Repetition, Race, and Desire in *The Great Gatsby*

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Repetition, Race, and Desire in The Great Gatsby

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Although disagreement persists over exactly what role race plays in The Great Gatsby, the issue cannot be ignored, especially in recent critical studies. Yet Gatsby reveals an unexplored angle that intersects with psychoanalysis in relation to Lacan’s “fundamental fantasy.” The protagonist’s object of desire (objet a), Daisy, is the maternal figure in a (self-)destructive adult repetition of the oedipal drama, complicated by her metaphorical associations with the American landscape and her husband Tom’s patriarchal and nativist views. Ultimately, the novel’s symbolic structure is haunted by a latent desire to reconstitute Gatsby’s ambiguous socially-projected racial makeup as only figuratively white.

Keywords: F. Scott Fitzgerald / The Great Gatsby / race / psychoanalysis / subjectivity

Race was the elephant in the room in Fitzgerald studies for decades, but since around the mid-nineties it has been a hot-button issue. A smattering of critics as early as the late 1960s and early 1970s began exploring Fitzgerald’s personal racial politics. But it was the likes of Richard Lehan’s The Great Gatsby: The Limits of Wonder (1990), Jeffrey Louis Decker’s “Gatsby’s Pristine Dream: The Diminishment of the Self-Made Man in the Tribal Twenties” (1994), and Walter Benn Michaels’s Our America: Nativism, Modernism, and Pluralism (1995) that set the stage for a thriving discourse on race in Fitzgerald’s fiction — and especially The Great Gatsby.

A major catalyst for these seminal readings was the rise of new historicism, which led to a reexamination of the nativist ideology that proliferated following the First World War. “The social climate of the early 1920’s,” says Decker, “specifically as it is expressed in increasingly racialized forms of nativism, creates the conditions under which Fitzgerald’s narrator imagines Gatsby as a figure for America” (56). In sharpening our perception of the social, cultural, and historical conditions that Gatsby grows out of, new historical influence sowed the seed for the recent outcrop of critical attention to the novel’s treatment of race. This new cycle of criticism, with noteworthy contributions including Meredith Goldsmith’s
“White Skin, White Mask: Passing, Posing, and Performing in The Great Gatsby” (2003), Benjamin Schreier’s “Desire’s Second Act: ‘Race’ and The Great Gatsby’s Cynical Americanism” (2007), and Greg Forter’s chapter on Gatsby in Gender, Race, and Mourning in American Modernism (2011), has situated the novel’s racial politics in relation to prevailing contemporary critical approaches including performance studies, queer studies, and narratology, helping establish what is now a well-defined body of scholarship on the issue.

However, the issue of race in Gatsby has not been sufficiently explored from a psychoanalytic perspective, and I would argue that further intervention in this realm is needed. My justification for this is essentially twofold. First, a slew of recent studies drawing inspiration from Frantz Fanon’s appropriation of Lacanian psychoanalysis have added a compelling and valuable dimension to the study of race and have considerably recalibrated the field. These include, to name a few, the influential collection Female Subjects in Black and White: Race, Psychoanalysis, Feminism (1997), edited by Elizabeth Abel, Barbara Christian, and Helene Moglen; Claudia Tate’s Psychoanalysis and Black Novels: Desire and the Protocols of Race (1998); Barbara Johnson’s The Feminist Difference: Literature, Psychoanalysis, Race, and Gender (1998); Christopher Lane’s collection The Psychoanalysis of Race (1998); Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks’s Desiring Whiteness: A Lacanian Analysis of Race (2000); Mikko Tuhkanen’s The American Optic: Psychoanalysis, Critical Race Theory, and Richard Wright (2009); and various contributions from Slavoj Žižek, Homi Bhabha, Joan Copjec, Judith Butler, and others. The second reason is that, while surprisingly few critics have taken up the task, Gatsby lends itself remarkably well to psychoanalytic interpretation. A.B. Paulson, John Hilgart, Barbara Will, Richard Godden, James M. Mellard, and others have certainly laid some groundwork in this respect, but there remains much to be said about the novel’s psychodynamics.¹

