The Road to West Egg

First published 75 years ago, *The Great Gatsby* still has a grip on modern sensibilities even as it stands as the ultimate novel of the Jazz Age. In F. Scott Fitzgerald's unflinching farewell to the American Dream lie the shadows of evil yet to come—and a bridge to innocence past.

BY Christopher Hitchens May 2000 *Vanity Fair*

The Great Gatsby was originally published in April 1925, which means that those who first read it were much nearer in time to Henry James and even Charles Dickens than we are to Scott Fitzgerald. And that reflection brings a shock. For just as the book survives in our minds partly as a period piece—the encapsulation of the splendors and miseries of "the Jazz Age" (an expression which Fitzgerald coined as well as symbolized)—so does it seem distinctly modern as well as, in certain passages, almost contemporary.

Why does this novel retain such a firm grip on our up-to-the-minute today, even as it is borne back ceaselessly into the past? First, because it represents a declaration of independence by American writing, a noticeably native style and subject owing little to the old European school. Fitzgerald was named for Francis Scott Key, author of "The Star-Spangled Banner" (he even thought of titling his novel *Under the Red, White, and Blue*), and though we glimpse him now through a mist of booze and debauchery and latter-day Hollywood posturings, it's important to remember that he was, at bottom, a patriotic young man from the Midwest who always wished he had seen active service in the First World War. Having decided with *The Great Gatsby* to chisel out nine short and finely wrought chapters that would demand everything he had, Fitzgerald found he'd taken on all the great American themes, from the original "dream" itself to the corresponding loss of innocence.

That phrase, "loss of innocence," has become stale with overuse and diminishing returns; no other culture is so addicted to this narcissistic impression of itself as having any innocence to lose in the first place. I have seen Mark Twain's *Innocents Abroad* described as the literary "declaration of independence" (though Mr. Twain never wrote about sexual obsession). And I have seen the famous "loss" attributed to Watergate, to Vietnam, to Hiroshima, to the Spanish-American War of 1898, and to the assassinations of the Kennedy brothers. Robert Redford dates it, in discussing his movie *Quiz Show,* to the moment in the respectable 1950s when Americans discovered that the egghead games on TV were fixed. That's a more plausible suggestion than the one made in the *New York Times'*s front-page obituary for Frank Sinatra, which solemnly argued that Frank's croons were the "loss of innocence" for a generation.

Avirginity so casually renewable can easily be mislaid again and again, just as many Jazz Age narcissists must have hoped it could be. However, the year 1919 did see a genuine loss of innocence and a serious, if hopeless, attempt to regain it. In that year, "Shoeless" Joe Jackson of the White Sox was widely believed to have been asked, by a crushed and plaintive little boy, to preserve and protect some childhood illusions and "say it ain't so." The rigging of the World Series really did come as a blow, innocence not so much lost as stolen or defiled. And the context? Why, the United States had just engaged in a war on the killing fields of the bloodstained old Europe it had been created to escape. Disillusionment was setting in, and the boys from "over there" had brought back some racy and cynical new ideas. Sensing the coming of a brash new world, the traditionalists of Puritan America mounted their last great stand in 1919 by passing the 18th Amendment, or Prohibition. Their target was not just the demon drink but really the whole phenomenon of modernism, with its sexual freedom, motorcars, and migration from the small and simple town to the big and clever city—most especially pagan and glittering New York City: star of the novel.

Early in *Gatsby* we encounter Meyer Wolfshiem, the man with human teeth for cuff links who has, according to sick and fascinated rumor, fixed the 1919 World Series. The narrator, Nick Carraway, is back from the war, and when he first meets his rich neighbor on Long Island discovers a common bond in the experience of combat. Every page, practically, bears the scent of gin and rum and whiskey: the characters marinate in illegal hooch and moonshine, and the cops are paid off. Innocence—what innocence? It's in the course of a drunken and spiteful moment in the Plaza Hotel that Nick realizes something:

"I just remembered that today's my birthday."
I was thirty. Before me stretched the portentous menacing road of a new decade.… Thirty—the promise of a decade of loneliness, a thinning list of single men to know, a thinning briefcase of enthusiasm, thinning hair.

