

**NAME ETYMOLOGY AND ITS SYMBOLIC VALUE
IN FRANCIS SCOTT FITZGERALD'S *THE GREAT GATSBY***

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Abstract

The aim of my paper is to scrutinize the manifold interpretations of proper names and their possible symbolical value that the reading of F. S. Fitzgerald's classic leaves in the reader. On the whole, the novel's internal structure is rather comprised, which consequently makes the story exact, its plot condensed, but behind this seemingly concise and more or less simple language the author nevertheless manages to embody powerful symbolism that speaks for itself. It is disputable whether Fitzgerald truly aimed to produce such a strong metaphorical emphasis that would most minutely delineate America's social character in the turbulent twenties as projected in the personal stories of the novel's leading protagonists. Within this figurative scope, large as it is, I therefore focus only on the significance of proper names and their obvious contribution to the holistic social portrayal. It may be only a minor, but nevertheless one of the most reliable and crucial means of outlining the consequences of the postwar spiritual apathy that overwhelmed the American nation and was induced by the societal downfall due to the disillusion of the American Dream. How this Dream influenced each individual's and society's destiny remains to be my goal in this article. For the purpose of analysis I rely on the 1994 Penguin edition. All direct quotes from now on are to be taken from this source.

This astonishing and ever penetrating novel of the leading Jazz Age writer has never quite ceased to capture the interest of critics, literary historians as well as avid readers all over the world in their attempt to reach beyond the story itself and find more multiple and intriguing interpretations of Francis Scott Fitzgerald's masterpiece *The Great Gatsby*. The compulsion that perhaps any reader feels by diving into the text is not its extensive structure, something in the likes of Steinbeck's *East of Eden*, but its exact opposite. What Fitzgerald strives to achieve and does succeed in so doing is a prosaic, matter-of-fact story of a golden boy of American dream, whose main blunder is his insatiable desire to enter a higher class than the one he was born into only to win "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" who ultimately destroys his aspirations. Gatsby's fate is hardly anything less traumatic than what so many other people from the social bottom experienced in the turbulent decade of superficial glamour and sophistication. Fitzgerald takes this sheer inertia experienced by the likes of Gatsby to portray the country's all-encompassing social disintegration, cultural dissolution and each individual's alienation as a result of the national hysteria felt by the majority. Gatsby may have been only

one of many victims that developed from the Jazz Age euphoria, but nevertheless his personality as conflicting as it may be serves to typify an average individual produced by the disillusioned society of the roaring twenties. As I proceed each protagonist's contribution to the creation of the national psyche back then shall be interpreted at some length, starting with the main character.

Jay Gatsby as the central character appears to be one of the most contradictory personas in the novel. On the one hand he is a benevolent man with a heart of gold, whose main fault is merely that he has lived too long with a single dream that never becomes a reality for him and makes him blind to the penetrating truth of the greedy society he lives in, which measures people by their affluence rather than their personal qualities. On the other hand, however, he emerges as a self-centred figure who overestimates his abilities and holds too high an opinion of himself and is too lenient in judgement of others. Lehan (1969: 121) associates him with a God-like figure, "rising from his Platonic conception of himself", but his attempt to create "[this] god-like image of himself" is in vain. Just like Eckleburg's gaze over the vast emptiness, Gatsby's "solemn dumping ground of worn out hopes [and shattered dreams]" turns out to be pointless. His endeavour to be true to his belief in people's innate goodness is the one that makes him look naive at the end but at the same time enables him to rise to the proportion of "a mythic hero" (Bewley 1963: 138) since it is the quality unlikely to be found in any other character.