If we accept Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks’s assertion that “Lacan’s theory of subject constitution provides us with cognitive landmarks or positions by which to bring the subject of race into representation” (2), we might argue that a psychoanalytic reading of race in Gatsby involves identifying the major “cognitive landmarks” in the life of the title character. These are primarily manifested in adult repetitions of childhood—and teenage—fixations. In order to make sense of these landmarks, we should begin by contextualizing Gatsby’s desire in relation to Lacan’s “fundamental fantasy,” which he codifies in the matheme $ <> a$. A reading of the novel that places Gatsby as the barred subject ($)—the void of subjectivity—and situates him in relation to Daisy as l’objet petit a (a), allows us to look beyond Daisy as mere commodity fetish, but rather as an object-manifestation of Gatsby’s primal lack, the signifying phallus. While commodity fetish is one facet of Daisy’s symbolic overdetermination, the novel—through Nick—tells us quite clearly what Gatsby is really after: “He talked a lot about the past and I gathered that he wanted to recover something, some idea of himself perhaps, that had gone into loving Daisy” (117; emphasis mine). Although Nick’s suggestion is frequently cited, critics tend to revert to the standard interpretation
of Daisy as just another item in Gatsby’s list of “things.” I suggest that we take Nick’s proposition more seriously and pay closer attention to the construction and function of Gatsby’s desire in the text.

Benjamin Schreier has made the valuable observation that *Gatsby* “enacts a deeply problematical drama of identification whereby the representational capacity of identity—ultimately *American* identity—is an object alternatively of desire and skepticism” and that it “ultimately lacks faith in the symbolic orders on which stable conceptions of identity rely” (155). Yet a more concentrated (re)contextualization of Lacan’s symbolic order relative to race will help us bring the novel’s psychodynamics into sharper focus. If we look beyond—or, perhaps more accurately, through—Daisy as commodity fetish, she may be viewed as an object- manifestation of Gatsby’s desire to return to the realm of the pre-Symbolic, prior to the figurative castration of the oedipal drama. Her maternal role, which is crystallized through the association of the green light at the end of her dock with the “fresh, green breast of the new world” on the final page of the novel, suggests her broader symbolic role in the text as America itself. And if we accept Decker’s claim that “Gatsby is ‘borne back ceaselessly’ into a Nordic past as recollected within the climate of the Tribal Twenties, when conceptions of whiteness both narrow and become a sign not of skin color but of national identity” (53), we might argue that she ultimately represents Gatsby’s desire to reconstitute his ambiguous—suggestively Jewish—racial identity in line with a fantasized Nordic American past. Adopting Walter Benn Michaels’s broader claim about Jewish identity helps us further contextualize this process:

The point, then, of identifying as a Jew the “stranger” who wants to marry into your family is to identify as American the family he wants to marry into, which is to say, to transform American identity from the sort of thing that could be acquired (through naturalization) into the sort of thing that had to be inherited (from one’s parents). Insofar as the family becomes the site of national identity, nationality becomes an effect of racial identity. (8)

Put in this broader context, we can read Gatsby’s renouncing of his biological family as a denial of his racially adulterated lineage and his desire to marry Daisy as an attempt to enter/create a family that would regenerate his socially-projected ancestry as figuratively white. Ultimately, this reading offers us a unique way of reconciling the symbolic duality of Gatsby’s autopoietic process and America’s fantasized (and racially whitewashed) mythopoeic past.

**SITUATING GATSBY’S DESIRE**

Just after the midway point in the novel, Nick recounts what must inevitably be considered an unverifiable account of Gatsby’s adolescence:

His parents were shiftless and unsuccessful farm people—his imagination had never really accepted them as his parents at all. The truth was that Jay Gatsby, of West Egg,
Long Island, sprang from his Platonic conception of himself [. . . ]. So he invented just the sort of Jay Gatsby that a seventeen year old boy would be likely to invent, and to this conception he was faithful to the end. (104)

Outside of the general unreliability of both our title character and narrator, Nick’s admission that “he told it to me at a time of confusion, when I had reached the point of believing everything and nothing about him” (107) leads us to further question the story’s veracity. But what is particularly interesting about Gatsby’s account is that it holds equal interpretive value whether it is true or not. Either his parents actually were “shiftless and unsuccessful farm people” who he never really accepted, or else he fabricated the account and, in doing so, refuses to accept whoever they really were. Nevertheless, the suggestion that his parents either were, or may have been, farm people has substantial—though multiple and perhaps competing—implications. On the one hand, this lineage may symbolically tie Gatsby to America’s earliest settlers, implying a hereditary stake in the nation’s history and emphasizing his essential “Americanness.” On the other hand, an association with itinerant immigrant farmers may imply a family lineage that could potentially be perceived as non-white.

