors the last line of the novel: "we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past" (Fitzgerald 115). The reader sees the swift, on-going narrative, but also notices how the present is manipulated and ultimately determined by the power of the past; Gatsby's undistinguished background and poverty, not to mention the illegitimate way that he escapes poverty, keeps him from Daisy and also, Daisy's personal history with Tom prevents her from leaving him. Because of this distinct structure relating the past and the present, Eble finally states that the "tight invariability of its construction" (7) is the reason that *Gatsby* has stayed with us. On the other hand, Tom Burnam, in "The Eyes of Dr. Eckleburg: A Re-Examination of The Great Gatsby," criticizes the "duality of symbol structure" (10), claiming that by pulling the reader in two directions simultaneously, it

becomes “somewhat less sharp, less pointed, more diffused in its effect” (10). While acknowledging that the overt theme is that of the futility of an attempt to recapture the past, Burnam is troubled by the symbols, such as the green light and the eyes of Dr. Eckleburg, which support the ironic subtheme of Gatsby’s determined attempt to beat against the current (8).

In “Boats Against the Current: Mortality and the Myth of Renewal in *The Great Gatsby*,” Jeffery Steinbrink focuses on a different type of duality. Steinbrink considers the juxtaposition of Gatsby’s pre-WWI American Dream idealism and the entropy that characterized the country after the War. He explores the relationship between the two ideas and declares that “the course of human experience...is best described as a downward glide... that regeneration and renewal are myths, at best metaphors, rather than real possibilities of actual life” (158). He then concludes that the characters of *The Great Gatsby* who oppose or ignore this aspect of reality are incredibly young, incredibly foolish, or both. In Roger Lewis’s essay “Money, Love, and Aspiration in *The Great Gatsby*,” he focuses on the issue of doubleness, examining the inconsistencies and insincerities of each of the principle characters and the complicated, absurd relationship between the themes of money and love. In “Fitzgerald’s Triumph,” Gale H. Carrithers, Jr. examines how concrete gestures in *The Great Gatsby* and the intentions behind them answer the two most pertinent questions in life: “Who am I?” and “What is the nature of the world?” Like Lewis, he examines each character’s concrete “gestures,” both physical and verbal, to answer these questions. Many critics focus on the relationship between Fitzgerald and Nick, the narrator, and also between Fitzgerald and Gatsby. Thomas Hanzo explores this issue in “The Theme and Narrator of *The Great Gatsby*” and also explores how Nick’s character acts

as a foil for Gatsby's character, dictating the major theme of the novel. Ultimately, we see each of these critics commenting on Fitzgerald's style, structure, or the way that he wrote each of his characters and their interactions. More than that, each of these critics uses those analyses to add to the conversation about the themes of the book. *The Great Gatsby* is about the American Dream, or rather, the corruption of it, the ideas of love, longing, and loss, the power and immovability of time, and finally, it is about living in a world where a fall is inevitable; all of which are perennial issues of the human experience.

In this thesis, I will examine *The Great Gatsby* in light of ancient literary traditions, including a comparison of Fitzgerald's twentieth-century novel to "The Story of Daedalus and Icarus", as recorded in Ovid's first century *Metamorphoses*, and also in relation to Aristotle's description and explanation of Greek tragedy as recorded in *The Poetics*, c. 335 BCE. I will explore how *The Great Gatsby* is informed by or parallels and complicates the Icarus myth, considering both the structure and major themes of *Gatsby* and of the Icarus myth. I will then use this study of the two works as a basis to determine what message Fitzgerald would want his readers to take away from his novel and its protagonist, the great Jay Gatsby, in relation to the concept of having hope in an entropic world. In *The Poetics*, Aristotle focuses on plot structure and description of the tragic hero. I will also base my analysis on how *The Great Gatsby* follows this model. This will demonstrate that not only is *The Great Gatsby* critically tied to ancient and acclaimed literary traditions, but informs and exemplifies the merits of those traditions and addresses the universal themes of both hope and of entropy among others, and as a result, has a presence and purpose in today's literary canon and in today's classroom. This purpose is not solely tied to the stylistic or structural merits which so many critics have commented on, but instead the

purpose is that all readers alike might use it to teach about human nature, our world, and ultimately, about ourselves.