Gatsby's first name is mentioned very seldom throughout the novel, which understandably enough triggers some questions. Being the same as the surname of America's first Chief of Justice John Jay (1789-1795), it justifies my previous claim that it was Gatsby's sincerity towards himself and others that made him great. A possible dichotomy that could be observed in analysing Gatsby's name and his personality occurs if we consider that in addition to a possible name or surname *jay* is also a common term denoting a foolish or talkative person (Webster 1997). Foolish Gatsby is – a fool of impossible love never to attain, a fool of judgement, many a fool, but extremely likable nonetheless. Talkative, however, he is not. His continually reiterated "old sport" starts to reflect his actual lack of words, his incapacity for rhetoric, otherwise observed in his antagonist Buchanan who never seems to run out of words. Oftentimes situations leave him speechless, even in intimate encounters with the golden girl of his dreams, which should spread his wings rather than make him utterly helpless. But as aforementioned, his personal name is barely used at all. No one except Daisy on a few occasions calls him Jay – he is known as Gatsby and people attend Gatsby's parties and gossip about him in Gatsby's mansion. According to Tamke (1968-69: 443-445) back in the twenties "gat" was a slang expression for a revolver, a pistol, which alludes to the fact that Gatsby was a man of mob connections residing in the house of accumulated fortune, in the district of the abundantly wealthy. This is exactly what "gat" as an archaic past tense of "get" suggests. (Webster 1997). He has amassed immense quantities of money through underground connections, become rich almost overnight, but has done so quite consciously, choosing to become a bootlegger, following his very own *law*. This strategy of his is hidden in the old Scandinavian suffix *-by* denoting a town or a place, which implies that the neighbourhood where he resides pertains to him as the initiator of this law. Moreover, Kruse (1969-70: 539-541)

relates that *Gatsby* written with “d” rather than “t” was back in the early twenties the name of a glamorous VIP hotel, which provides one final association to Gatsby’s palace as “a hotel for rootless people.” In the same way his wealthy status could be depicted as rootless since in order to get his fortune he first had to deny his father’s roots. Contrastively, Tom’s and Daisy’s rootlessness is conditioned by their instability to settle down for any longer period of time.

Gatsby as the leading character has two counterparts – Nick Carraway and Tom Buchanan, both epitomising two aspects of the same reality, albeit through two different points of view. If Tom personifies the sordid reality of the rootless upper classes, Nick stands for wakening and reason – he is a centre of integrity and moral uprightness. Being a narrator and a close friend to just about everyone else, Nick takes on the role of Daisy’s beloved cousin, Tom’s former university buddy and Gatsby’s favourite neighbour. After Gatsby’s death he is the only one that takes responsibility for him. This shows in his loyalty to take care of all the arrangements and in his last attempt to gather some of Gatsby’s alleged friends for his funeral. Their close relationship finally results in Nick’s decision to have Gatsby’s story told in the first place. His caring personality is very visibly reflected also in Nick’s first and last names. As St Nicholas, the patron of young people and sailors (Webster 1997) – Gatsby used to be an adventurous sailor – he keeps watch over Gatsby. He is a protective caretaker and probably the only character that truly evolves in the course of the novel. Initially he judges Gatsby for his irrational attempt to reiterate his illusive dream from the past, but then grows to admire his idealism, since heading for the future also means being inevitably drawn back into the past. At the end Nick realises that “[w]e [all] beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.” (188)

The spelling of *Carraway*, however, reveals the following inconsistency. It might suggest that his chosen way in life is to care a great deal (care + way) rather than to care not, as the particle *away* infers. This, however, plays an essential role in the second possible analysis which sees Nick and others continually surrounded by cars which finally gain dimensions of death vehicles doing away with people’s lives (car + away). Nick’s sensitive personality could never sustain such a dire threat embodied in the image of cars as posed in the detached and inhuman East. Towards the end Nick admits:

I see now that this has been a story of the West, after all – Tom and Gatsby, Daisy and Jordan and I, were all Westerners, and perhaps we possessed some deficiency in common which made us subtly unadaptable to Eastern life. (183)

In accordance with this, Nick’s movement back West is triggered by the fact that he does not care for the East anymore, nor did he ever particularly care for it in the first place. They were all westerners as Nick recognises, but unlike himself

[t]hey were careless people, Tom and Daisy – they smashed up things and creatures and retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made ... (186)