Gatsby’s account reflects the ambiguity into which he is continually cast (and casts himself) throughout the novel. Ultimately, we do not come to understand his history with any more certainty. Instead, we are confronted with the essential polysemy of the novel, which—as critics have observed²—arises out of the many narrative and textual contradictions that cleave fissures in the meaning of the text. But regardless how we characterize or interpret Gatsby’s family history, what matters is that he renounces it. In doing so, he symbolically extricates himself from the oedipal drama and sets the stage for what James M. Mellard has called in relation to Fitzgerald’s short story “Winter Dreams,” “an adult repetition of a childhood phenomenon” (55).

In his highly original reading of “Winter Dreams,” part of what has come to be called the “Gatsby cluster” of short stories that prefigure the novel, Mellard argues that this tale of ill-fated romance “illustrates how we may read the dialectic of desire not only in the context of oedipal authority—the Lacanian Law of the Symbolic Father—but also in that of the abjected mother residing in the semiotic chora Julia Kristeva posits as prior to the patriarchal order ultimately repressing it” (51). In the story, a young boy named Dexter Green, who aspires to transcend his humble upbringing and join the ranks of the upper class, falls in love with a wealthy girl named Judy Jones. Much like Gatsby, he covets her as a symbol of the wealth and status that he hopes to acquire. The narrator tells us at one point that “he wanted not association with glittering things and glittering people—he wanted the glittering things themselves” (“Winter Dreams” 220–221). Like Gatsby, the story speaks through the language of commodities, as material possessions become tantamount to social stature. Matthew J. Bruccoli describes the story as “the strongest of the Gatsby-cluster stories,” explaining that “like the novel, it examines a boy whose ambitions become identified with
a selfish rich girl. Indeed, Fitzgerald removed Dexter Green’s response to Judy Jones’s home from the magazine text and wrote it into the novel as Jay Gatsby’s response to Daisy Fay’s home” (217). By reading Dexter’s desire through Lacan’s account of the oedipal plot, Mellard chronicles the eventuation of Dexter’s oedipal resolution. Like Daisy, “from the beginning Judy wears a halo of desirability because of her metonymic association with a place—and eventually, a subject—of wealth and power” (Mellard 58). Through the metonymy of Dexter’s desire, Judy ultimately represents the symbolic phallus that Dexter lacks on account of the figurative castration of the oedipal drama. “As a symbol of the phallus,” Mellard says of Judy, “she represents something beyond desire” (66) and “as the symbol of that which the subject wants but cannot have, she invokes castration in the prohibitions of the law of the father” (67).

The oedipal drama unfolds almost identically in Gatsby. The crucial difference is that, while at the story’s end “Dexter has truly become the postoeidipal subject, has resigned himself to loss, loss not of grief or of Judy but of that which every oedipalized subject loses—the phallus” (Mellard 74), Gatsby instead charges on toward the painful jouissance³ that resides in possession of Daisy and is eventually punished for his transgression of the Law of the Name of the Father. As with Dexter, Gatsby’s desired object (Daisy) is merely one manifestation in a deeper signifying chain and, as Mellard explains, “since the object is never attainable, both Gatsby and Dexter approach it (as do most subjects) from the side, for, in the beginning, they focus not on the woman as such, but on the accouterments of wealth with which they associate the woman and in which they display their right to her, the one who symbolizes their fantasies” (54–55).