In both the story of Icarus and *The Great Gatsby*, readers see a tendency toward decay. The worlds of both of these stories are characterized by entropy: a process of running down or degradation, or a trend to disorder. Entropy is the reason why paint peels, why hot coffee turns cold. Entropy is expressed in the second law of thermodynamics as an immutable law of nature which one must be aware of and conscientiously work against in order to achieve his or her goals (Requadt). So when literary critic, Jeffery Steinbrink focuses on the issue of entropy in his analysis of *The Great Gatsby*, asserting that entropy does not merely encompass the world of the novel, but also all of America (particularly in Fitzgerald's era) and the universe as a whole (158), this is a signal to readers that both Ovid's early first-century poem and Fitzgerald's more contemporary novel can be viewed through the same lens with which we view our own lives.

The action of *The Great Gatsby* takes place during the summer of 1922 in Long Island. Nick Carraway relates the events of that summer to the reader, focusing attention on Jay Gatsby and his aspirations. Nick is a Midwesterner who moved east to get into the bond business and ends up renting the house next to Gatsby's mansion and across the bay from his cousin, Daisy and her husband, Tom Buchanan. Nick finds out that Tom has a mistress and that Daisy is unhappy. Back on West Egg, Nick is invited to one of Gatsby's extravagant parties and eventually meets the man that he has heard so much about. Nick discovers that Daisy and Gatsby had been in love only five years earlier and that Gatsby's parties and extravagant lifestyle were all an effort to impress Daisy. Gatsby then asks Nick to arrange a meeting for him and Daisy, which Nick does gladly. After an initially awkward

reunion, Gatsby and Daisy begin an affair. Despite Tom's own involvement in an extramarital affair, he becomes increasingly jealous of Gatsby and Daisy's relationship. This conflict culminates when the five take a day trip to New York. After a gigantic argument, Daisy realizes that her allegiance is to Tom and that she can't change what is past, destroying Gatsby's dream. Gatsby and Daisy then head back to Long Island and Daisy strikes Myrtle Wilson, Tom's lover, with the car. Gatsby is willing to take the blame for Daisy, and Tom tells Myrtle's husband that it was Gatsby who killed Myrtle. Myrtle's husband arrives at Gatsby's mansion, shoots Gatsby and then himself. Nick holds a funeral for Gatsby, which aside from Gatsby's father, no one attends and then Nick moves back to the Midwest, disgusted by what he has encountered in the East.

Ovid's myth opens on Daedalus and Icarus trapped on the island of Crete by King Minos. Daedalus realizes that he cannot escape by the sea and decides to fashion wings for himself and his son, imitating the wings of a bird. Daedalus instructs his son to follow him and fly a middle course, explaining the risks of flying too high and too low. During the flight, Daedalus looks behind him and sees Icarus flying too close to the sun. The wax that bound Icarus's wings melts and he falls to his death.

These two stories appear wholly unrelated, particularly in regards to their setting, historical context, complexity, and format. However, within the context of a close reading, the parallels between *The Great Gatsby* and "The Story of Icarus and Daedalus" become more evident and arguably give greater weight to the meaning and significance of both stories. Jay Gatsby's roots were initially Midwestern. He was born and raised in the middle-of-nowhere North Dakota, as a child of inconsequential parents. Because of the actions and identities of his parents, James Gats found himself essentially trapped by an impoverished

family, a worthless name, and a lack of opportunities for achieving greatness. Similarly, Icarus was trapped and punished because of his father. King Minos had imprisoned Daedalus on the island of Crete for two reasons: to punish him for helping Pasiphaë to mate with a bull and to prevent him from spreading knowledge about the Labyrinth that he had created. For both James and Icarus, leaving the only home that they knew was the only way to truly live; for this reason, both characters have a sense of rootlessness about them.