To pursue with Tom Buchanan, it should be mentioned that he is Gatsby's diametrical opposite. His extreme cruelty for another human being is what he has in common with Daisy rather than Nick, let alone Gatsby. If Gatsby is heightened sensitivity and humanity, Tom is all animalism and vulgarity, manipulating Gatsby with his oral skills, maliciously using them to dematerialize Gatsby's illusions. His Yale education is definitely reflected in his speech versatility, but is often misused in small talk on topics he misinterprets, and sometimes he ends up excelling only as a bloodsucking bully, which may also be indicated in *bu-*, the first syllable of his last name *Buchanan*. His potential becomes misused under the weight of his wealth, which shall distinguish his future generations in the years to come. His surname alludes to the last name of America's fifteenth president James Buchanan, who was vilified for having led the Americans into the Civil War. Principally, President Buchanan was against the institution of slavery as such but he also claimed that states should decide for themselves whether to retain slavery or not since only their free decision would eventually contribute to the peaceful solution of the slavery issue. By winning the warm support of the South, he gained hostility of the North (Klein 2002). Tom Buchanan's racial and ethnical hatred, however, is contrasted with President Buchanan's pro-slavery beliefs. If the President spoke in favour of slavery to help the southern states secede peacefully, Tom's alleged superiority is based on the exact opposite. Unlike James Buchanan who believed that if the South chose to form the Union, their rights should be protected in the Constitution, Tom Buchanan believed in the white Nordic race and asserted that "this rising nativism" would announce the fall of the "self-made man" such as Gatsby (Decker 1994: 52-72). Tom's animosity towards coloured races is his prejudice, his antagonism towards America being submerged by the influx of other nations. If James Buchanan is supposed to have been a benevolent father of the South, Tom Buchanan undoubtedly appears to be an advocate of Nordic supremacy and a vindictive foe to racial minorities. All in all, he could be claimed to stand for a distorted image of his political counterpart. What Fitzgerald did was that he took President Buchanan as his model on which he roughly based Tom Buchanan, but he deliberately reversed the very idea for which the President was vilified by the public in the first place. President's fatherly care mistaken in his time for his pro-slavery inclination and therefore reproached him by the North stands in sharp contrast with Tom Buchanan's scorn of coloured races. Having done so, Fitzgerald strengthened the character of Tom Buchanan and diminished Gatsby's significance respectively.

Tom's wife Daisy is in fact no better than him. Egotism and corruption are attributed to Tom as much as her. Her name shows a parallel to her flower counterpart *daisy* whose heart is yellow and its leaves white, just as Daisy perpetually dresses in white robes, but her soul is empty, vain, insincere, scheming, replete with alternative motives, inspiring ultimate deception. Yellow, gold and silver, all colours indicative of money and possessions, are observed even in Daisy's voice, which "is indiscreet" and "full of money" (126). Similar tones are heard at Gatsby's parties, where "the orchestra is playing yellow cocktail music" (46). Similarly to Daisy who mostly deceives with her deceitful voice inspiring hope and devotion, Gatsby does so merely with his possessions gained through corrupt yellow money. On the other hand, yellow

is also the colour of the sun that radiates from Daisy towards Gatsby. Sun appears to be the prevailing light force in the novel. Daisy seems to emanate sunlight and Gatsby attempts to bathe in it. This correlation between the two could be understood in the fact that the sun rises in the east and sets in the west, which would then put Gatsby in the shadow, since his parties have for years on end been unfrequented by Daisy. Gatsby's luminous halls have been lit by artificial lights not bright enough to attract Daisy. However, Daisy's brilliance is merely external, caused by money and wealth alone, whereas Gatsby's inward glow is real, spiritually incompatible with Daisy's fake golden shimmer spreading from her. Gatsby's downfall, therefore, shows a reversed reality, the setting of the sun in autumn after his death, the dying of summer and Gatsby's great vitality, which with the falling of leaves bring forth social decay and disintegration. The second part of her name, suffix *-sy*, indicates her sight which is blurred. Finally, as her maiden name suggests, she is fay, beautiful, also fair-haired, but far from faithful, which is also a possible meaning of *fay*. (Webster 1997). Her promises to leave her husband and stay with Gatsby are empty, her words are not to be trusted. Even if she had sworn "by her fay" (by her faith) (Ibid), this would have been a phrase without a meaning.