For Gatsby, this association is formed the first time he visits Daisy’s house. Nick tells us it “had amazed him—he had never been in such a beautiful house before. But what gave it an air of breathless intensity was that Daisy lived there—it was as casual a thing to her as his tent out at camp was to him. There was a ripe mystery about it” (155). Gatsby realizes, however, that as “a penniless young man without a past” (156) he will not be able to marry Daisy. As Walter Benn Michaels argues, “the real problem is that he is ‘without a past’ and to get Daisy he must get a past. Thus Jimmy Gatz’s efforts to improve himself, which begin in the Franklin-like scheduling of his present intended to produce the perfected Gatsby of his future (‘study electricity, etc.’), must themselves be transformed into efforts to reconstruct his past” (26). Put another way, “Gatsby does not want to be praised for what he is, but for what he is not” (Berman, “Gatsby and the Twenties” 87). While Gatsby certainly wants to “reconstruct” his past, as Michaels has said, he also wants to repeat the past once he has revised its premises and live out the fantasy that his socially and racially muddled pedigree has prevented. Gatsby’s symbolic transformation from James Gatz to Jay Gatsby has already set his desire in motion before he meets Daisy; she simply becomes its object manifestation, or objet a.

Lacan describes objet a⁴ as “something from which the subject, in order to constitute itself, has separated itself off as organ. This serves as a symbol of the
lack, that is to say, of the phallus, not as such, but in so far as it is lacking. It must, therefore, be an object that is, firstly, separable and, secondly, that has some relation to the lack” (Four Fundamental Concepts 103). Prior to the mirror stage, the object of the child’s desire is the mother; the child—who has not yet imagined him/herself as subject(ed)—sees the mother as a physical extension of its own body. The “moment at which the mirror stage comes to an end,” however,

decisively tips the whole of human knowledge [savoir] into being mediated by the other’s desire, constitutes its objects in an abstract equivalence due to competition from other people, and turns the I into an apparatus to which every instinctual pressure constitutes a danger, even if it corresponds to a natural maturation process. The very normalization of this maturation is henceforth dependent in man on cultural intervention, as is exemplified by the fact that sexual object choice is dependent upon the Oedipus complex. (Lacan, Écrits 79)

Following the mirror stage, the initial desire for the mother (Other) becomes a repressed unconscious desire for which the subject seeks substitutes, now symbolized in objects, or the “little things”—objets petit a—that represent the mother/Other that has been lost (Mellard, Using Lacan 147). While the process of subject formation is initiated in childhood, it is ongoing throughout adult life.

In adopting this Lacanian terminology, then, we must make a crucial differentiation between Autre (“Big” Other) and autre (“little” other). According to Lacan, the status of the Other is interminable. The subject’s desire for the Other is an unending and impossible attempt to fill the void left by the loss of the mother; it is this interminability that causes the subject to seek substitutes in objects that can take virtually any form.⁵

Objet a can take on many different guises. It may be a certain kind of look someone gives you, the timber of someone’s voice [i.e., “full of money”], the whiteness, feel, or smell of someone’s skin, the color of someone’s eyes, the attitude someone manifests when he or she speaks—the list goes on and on. Whatever an individual’s characteristic cause may be, it is highly specific and nothing is easily put in its place. Desire is fixated on this cause and this cause alone. (Fink, Clinical Introduction 52)

Objet a produces an elusive/illusory duality, since its value is not inherent, but is rather a product of the metonymic process of desire, “indicating that it is the signifier-to-signifier connection that allows for the elision by which the signifier instates lack of being [le manque de l’être] in the object-relation, using signification’s referral [renvoi] value to invest it with the desire aiming at the lack that it supports” (Lacan, Écrits 428). Thus, as Lacan famously says, desire is ultimately “caught in the rails of metonymy, eternally extending toward the desire for something else” (Écrits 428).

In order to understand Gatsby’s fundamental desire to rewrite his ethnological history, we must further unpack the metonymic chain of Gatsby’s desire and the process through which Daisy becomes the penultimate link. The key moment in this process is their first kiss:
His heart beat faster and faster as Daisy’s white face came up to his own. He knew that when he kissed this girl, and forever wed his unutterable visions to her perishable breath, his mind would never romp again like the mind of God. So he waited, listening for a moment longer to the tuning fork that had been struck upon a star. Then he kissed her. At his lips’ touch she blossomed for him like a flower and the incarnation was complete. (117; emphasis mine)

The ineffability of the dream—“his unutterable visions”—collide here with a very specific “object”: “her perishable breath,” culminating in an aptly described “incarnation” that transforms the various components of Gatsby’s desire (which are joined through metonymy) into a Borromean knot that entwines each fiber of Daisy’s symbolic overdetermination. Hilgart has made a similar observation: “His portrait shows Gatsby’s consciousness to be so completely reified that desire’s substitutional, symbolic process has become a loop, repeatedly attempting to exceed itself yet ever diverted back to the signifiers of the commodity” (99).