James and Icarus both had aspirations far greater than their initial circumstances. As James Gats became Jay Gatsby, it was clear that his hopes and expectations were going in a direction perpendicular to that of entropic decline (Steinbrink 164). He refused to be diminished by a post-War world of entropy and remained focused on the green light, symbolizing the Daisy and his potential for reaching his dream, at the end of the dock across the water. Jay's financial and social ascension is drastic and mysterious to the other characters in the novel and readers alike, giving those around him a sense of wonder. Icarus, too, refused to be content with moderation in his ascent. He did not follow the conservative course that his father demonstrated, but rather allowed himself to be swept up into the glory of flight. Icarus's literal ascension in flight is, like Gatsby's, equally shocking, with Daedalus "changing the laws of nature" (Ovid 187). Both characters strove to imitate the greatness that they observed in the world around them. Jay Gatsby established himself in West Egg, identical in shape and contour to East Egg, but notably less fashionable and aristocratic. His mansion "was a factual imitation of some Hôtel de Ville in Normandy, with a tower on one side, spanking new under a beard of raw ivy, with a swimming pool, and more than forty acres of lawn and garden" (Fitzgerald 5), but was strangely out of place next to Nick's cheap bungalow. Likewise, Daedalus' invention

mirrored the image of a bird's wings, and Icarus was able to soar higher and higher, believing that with his wings, he was as limitless as the birds he imitated. He refused to acknowledge the power of gravity and the danger of the sun; he flew boldly, opposing both.

Both Gatsby and Icarus rose by illegitimate or unearned means. While Jay was still James, he worked diligently, and according to his father, "Jimmy was bound to get ahead" (Fitzgerald 110). However, through an unfortunate turn of events and the loss of Dan Cody's inheritance, he realized that the American Dream was just that, a dream. Hard work was not a promise of success. Despite his best efforts, Gatsby had lost Daisy, whom he had loved for her aura of charm, elegance, and luxury and for the promise of a past that he could not forget. Gatsby was willing to do whatever it took to get Daisy back and because "her voice was full of money" (Fitzgerald 76), he thought that money and a luxurious lifestyle were the keys to her affection. Gatsby then resorted to bootlegging and organized crime to make his money. In order to win Daisy back, he illegitimately acquired millions of dollars, bought a gaudy mansion in West Egg, and threw lavish parties every weekend. He lived on a notion that he could facilitate his own happiness; that he could buy and force every one of his dreams into reality. Because Jay Gatsby essentially created himself from nothing, he is a paradox; he is simultaneously a moneymaker and a hopeless romantic (Lewis 44).

For Icarus, flight was wonderful, but he did nothing to bring about his capacity for flight. He flew because of the work, brilliance, and inventiveness of his father. Icarus, if anything, was a hindrance to his father's work. He "Stood by and watched, and raised his shiny face/To let a feather, light as down, fall on it,/Or stuck his thumb into the yellow wax,/Fooling around, the way a boy will, always,/Whenever a father tries to get some work

done” (Ovid 187-88). Because he did not work or strive to understand the power and limitations of the wings, Icarus obviously brought about his own downfall.

Jay Gatsby did not understand the risks of his ill-gotten gains. He might have been aware of the legal risks of bootlegging and working with characters like Meyer Wolfsheim, but he never thought of the polarizing effect that his olfactory money would have on Daisy. She wanted to believe that he had made his fortune on a chain of drug stores, but even the revealing gaudiness of his party was repugnant and offensive to her. In his desperate attempt to imitate her lifestyle, he neglected to realize that even among the extraordinarily rich, there were class divisions. She would always have old money and she would always be accustomed to it. His new money would never stop smelling and it would never be enough. Likewise, Icarus did not or could not grasp the fatal risks involved with flight. Despite having Daedalus to instruct and lead him, Icarus ignored the wisdom offered to him and followed his own inclinations. When Jeffery Steinbrink says referring to the characters in *The Great Gatsby*, “the very young and the very foolish either refuse to accept or are unable to understand the personal consequences of living in an entropic system and are crushed—some tragically, some only pitifully—by the burden of truth they are eventually made to bear” (158-159) we see that this conclusion can also be applied outside of the novel, particularly to Icarus.