Recall that Tom Buchanan is described in the opening pages as "one of those men who reach such an acute limited excellence at twenty-one that everything afterwards savours of anticlimax." They are not long, the days of wine and roses …

As the other characters—Daisy and Gatsby in the lead, and driving badly—are embarking on the "portentous menacing road" back to East Egg and calamity, Nick is oppressed by another sense of deprivation, the one we attach to the "Lost Generation" of those years. Youth is gone; there may be some comfort to be found in sex and alcohol, but … youth is gone all the same, and is irretrievable. Needless to add, innocence departed before youth did. There will never be glad, confident morning again.

In its evocation, *The Great Gatsby* is the American *Brideshead Revisited.* Or perhaps one should say that *Brideshead,* produced two decades later, is the English*Gatsby.* In both novels young people are caught in a backwash of postwar blues and anomie, and everybody drinks too much. In both novels, too, the old order is visibly deteriorating, and an insecure yet grand mansion is a centerpiece. The dreaming spires of Oxford play a strange, background role in each, but the fictional foreground is filled with jazz and flappers and infidelity and brittle, amoral talk. Rex Mottram, Julia Flyte's crude lover in *Brideshead,* is a newly rich and self-invented man from a shabby background, vulgar and ostentatious in his hospitality, suspected of crime and violence, and full of status anxiety. (I can't find any evidence that Waugh ever read *Gatsby,* and he affected to disdain American writers, but still …)

Both books outlive their abysmal weaknesses of plot and plausibility precisely because they attach themselves to our emotions and perceptions by condensing the evanescence of youth and the hateful, inescapable proximity of boredom and death. The epoch of *Gatsby*was also the period of the first, sensational publication of "The Waste Land." Waugh quotes very effectively from that crucial poem in *Brideshead;* Fitzgerald is known to have drawn his valley of ashes on Long Island from Eliot's haunting imagery. (And Eliot praised *Gatsby*extravagantly, calling it "the first step the American novel has taken since Henry James.") Not all the great modernists liked *Gatsby* as much—here's H. L. Mencken's annihilating review:

This clown [Gatsby] Fitzgerald rushes to his death in nine short chapters. The other performers in the Totentanz *[dance of death] are of a like, or even worse quality. One of them is a rich man who carries on a grotesque intrigue with the wife of a garage keeper.*
Another is a woman golfer who wins championships by cheating. A third, a sort of chorus to the tragic farce, is a bond salesman—symbol of the New America! Fitzgerald clears them all off at last by a triple butchery. The garage keeper's wife, rushing out upon the road to escape her husband's third degree, is run down and killed by the wife of her lover. The garage keeper, misled by the lover, kills the lover of the lover's wife—the Great Gatsby himself. Another bullet, and the garage keeper is also reduced to offal.…

The crooked lady golfer departs. The lover of the garage keeper's wife goes back to his own consort. The immense house of the Great Gatsby stands idle, its bedrooms given over to the bat and the owl, its cocktail shakers dry. The curtain lurches down.

Mencken is inarguably right in one way: a man of Gatsby's supposed force and vitality just takes a house and waits for the girl to come, luckily discovering after brooding at length on a green light that the adored one's cousin lives next door! And one winces when Mr. Wilson's body is found near Gatsby's blood-streaked pool and "the holocaust was complete," because of the awful straining for effect and also because any definition of a holocaust would have had to take the life of Tom or at least Daisy. And yet, look back at what Mencken writes and see where he falls into obvious error. Fitzgerald doesn't "clear them all off at last." The only ones who die or are killed, from or by a combination of callousness and caprice, are—the innocent.