In highlighting the process of reification, Hilgart perceptively demonstrates the way in which commodities in the novel act as signifiers of deeper desires, rather than ends in themselves. Ronald Berman recognizes this distinction as well, noting that “the central irony developed by the novel is that our largest feelings, love and faith, can only be directed at objects unable to contain them” (The Great Gatsby and Modern Times 50). In turn, when Gatsby says to Nick that “her voice is full of money” (127), he employs not a simile but a direct metaphor; her voice is not like money, it is money. According to Richard Godden, “Daisy’s quality has a tendency to become a quantity: how many bedrooms, how many men, what make of car? Even as the object of Gatsby’s desire is translated into ‘commodity,’ so Gatsby’s desire is commodified” (Fictions of Capital 83). While commodification plays an integral role in the process of Gatsby’s desire, then, it is crucial that we recognize the role of objects in the novel—and here I include Daisy—as mere place-holders (objets a) for Gatsby’s deeper desire. The first kiss marks the moment when Daisy as commodity fetish and as object-manifestation of Gatsby’s preexisting desire intersect. It also closely precedes the moment, as I will go on to argue, that Gatsby symbolically reinitiates the oedipal drama.

DESIRE AND REPETITION

Just before describing the first kiss, Nick recounts the following: “Out of the corner of his eye Gatsby saw that the blocks of the sidewalk really formed a ladder and mounted to a secret place above the trees—he could climb to it, if he climbed alone, and once there he could suck on the pap of life, gulp down the incomparable milk of wonder” (117). In his classic Freudian reading, A.B. Paulson glosses this passage by arguing that “Gatsby must ‘climb’ alone because Fitzgerald’s metaphor—despite its conventionality—is true to the psychic realities of nursing infants and mothers’ breasts; at some deep level Gatsby pursues a source of nourishment in which the self and the world merge, fuse, and expand to colossal
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proportions” (313). Bruce Fink can help us take this analysis one step further; he explains that “when Freud says in the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* that ‘[t]he finding of an object is in fact a refinding of it,’ he is referring to the fact that object-choice after the latency period repeats the child’s first object-choice: the breast. Here too, an initially encountered object is found anew at some later point in time” (*The Lacanian Subject* 94).

Read in the context of Freud’s insights on repetition, Gatsby’s encounters with Daisy emerge as repetitions of his childhood relationship with his mother. The maternal language that appears throughout the novel—of which more will be said later—suggests Daisy as a substitute for the biological mother who Gatsby has forsaken, and who is conspicuously absent from the text. When, in the final lines of the novel, the green light at the end of Daisy’s dock is symbolically linked to the “fresh, green breast of the new world” (189), the incarnation that becomes “complete” with the first kiss is now wholly consummated in the novel’s broader symbolic configuration. Ultimately, the final page of the novel underscores repetition as its textual, thematic, and symbolic axis. Gatsby’s attempt to repeat his past with Daisy is finally equated with a collective cultural desire to relive a fantasized American past when “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” (189). While not understood or desired at the time—when the future had not been foreseen—it is the nostalgia to recover the (imagined) vanished moment that underlies the compulsion to repeat.

In order to make sense of this compulsion, it will be useful here to review Freud’s identification of four types of repetitive behavior in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. The first involves “dreams occurring in traumatic neuroses [that] have the characteristic of repeatedly bringing the patient back into the situation of his accident, a situation from which he wakes up in another fright” (11). The second is the *fort/da* (gone/there) game played by children, in which the child throws a toy from its crib, reels it back in, and then repeats the process.