For both Jay and Icarus, the fall was sudden and devastating. Gatsby’s fall comes in two parts. First, it is in the moment that Daisy says “Oh, you want too much...I love you now — isn’t that enough? I can’t help what’s past” (Fitzgerald 84); with those last five words, Daisy destroys Gatsby’s dream of recreating the past to which he had clung so desperately for five years. The second part of Gatsby’s fall is when George Wilson wrongfully murders

him, because of what Tom said regarding Myrtle's death. Icarus was caught up in the miracle of flight; he "soared higher, higher, drawn to the vast heaven/ Nearer the sun, and the wax that held the wings/ Melted in that fierce heat, and the bare arms/ beat up and down in the air, and lacking oarage Took hold of nothing," (Ovid 123-128). While Icarus finds himself too close to the sun, Jay Gatsby finds himself too close to upper-class characters, Daisy and Tom, and even Meyer Wolfsheim, who "were careless people...they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness...and let other people clean up the mess they had made" (Fitzgerald 114).

Nick and Daedalus are both characters whose actions and attitudes serve to stress and highlight the distinctive temperament of their respective counter parts, making them clear foil characters (Abrams 225). To Nick, Gatsby represents everything for which he has "unaffected scorn" (Fitzgerald 3), and, while Gatsby is utterly convinced that he will be able to shape his own future at will, Nick is more realistic and recognizes the limitations of the human will and time. Daedalus and Icarus represent opposing ideals as well. Where Daedalus stands for balance and moderation, Icarus represents the impulsive and passionate. Daedalus cautiously flies a middle course, but we see Icarus following his own imprudent inclinations. The foil characters incorporated in *The Great Gatsby* and the Icarus myth strengthen the impact of both stories by highlighting the differences in ideals, attitudes, and behaviors.

For both Jay Gatsby and young Icarus, their problems began when they left what they knew and understood. Gatsby abandoned his Midwest roots and value systems, and when he went to the East, the simplicity of his background prevented him from realizing the danger that corruption represented. He risked his morality, his dream, and finally, his

life as he thrust himself into the world of the East. By leaving the ground in flight, Icarus literally put himself in a position to fall. He left everything, even the laws of nature behind him. Both characters could have survived or perhaps even avoided a fall if they had selected more moderate paths and dreams. If Jay had found a balance between his dream and reality or even simply recognized that the last five years of his life could not be erased, he might have been able to accept that Daisy could not completely remove Tom from her life. Likewise, if Icarus had been content with a modest path, he could have made it too freedom.

The parallels in action, characters, and message in *The Great Gatsby* and the Icarus myth are undeniable. Why should this matter? Our world is full of spin-offs, fan-fiction, allusions, references, and re-workings of the texts that came before. We find intertextuality in everything from television ads to newspaper articles to scholarly journals and we openly use popular works as models for new texts. So what is it that sets these two particular accounts and the connection that they have to each other apart from the rest? Fitzgerald structures *The Great Gatsby* using the examples, strategies, and rhetoric of classic authors: I would argue that *The Great Gatsby* was informed by Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and also that both of these narratives follow the model for tragedy as determined by Aristotle in *The Poetics*. Aristotle's treatise has greatly influenced the development of literary and theatrical criticism. According to acclaimed Cornell University professor, Lane Cooper, "The Poetics of Aristotle is brief...yet one of the most illuminating and influential books ever produced by the sober human mind. After 22 centuries, it remains the most stimulating and helpful of all analytical works" (3). Because it seems to

follow the Aristotelian model for tragedy, Fitzgerald created a memorable and meaningful work that has been canonized in American literature.

Aristotle defined tragedy as the “mimesis of action which is complete, whole, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished by distinct forms in its sections; employing a mode of enactment, not narrative; and through pity and fear accomplishing catharsis of such emotions” (49). Aristotle also stated that the merit of a tragedy, referring specifically to theatrical tragedy, could be determined by considering six key characteristics in the following order: plot, characters, diction, thought, spectacle, and melody. For this analysis, the focus will be on plot and character, because the other four pertain specifically to theatrical productions.