Myrtle Wilson, on the other hand, a victim of the ashen community, the product of the less favourable Wasteland, endeavours to outgrow her poisonous suffocating milieu at any cost. She is Daisy's complete opposite in appearance as well as character. This contrast is visible in the association of her name with an evergreen shrub that has brown berries and pinkish-white flowers (Webster 1997). The leaves and the berries of *myrtle* suggest her sturdy character she needs to survive in the Valley of Ashes, while the pink flowers indicate the long-aspired quality she admires in the likes of Daisy. Daisy is everything she is not. She is not sophisticated, but oozes sexual vitality, a lust for life, the quality missing in Daisy, that Tom finds himself inexplicably drawn to. The distinction between the two flowers thus indicates a discrepancy between the two women as to their physical appearance and class affiliation. Fragile and delicate like the flower, Daisy serves as an ornament in her white world closed to any intruders, whereas Myrtle's struggle in the wasteland of scum is real and painful. In her attempt to be more like Daisy she gets killed. Still her attempt to surpass her social rootedness, to live a glamorous life, if only for a moment, shows that she is ready to risk her life. She decides to buy herself a dog because she thinks this will associate her with class. Furthermore, when Mrs McKee compliments her dress she pretends to be modest by saying "I just slip it on sometimes when I don't care what I look like" (37). It is obvious that she cares a great deal about her appearance. Her aspiration to enter high society is most visibly reflected in her statement "I told that boy about the ice. These people! You have to keep after them all the time." (38). These words sound more like Daisy she so desperately tries to imitate. But just as Myrtle was never born into the upper strata and could thus never be Tom's equal in social status – in this she parallels Gatsby in his desire to win Daisy back, – Daisy also could never deny her class affiliation by getting involved with Gatsby. Both women therefore cannot live below or beyond their social status, but Myrtle's struggle to try to do so is real, whereas Daisy's vague attempts are nothing but a pretence.

George Wilson as a son of God's will triggers a lot of dispute as well. Claiming to be almost faithless – the last or the only time he was in church was on his wedding day, – he becomes paradoxically blinded by the false gaze of the man advertising spectacles, since he naively misjudges the signboard above his workshop for God's omniscient persona. He could thus at best be interpreted as a fallen son deceived by the ruling God of advertising that has devoured American materialistic community. Like Tom's surname which relates him to President Buchanan, George Wilson himself could very well be paralleled with Thomas Woodrow Wilson, America's twenty-eighth president, supposedly one of the most intelligent, democratic and high-minded presidents, who led the States into the World War I (Buchanan, on the other hand, led America into the Civil War), believing that America was privileged to spend her energy to fight for the principles promising happiness and peace. His powerful statement that "[a] conservative is a man who sits and thinks, mostly sits"¹ designates George to the fullest, since it is precisely his passivity and inaction that drive Myrtle out of her wits. In this respect his instant decision to take vengeance on Gatsby is in stark contrast with his previous passive life, but in precisely the same aspect he resembles Gatsby's urge to stand up for his girl by fully taking the blame for her action. At this point, two more statements of President Wilson that appeal to both Wilson and Gatsby should be mentioned. The President once stated that "[t]he object of love is to serve, not to win"² and "[t]he man who is swimming against the stream knows the strength of it."³ Both men blindly serve their ladies, honour them with their blind devotion, but it is only Gatsby of the two who chooses to swim against the current. This act finally becomes fatal since by diving into the past he is denying himself any kind of future.

Finally, Meyer Wolfshiem, the fatherly patron of Gatsby, who claims to have made Gatsby, needs some deeper interpretation. He appears to be a direct embodiment of Arnold Rothstein "who fixed the World's Series back in 1919" (79), but unlike Rothstein who was more of an old dandy, *Wolfshiem* 'wolfishly' preys on Gatsby. His canine character is suggested in "cuff buttons" (78) he wears, "finest specimens of human molars" (78). Speaking to Nick about his protégé he relates to Gatsby as "a man of fine breeding" (78). But Gatsby's absorption with his ideal makes him utterly unprepared for Wolfshiem's scheme to draw him into his world of gambling. *Scheme* is hidden in the second part of Wolfshiem's name, *-shiem*. Contrastively, the analysis of his first name *Meyer* into *my err* as in *my error* is immaterial since it was Gatsby rather than Wolfshiem who committed an error in judgement by choosing to trust the latter and at the same time aimed to re-live the Great American dream represented in the safe pastoral past and his impossible love for Daisy Fay. All this made him utterly unprepared to recognise the blunder in a seemingly benevolent man.