The interpretation of the game was related to the child’s great cultural achievement—the instinctual renunciation (that is, the renunciation of instinctual satisfaction) which he had made in allowing his mother to go away without protesting. He compensated himself for this, as it were, by himself staging the disappearance and return of the objects within his reach. (14)

The third type of behavior occurs when an analysand is exploring his or her repressed past and “is obliged to *repeat* the repressed material as a contemporary experience instead of, as the physician would prefer to see, *remembering* it as something belonging to the past” (19). The fourth is a more generalized “compulsion of destiny,” in which the subject possesses “an essential character-trait which always remains the same and which is compelled to find expression in a repetition of the same experiences” (23–24). Freud concludes that “if we take into account observations such as these [. . .] we shall find courage to assume that there really does
exist in the mind a compulsion to repeat which overrides the pleasure principle” (24). Because the so-called “repetition compulsion” acts counter to the pleasure principle, Freud goes on to explain, it must therefore represent something “more primitive, more elementary, more instinctual than the pleasure principle which it over-rides” (25). This compulsion to act against the pleasure principle underlies Derrida’s proclamation in Writing and Difference (1967) that “what is tragic is not the impossibility but the necessity of repetition” (248). In other words—as we see in the novel—repetition acts through language as it does through desire.

The novel’s tragedy, in both a classical and psychological sense, is encapsulated in Gatsby’s “incredulous” response to Nick’s suggestion that one cannot repeat the past: “Can’t repeat the past [. . .] Why of course you can!” (116). Gatsby epitomizes the repetition compulsion; he attempts to relive his affair with Daisy “as a contemporary experience instead of [. . .] remembering it as something belonging to the past.” And, as we have seen, Daisy is only an object-manifestation of Gatsby’s deeper desire; because it is not Daisy, but a reconstituted version of himself that he seeks, Gatsby’s dream inevitably “fails” shortly after he and Daisy reunite:

He had passed visibly through two states and was entering upon a third. After his embarrassment and his unreasoning joy he was consumed with wonder at her presence. He had been full of the idea so long, dreamed it right through to the end, waited with his teeth set, so to speak, at an inconceivable pitch of intensity. Now, in the reaction, he was running down like an overwound clock. (97)

The image of the overwound clock aptly describes the inevitable failure of the dream to live up to the reality and brings us back to the crucial role of repetition—both psychological and temporal—in the novel, back to the “orgastic future” that has always already eluded us. “In invoking the Oedipus complex,” Mellard says of “Winter Dreams,” “when Judy situates Dexter within the dialectic of desire, she places him between the polarities of desire and jouissance, alienation and separation, Oedipus and Narcissus” (62). The same could be said of Gatsby, whose reunion with Daisy sends him symbolically “beyond the pleasure principle” into the realm of jouissance, which functions as a surplus desire not unlike Marx’s surplus value.

We can turn to Slavoj Žižek in order to bring the concept of jouissance into sharper focus. In one example, he describes the Titanic as

a Thing in the Lacanian sense: the material leftover, the materialization of the terrifying, impossible jouissance. By looking at the wreck we gain an insight into the forbidden domain, into a space that should be left unseen: visible fragments are a kind of coagulated remnant of the liquid flux of jouissance, a kind of petrified forest of enjoyment. (Sublime Object of Ideology 71)

If we appropriate Žižek’s metaphor in respect to Gatsby’s desire, we might read Daisy in place of the Titanic. Because she cannot possibly live up to her symbolic overdetermination, she comes to represent not Gatsby’s dream—which requires
the whitewashing of his racial past—but the impossibility of its realization. We can never actually “obtain” the object of desire, but can only circle around it in a never-ending repetition.

What is perhaps most tragic in the novel—if we lend some credence to Nick’s insight—is that Gatsby appears to realize this fact. Just after the reunion with Daisy, for example, Nick makes the following observation:

Possibly it had occurred to him that the colossal significance of that light had now vanished forever. Compared to the great distance that had separated him from Daisy it had seemed very near to her, almost touching her. It seemed as close as a star to the moon. Now it was again a green light on a dock. His count of enchanted objects had diminished by one. (98)

The light at the end of the dock serves as a perfect metaphor here, bringing Daisy closer to Gatsby in a process of optical magnification; because the light is physically close but also “as close as a star to the moon,” the description fittingly analogizes Gatsby’s relationship to his dream. In one sense, it feels as close as an object across a bay, but from another perspective, the distance is unfathomable. Even as he attempts to relive his past with Daisy, Gatsby realizes that his compulsion to repeat has already taken him beyond the pleasure principle and into the realm of pain and oedipal punishment.