Aristotle prioritizes plot the most, going as far as saying that “tragedy’s capacity is independent of performance and actors” (55). Aristotle ascribed three characteristics to a commendable plot: it must be whole, complete, and of magnitude. To be whole, a play must have a beginning, middle, and end. The beginning ought not to be “following necessarily from something else, but after which a further event or process naturally occurs” (55). The middle should follow a preceding event and bring about further consequences. The end is that which naturally occurs and need not be followed by anything else. Essentially the plot is a series of cause and effect events. In the beginning, one focuses on the effect; in the middle, one focuses on both the cause and effect; and in the end, one focuses only on the cause, not on the effect. *The Great Gatsby* follows this chain of events. While the reader is given information about what brought Nick Carraway to the East, within a page of beginning the book, the reader is already in the East, and within three pages, the dinner at the Buchanans starts the action of the novel and initiates the chain of events that lead to

Gatsby's downfall. Likewise "The Story of Icarus and Daedalus" begins in the midst of exile. Without familiarity with rest of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the reader is completely lost as to the antecedent action that brought about Icarus's and Daedalus' exile. The middle of *The Great Gatsby* is a natural and seamless chain of events, wherein both the causes and effects are critical. Fitzgerald does not waste the reader's time or attention with descriptions that are not directly related to the social gatherings or interactions and critical dialogues that shape this novel. "The Story of Icarus and Daedalus" also relates the events of the story in a very focused manner; Ovid spends only sixty-one lines of poetry on the entirety of the myth. The ends of both stories are almost exclusively focused on the "causes." In *Gatsby*, all focus is on Gatsby's murder and the minimal attendance at his funeral. These two events trigger the final action in the story: Nick moves back to the Midwest. All that we know about his return is that he pondered the events that had led him back to his roots. After Icarus's fall and Daedalus' cries, we know only that the body was laid in a tomb and that the land was named for him.

The second characteristic that Aristotle ascribed to the plot is that it must be "complete," having a "unity of action" (57). By this, Aristotle means that the plot must be structurally self-contained, with the incidents brought together by internal necessity, with each action leaning into the next with no outside intervention. As mentioned in the preceding paragraph, the events, social gatherings, character interactions, and critical dialogue that shape this novel follow one after the other. While Fitzgerald incorporates beautiful, almost poetic descriptions, these passages do not take the focus away from the action of the novel, but rather etch the scenes more firmly in the reader's mind. Likewise,

“The Story of Icarus and Daedalus” is so short that all the events that are included, are included out of necessity, making the action is unified.

The third characteristic that Aristotle ascribes to plot is that it must be “of a certain magnitude,” both quantitatively (complexity and length) and qualitatively (seriousness and universal significance) (57). Maurinne Corrigan, NPR book critic, argues that *The Great Gatsby* is indeed of a certain magnitude, in both regards, in her book *So We Read On*. In an interview she describes *Gatsby* as the “one great American novel we think we’ve read but probably haven’t.” She claims that when it is read in high school, and it usually is, the readers are too young to understand the complexity and weight of the novel. Many other literary critics, including Tom Burnam, Jeffery Steinbrink, Thomas Hanzo, and Roger Lewis have commented on the complex dualities and doubleness presented in the symbols, characters and overarching themes. The themes of the novel are certainly significant. Fitzgerald addresses issues including love, longing, loss, the American Dream, having hope in an entropic universe, and the futility of actions against time. While the Icarus and Daedalus myth does not have the same quantitative complexity as *The Great Gatsby*, it undoubtedly addresses the universal issue of having hope in a world destined towards decay and teaches an invaluable lesson on the importance of moderation.

Aristotle would characterize “The Story of Icarus and Daedalus” as a simple plot. Simple refers to when the action is continuous and unitary, but the transformation lacks reversal and recognition. Instead, the simple plot features only the *catastrophe*, or the change of fortune. While Aristotle considers simple plots acceptable, a complex plot is preferred.