There are two key words in the book. They are "pointless" (and its analogues) and "careless." They recur with striking and mounting emphasis as the narrative shakes off its near-permanent hangover. A dog biscuit at Tom Buchanan's adulterous and nasty gathering is represented as "decomposed apathetically" in a saucer of milk; Myrtle on the same horrid occasion "looked at me and laughed pointlessly." At Gatsby's bigger but even hollower party, there's a cocktail table—"the only place in the garden where a single man could linger without looking purposeless and alone." After "a somehow wasteful and inappropriate half hour," Jordan Baker wants to leave. In New York one hot evening, Nick notices "young clerks in the dusk, wasting the most poignant moments of night and life." Driving through Central Park, Gatsby "came alive to me, delivered suddenly from the womb of his purposeless splendor." Is there a line more expressive of vicious tedium than Daisy's petulant demand: "What'll we do with ourselves this afternoon, and the day after that, and the next thirty years?" If there is, it's the earlier pettishness when she insists on knowing whatever it is that people do when they make plans. Even the great cars are bored and affectless: "The dilatory limousine came rolling up the drive." When Tom talks about getting gas, "a pause followed this apparently pointless remark"; when the stop for gas is made, the expression on Myrtle's face at first seems "purposeless and inexplicable." In West Egg, Daisy dreads "the too obtrusive fate that herded its inhabitants along a shortcut from nothing to nothing." As Nick takes his penultimate leave of Gatsby, he quits him "standing there in the moonlight—watching over nothing." Here is the full-out horror of torpor and morbidity and futility and waste, saturated in joyless heat and sweat. *Gatsby* came out in April of that year of grace 1925: the cruelest month seems right.

But then what of care, or caring? It's the antithesis of the spoiled and the bored and the nihilistic: it shares an impulse with charity and *caritas* and, well, love. People come uninvited to Gatsby's mansion, which is as lonely and desperate as Hearst's castle, and he doesn't care. He is indifferent. So is Jordan Baker, a rotten and insouciant woman of whom Nick inquires, if only about her terrible driving, "Suppose you met somebody just as careless as yourself." And then I'm sure you remember: "They were careless people, Tom and Daisy—they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made."
(I sometimes think that the word "car-less" is lurking here in some subliminal, Jungian way, given the role played by the nonsentient, automatic, and then entirely new and exciting status symbol of the fast limo or coupe. What poor, degraded Mr. Wilson wouldn't give to be buying a car instead of just repairing one.) Anyway, the ultimate and startling point about Gatsby is that he does care, deeply and secretly and inarticulately and naïvely and vulnerably, and he cares for someone who could hardly care less. And he *is* innocent, in spite of all his worldliness. This is the lineament of tragedy.

Fitzgerald used to say that he had a "presentiment of disaster" that inflected all his stories. Another reason for the hardihood of his finest novel may be the foreshadowing that it contains of a brutish and inhuman modernity succeeding the dance music and the affectless flippancy. Fitzgerald had been reading of

Spengler's dismal and reactionary *Decline of the West,* and many people had been peering at a popular and poisonous volume on eugenics called *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World-Supremacy,* published by a quack named Lothrop Stoddard in 1920. When we first meet Tom Buchanan he has been reading "The Rise of the Coloured Empires *by this man Goddard.… It's a fine book and everybody ought to read it. The idea is if we don't look out the white race will be—will be utterly submerged. It's all scientific stuff; it's been proved … we're Nordics … and we've produced all the things that go to make civilization—oh, science and art and all that."*

One wants to smile at a total philistine who could make no other reference to science and art, let alone "all that"—just as one smiles today when silly people pretend to ask For Whom the Bell Curves—but Tom Buchanan is a prefiguration of the ugly pseudo-scientific and pseudo-intellectual types who would mutate into Fascism over the horizon of 1929. References to Jews and the upwardly mobile are consistently disobliging in the book—Fitzgerald also has this in common with Waugh, coming up with absurd names for arrivistes such as Stonewall Jackson Abram—but it gives one quite a turn to find Meyer Wolfshiem, he with molars for cuff links, hidden Shylock-like behind the address of "The Swastika Holding Company." Pure coincidence: the symbol meant nothing sinister at the time. Still, you can get the sensation, from *The Great Gatsby,* that the 20th century is not going to be a feast of reason and a flow of soul.