Žižek’s Titanic metaphor proves useful in relation to other aspects of the novel as well, particularly the valley of ashes, described here by Nick:

About half way between West Egg and New York the motor-road hastily joins the railroad and runs beside it for a quarter of a mile so as to shrink away from a certain desolate area of land. This is a valley of ashes—a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens, where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and finally, with a transcendent effort, of men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air. (27)

Nick’s Bosch-like imagery recalls Žižek’s characterization of the Titanic’s wreckage. The valley rests in a liminal zone between the novel’s two geographical poles, Manhattan and Long Island, and serves as a repository for the excreta of society’s unconscious, “the material leftover” that Žižek describes above. The imagery of “a fantastic farm” suggests an inversion of America’s idealized pastoral past. It also calls to mind Žižek’s (re)formulation of the Thing (das Ding), a concept used by Freud and later Lacan, as

the Space (the sacred/forbidden zone) in which the gap between the Symbolic and the Real is closed, i.e. in which, to put it somewhat bluntly, our desires are directly materialized (or, to put it in the precise terms of Kant’s transcendental idealism, the Zone in which our intuition becomes directly productive—a state of things which, according to Kant, characterizes only infinite divine Reason). (“The Thing” 221)

For Žižek, the Thing is an Id-Machine, “a mechanism that directly materializes our unacknowledged fantasies” (221). This characterization lays the groundwork
for a Lacanian analysis of the valley of ashes. The Thing, like Marx’s surplus-value and Lacan’s jouissance, represents a surplus-desire, a desire that has gone “beyond the pleasure principle and into the realm of pain,” as does Gatsby’s desire for Daisy.

While Žižek’s Titanic serves “as a condensed, metaphorical representation of the approaching catastrophe of European civilization itself” (70), Fitzgerald’s valley of ashes can be said to serve the same function in relation to American civilization as manifested in the views of Tom and other nativists of the time. “Civilization’s going to pieces,” Tom says in the first chapter of the novel, before referencing “The Rise of the Coloured Empires.” The valley of ashes thus becomes a symbolic reservoir for society’s abject, a fact that is compounded by the eyes of Doctor T.J. Eckleburg that “look out of no face but, instead, from a pair of enormous yellow spectacles which pass over a nonexistent nose” and “brood on over the solemn dumping ground” (27–28). Spectral and uncanny, the eyes surveil and judge those living beneath. Moreover, it is overlooking the valley where the novel’s most notable confrontation with race occurs as Nick and Gatsby cross over the Queensboro Bridge:

As we crossed Blackwells Island a limousine passed us, in which sat three modish Negroes, two bucks and a girl. I laughed aloud as the yolks of their eyeballs rolled toward us in haughty rivalry.

“Anything can happen now that we’ve slid over this bridge,” I thought; “anything at all. . .” Even Gatsby could happen, without any particular wonder. (73, emphasis mine)

Greg Forter observes that “the sight of racial inversion gives rise to the thought that ‘Anything can happen now’; that thought then produces the reflection that ‘Even Gatsby could happen.’ Such a sequence gives an explicitly racial cast to the social fluidity and sense of possibility that Gatsby exploits in his self-making” (47). Furthermore, I would suggest that as the valley is figuratively racialized through Nick’s account, crossing over it comes to suggest the prospect (and fear) of miscegenation. This fear, particularly on Tom’s part, then erupts when the characters again make the crossing in chapter 7, where the novel’s final tragic events are set in motion and where the violent scene in the hotel room takes us back once again to the oedipal conflict.

RESOLUTION OF THE OEDIPAL CONFLICT

If we read Gatsby’s desire through Lacan’s fundamental fantasy, we must account for the moment in the novel when Gatsby’s symbolic castration first takes place. This occurs, I would argue, when his initial affair with Daisy is interrupted by his deployment and he is subsequently usurped by Tom, who marries Daisy in his absence. A reading of Tom as symbolic father is supported by Nick’s first description of him:
Two shining, arrogant eyes had established dominance over his face and gave him the appearance of always leaning aggressively forward. Not even the effeminate swank of his riding clothes could hide the enormous power of that body—he seemed to fill those glistening boots until he strained the top lacing and you could see a great pack of muscle shifting when his shoulder moved under his thin coat. It was a body capable of enormous leverage—a cruel body. (11)