The Great Gatsby further fits Aristotle's description of great tragedy because it is complex and includes *peripetia*, a reversal, and *anagnorisis*, a recognition. A *peripetia* is the moment of change in the tragic hero's fortune, irrecoverably for the worse; it is brought about by the hero's actions or character. Often the trait that brings about the hero's downfall is the trait that the audience also admires. This is certainly the case with Gatsby. We admire his dream and the relentless way that he pursues it, his grand gestures, glamorous parties, and dynamic speeches that ultimately push Daisy away from Gatsby. During the battle for Daisy, Gatsby's actions and demands consolidate Tom's grip on Daisy. As though this were not enough, Tom then feels comfortable enough with his grip on Daisy that he sends her home with Gatsby.

The *anagnorisis* is considerably less clear. It begins after Daisy has struck and killed Myrtle Wilson. She stays with Tom and does not contact Jay Gatsby, fully indicating that she intends to allow Gatsby to take the fall for her. This recognition continues in the conversation between Nick and Gatsby. Gatsby finally admits "Of course she might have loved him, for just a minute-when they were first married and loved me even more than, do you see?" (Fitzgerald 97). We see Gatsby beginning to recognize that his and Daisy's love was not as perfect or enduring as he might have hoped, but at this point, he has not fully given up his delusion about their love, that it supersedes everything else. After this scene, the death of Gatsby follows quickly, almost mercifully. "He is not given time to contemplate his fall or to learn very much from it" (Steinbrink 166), preventing him from fulfilling the process of *anagnorisis*.

According to Aristotle, character has the second place in importance in a tragedy. While some might suggest that Jay Gatsby is a villain or simply the principle character in an

unsuccessful romance, in actuality he is able to fill the shoes that Aristotle designed for the tragic hero. In a commendable tragedy, the characters support the plot. Their personal motivations are intricately connected to parts of the cause and effect chain of action. The reader sees Jay Gatsby's pursuit of Daisy literally shaping and structuring the entirety of the novel. Aristotle stated that first the character must be renowned or prosperous, so that his change of fortune can go from good to bad. This change should come about as a result, not of vice, but of some great error or frailty in character. Such a plot is most likely to generate pity or fear, for "pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune, fear by the misfortune of a man like ourselves" (Aristotle 69-71). Jay Gatsby made himself renowned. He built a fortune up for himself, bought a beautiful mansion, and played the gracious host who constantly threw lavish parties. Secondly, the character ought to be good or fine in relation to moral purpose, relative to social class. Jay Gatsby's morality is questionable because of the means by which he acquired his fortune, but arguably, he had morality on a higher plane. His pursuit of wealth and reputation, while illegitimate, was all for love, the most noble and defining human emotion. Aristotle states that thirdly, the tragic hero must have "fitness of character" and be "true to life" (79). The character should be true to his or her type and also realistic. While Jay Gatsby does represent an extreme and irrational hope, he is still a credible or believable character. The final, and perhaps most important characteristic for the character is that he or she has consistency. The characters must be true to themselves in their actions and behaviors. Once their personality and motivations are revealed, those same elements should continue throughout the duration of the work. The tragic hero must be true to life in that he or she is believable or realistic, and yet they

must be more beautiful. They must be idealized and ennobled. They must be someone that the common man can learn from.

Let us say then that there are undeniable parallels between Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Ovid's "The Story of Icarus and Daedalus" and that both of these works do follow the model set forth by Aristotle's *Poetics*. We must then ask ourselves why this matters. This matters because of the purpose of fiction. This matters because of the purpose of myth. This matters because of the purpose of all literature. Words are meant to communicate and to teach. According to E.O. James, "the essential function of myth is to validate and justify, conserve and safeguard the fundamental realities and values, customs and beliefs on which depend the stability and continuance of a given way of life" (482). G.S. Kirk states that myth has a threefold purpose. "The first type is primarily narrative and entertaining; the second operative, iterative, and validatory; and the third speculative and explanatory" (253-254). If it was uncertain before, these definitions of myth make it very clear that the Icarus and Daedalus myth has a much higher calling than merely entertaining and preserving the Greek literary tradition.