Other notes are struck that keep the novel stingingly fresh. Fitzgerald sardonically foreshadowed the epoch of self-generating celebrity with the same skill he employed capturing the tone of the non-event: "We all turned and looked around for Gatsby. It was testimony to the romantic speculation he inspired that there were whispers about him from those who had found little that it was necessary to whisper about in this world."

And as for the dawning of the corresponding myth of publicity, how can one equal the frenzied pointlessness of this episode, almost postmodern in its effect?

About this time an ambitious young reporter from New York arrived one morning at Gatsby's door and asked him if he had anything to say.
"Anything to say about what?" inquired Gatsby politely.
"Why—any statement to give out."
It transpired after a confused five minutes that the man had heard Gatsby's name around his office in a connection which he either wouldn't reveal or didn't fully understand.… [His] notoriety, spread about by the hundreds who had accepted his hospitality and so become authorities upon his past, had increased all summer until he fell just short of being news.

"Her voice," says Gatsby of Daisy when he finally finds his own, "is full of money." And Nick picks up on this metaphor right away—"the inexhaustible charm that rose and fell in it, the jingle of it, the cymbals' song of it.… High in a white palace the king's daughter, the golden girl." Fitzgerald really believed, with Somerset Maugham, that money is the sixth sense that makes the other five senses tingle and come alive. He also believed that in America you could remake yourself and get others to judge you by the identity and reputation you had fought to make your own. Yet in *Gatsby,* his artistry won't allow this drossy romanticism to be vindicated. Gatsby looks and sounds a fool when he says, "Can't repeat the past? Why of course you can!," as if opportunity were boundless, or a matter of the triumph of the will. His gold turns to ordure. He might as well not have changed his name from Jimmy Gatz, or written out that Horatio Alger schedule for getting ahead by sheer effort and merit, which his sad father discovers on the flyleaf of an old Hopalong Cassidy book. His strenuous reinvention makes him look pitiable. The snobs win; this is a class society, and those who work hard and play by the rules, like the wretched Mr. Wilson, are treated like ordure, too. And is there anything in American fiction more frigid and careless than Daisy's treatment of the little daughter she appears to have? Despair is never very far away, so it's

no exaggeration to say that *Gatsby* also achieved and held its strangely contemporary status by anticipating, in an age of relative if aimless cheerfulness, the concept of the existential, the causeless rebel, and indeed the absurd.

Such themes deserve the name of timeless; the beautiful metaphysics of the novel (the “yellow cocktail music” and the young woman who appears “like an angry diamond”) are echoed in Fitzgerald’s devastating rendition of the pangs of disprized love. Of the many such passages: “He stretched out his hand desperately as if to snatch only a wisp of air, to save a fragment of the spot that she had made lovely for him. But it was all going by too fast now for his blurred eyes and he knew he had lost that part of it, the freshest and the best, forever.”

These days, the Eggs and the Hamptons and Montauk are still an adventure playground on “that slender riotous island which extends itself due east of New York,” but Mencken was also right when he went on to say that Fitzgerald’s prose redeemed his story. The grand houses on the Sound may be called “inessential,” yet the young and the vivid, the loving and the yearning and the sexual chords above are answered by:

The old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors’ eyes—a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby’s house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder.

Fitzgerald’s work captures the evaporating memory of the American Eden while connecting it to the advent of the New World of smartness and thuggery and corruption. It was his rite of passage; it is our bridge to the time before “dreams” were slogans. He wanted to call it *Among the Ashheaps and Millionaires*—thank heaven that his editor, Maxwell Perkins, talked him out of it. It was nearly entitled just plain *Gatsby.* It remains “the great” because it confronts the defeat of youth and beauty and idealism, and finds the defeat unbearable, and then turns to face the defeat unflinchingly. With *The Great Gatsby,* American letters grew up.

Christopher Hitchens is a *Vanity Fair* contributing editor. Send comments on all Hitchens-related matters to hitchbitch@vf.com.