At this point two further instances of visual symbolism should be outlined. The ubiquitous eyes of Dr T.J. Eckleburg blindly gazing from the oculist board into the vast nothingness of a once shining city as false eyes of God of advertising have already been stressed. As for the etymology of the name *Eckleburg*, *Eckle* is a diminutive of a German *Ecke* for corner, whereas *Burg* formerly denoting a fortified place upon a hill gains a connotation of a hill at large, even of a town and together with

¹⁻³ <http://www.top-education.com/Speeches/ThomasWoodrow.htm>

borough stems from the same Germanic root. Significantly enough, it points to the middle-class *bourgeois* (Tamke 1968-69: 443-445) and consequently to Gatsby as a representative of the landed gentry. Dr Eckleburg's advertisement stands in a God-forsaken corner of the Valley of Ashes, the nationally disillusioned Wasteland initiated in modern literature by T.S. Eliot. This vast nothingness stands for the once beautiful country disintegrating on its moral corruption, with the two Eggs (imaginary divisions of Long Island) running into the pit of decay and spiritual desolation. The image of the two Eggs – the corrupted Eastern isle and its more pure Western half – is most paradoxical, since both are in fact located on the East coast of the USA, which comes to stand for glamour, success and sophistication as opposed to peaceful tradition, loyalty and integrity of America's West and Mid-West. The infected Valley of Ashes symbolises the American soul, showing how the West is getting increasingly tainted by the moral degeneration of the East, thus turning into a place of decadence and moral decline. The two Eggs, however, as their names by insinuating fertility might suggest, breed nothing but utmost degradation.

Alongside with the brooding eyes of Dr Eckleburg, Owl Eyes represents another instance of powerful visual symbolism, since he acts as a physical incarnation of godly providence, but above all he appears as the man with the clearest sight. Meeting Gatsby at one of his parties, he immediately recognises that the gold-bound books in his library serve merely as a decoration, but he nevertheless sees through his posture and also attends Gatsby's almost unattended funeral. His character, though of minor importance, was modelled upon Fitzgerald's close friend and well-known satirist Ring Lardner (Hampton 1976: 229), whose neighbour used to throw lavish parties that he and Fitzgerald sometimes observed, often even joined. His as well as Lardner's nickname was due to the enormous spectacles they both wore, which figuratively speaking represents the solemnity of an owl, which is not only a night bird, sometimes referred to as a nighthawk, but comes to be used also for people with nocturnal habits. (Webster 1997) It is important that the first time we meet Owl Eyes he appears at one of Gatsby's night parties. The next time he shows up is at Gatsby's funeral, where he offers a piece of his wisdom by concluding that Gatsby was "the poor son-of-a-bitch." (182) But in truth Gatsby resembles an elusive cat more than a greedy dog.

Apart from canine and feline allusions that indeed pervade the text, the former being mostly attributed to Wolfshiem's and Tom's characters, the latter to elusive cat-like Gatsby, there is only one further instance of animal symbolism in addition to Owl Eyes, which is directly attributable to the proper name of Gatsby's piano player *Klipspringer*. He entertains Gatsby, even lives at his mansion, but he does not show up for the funeral. His cheating nature is hidden in the first part of his amusing name. *Klip* derives from *-clip*, which means "to cheat", but also "to move rapidly", *springer*, however, denotes an agent of jumping. As a compound, however, *klipspringer* refers to a small agile antelope of southern and eastern Africa, known for his rapid movement (Webster 1997). Symbolically this name suits its owner as it stands for a false friend who will never stand by Gatsby in times of need but will vanish into thin air as rapidly and instantaneously as he had appeared. This at the very end turns out to be the case with almost all who claim to be Gatsby's friends but do not know the meaning of the word, which consequently brings Gatsby to his inevitable end.

The aim of the etymological analysis of proper names was primarily to show how pervasively symbolic proper names in *The Great Gatsby* really are and how their interpretations contribute to the minute analysis of the protagonist's diverse personalities. The multifold interpretations of each individual's name have even greater significance when they contribute to the formation of America's social character. This has been based on the notion of the American dream of endless opportunities that promised people happiness in their self-made lives. This Dream, however, occurred as America's greatest idea but also its greatest blunder, the grand illusion that was common not only in the visionary atmosphere of Jazz Age, but which remains timeless in history since dreams, either personal or national, keep recurring in all periods and all milieus.

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