Then we must consider the individual merits of the *The Great Gatsby*, specifically in the classroom where it sees the most use. It is a teaching tool "because it is accessible, because of its literary devices, including symbolism, motifs, and themes; because it affords an extensive study on point of view; and because Fitzgerald's style and prose is vivid and hauntingly beautiful" (Prosser). High school teacher, Emilia Prosser also observes that English Language Learners are less likely to give up on *Gatsby* than on other texts because of the accessibility of the language in comparison to other classical texts. Veteran teacher, Coleen Ruggieri also suggests "Gatsby's timeless quest for the American Dream still

resonates with modern readers” (109). Perhaps the most powerful testament as to why *The Great Gatsby* fulfills its instructional purpose is captured in an article by Sara Rimer. Rimer writes on the inspirational impact that the novel is having on the students at Boston Latin School. For a student who recently emigrated from China and has never seen anything like the glamor of Gatsby’s life, her green light is Harvard. For a student who is a refugee from Vietnam, his version of Gatsby’s dream is to make his parents proud of him and to be able to support them. *Gatsby* is making a difference in the lives of students. Not because it is a glittering time capsule that contains the magic and the glamor of the Jazz Age. Not because it is an exemplary piece of writing that demonstrates control of style, structure, and literary devices. *Gatsby* is making a difference in the lives of students because it has a powerful message.

Ovid’s message in “The Story of Icarus and Daedalus” is very straightforward. It gives a clear warning against following extreme paths and advocates moderation instead. It teaches a simple lesson about how risk relates to survival. This short account even advocates obeying parental or authoritative figures and recommends seriously regarding others’ wisdom and experience. *The Great Gatsby* is a little less straightforward. The reader is presented with two possible models. We begin and end the work with Nick. Like Daedalus, he flies a modest course. At times he succumbs to the glamour and immorality of the East, but overall, his character remains consistent with the well-to-do conservative man he was when he first left the Midwest. While by no means perfect, his morality far exceeds that of the other characters. Arguably though, he learns nothing throughout his time with Gatsby. He returns home to the safety and ease of Minnesota, closing off the lessons that those in the East could have learned from Gatsby’s fall. He wishes the world to “stand at a

sort of moral attention forever” (Fitzgerald 3) but he does nothing to bring this about. Finally, in the last moments of the novel Nick advocates Gatsby’s dream instead of his own course of action. He implies that it was worth it for Gatsby to believe in the green light on the end of Daisy’s dock. He implies that it is better to hope that one fine morning we might reach the imagined future that lies before us. Yet, we cannot forget the consequences of Gatsby’s actions. We cannot forget the gravity of his risks. We cannot forget that Daisy rejected him, that he lost his dream, and that his death was meaningless.

Like Icarus, like Jay Gatsby, we live in a world where there is a tendency towards decay, where we know that the fall is inevitable. Ultimately, it is each individual’s choice of how they act and react to a world that is indeed characterized by entropy. While no one wants to fall like Gatsby or Icarus, there is an undeniable poetic beauty to both of their ascents and to the literary merit in their stories. The fearless leap that both take in the direction of their dreams is courageous and admirable and meaningful, but not without risk. Both of these characters certainly “paid a high price for living too long with a single dream” (Fitzgerald 103), as we see in their sudden and devastating descents. However, it is not enough to simply see the rise and fall of these two characters or acknowledge the writing prowess of Fitzgerald and Ovid; if we do not learn from Gatsby and Icarus, the stories are useless. We must consider not only their plights, but also the world in which they lived. We need to learn to recognize the limitations of the world we live in and also to strike a balance between hope and realism. Once we have achieved this, we need to teach others. We need to keep both *Gatsby* and these ancient texts in our classrooms today. We should not merely utilize *The Great Gatsby* as a structural model for creative writing, as an example of language manipulation and style, or as a time capsule from the Roaring

Twenties; nor should we use the Icarus myth as way of explaining Freytag's Pyramid or simply commend its blend of history and myth. Instead we need to take a hard look at the themes and messages of both accounts. We need to talk about hope, loss, longing, dreams, and failure. We need to use everything from Greek myth to *The Great Gatsby* to teach literariness, and more importantly, to teach life. So that ultimately, we might "beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past" (Fitzgerald 115).

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