In the subsequent paragraph, Nick observes in his voice “a touch of paternal contempt” (11). As a symbolic father figure, Tom stands in the way not only of Gatsby's desire for Daisy, but of her desire for— recognition of—him, which is crucial in his achieving his dream. Tom's nativist views, as other critics have noted, put him squarely in opposition to Gatsby, whom he addresses repeatedly in racially-charged terms. “For Tom, as for Stoddard,” Michaels explains, “Gatsby (né Gatz, with his Wolfsheim 'gonnegtion') isn’t quite white, and Tom’s identification of him as in some sense black suggests the power of the expanded notion of the alien. Gatsby’s love for Daisy seems to Tom the expression of something like the impulse to miscegenation” (25).

The conflict between the men reaches its climax in the hotel room altercation in which Gatsby insists that Daisy never loved Tom:

“Your wife doesn’t love you [. . .] She’s never loved you. She loves me [. . .] She only married you because I was poor and she was tired of waiting for me. It was a terrible mistake, but in her heart she never loved anyone but me!” (137)

In this battle for recognition, Gatsby seeks to symbolically kill Tom—the father figure—so that he can decisively possess Daisy. It is not until Gatsby has eliminated the symbolic influence of the father figure that Daisy’s desire for him will be pure and uncorrupted. Instead, the humiliating rejection that he suffers when Daisy refuses to declare that she never loved Tom—“Oh, you want too much!’ she cried to Gatsby. ‘I love you now—isn’t that enough?’” (140)—amounts to another symbolic castration and a further splintering of Gatsby’s dream, as she ironically exclaims that she “can’t help what’s past” (140).

The deeper consequences of Gatsby’s oedipal desire begin to unfold when Daisy kills Myrtle Wilson with Gatsby’s car. Paulson's analysis of Freudian splitting in the novel has been valuable here in drawing the symbolic connection between Daisy and Myrtle that fits her into the oedipal reading as well. “Here,” Paulson explains,

the novel’s contrary movement—toward synthesis—appears as a function of androgy- eny [sic]; that is, the mythical dream of the hermaphroditic being [. . .] The image of the ‘fresh green breast’ makes a good beginning because I see both androgeny [sic] and splitting as grounded in a special relationship to the mother. (312)

My sense is that the importance of the mother figure in the text is twofold: First, as Paulson argues, “mothers are conspicuous by their very absence” (312). But, at the same time, it is arguably all the more significant that Daisy is the only
mother in the novel. As such, it seems a natural extension to symbolically tie her to Myrtle’s physical violation, with her breast “swinging loose like a flap” (145).

If we accept the symbolic tie that links Daisy and Myrtle, the mutilation of the latter’s breast can be read as an analogy for the corruption of the promise once carried by the American landscape as it has been embodied in our collective culture fantasies. Once again recalling Žižek’s *Titanic*, Myrtle’s mutilated body may also serve as “the material leftover, the materialization of the terrifying, impossible jouissance” that has been Gatsby’s relationship with Daisy. Like the *Titanic*, Myrtle’s body becomes a spectacle, first lying mutilated in the street and then splayed out on a table in Wilson’s garage. The novel’s climactic scene invests the valley of ashes with its full significance as described above—“a condensed, metaphorical representation of the approaching catastrophe of [American] civilization”—and sets in motion the events that lead to Gatsby’s ultimate punishment, inflicted by Wilson, but precipitated by Tom.

**CONCLUSION**

The final lines of the novel unify its themes with an overwrought precision rivaled by few short passages in fiction. Of particular interest to the present analysis are the following lines: “Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that’s no matter [. . .]” (189). If we are to assume the antecedent of the pronoun “It” that begins the second sentence is “the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us,” then we are encountering a temporal dislocation in the text—what Thomas Pendleton has called a “chronological incoherence” (12). The text is telling us that “It” (“the orgastic future”) “eluded us then.” The context in which the pronoun “then” is used suggests that the elusion occurred in the past. But how can “the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us”—in a continual, ongoing action—have eluded us then, in the completed past? This paradox produces the polysemous doubling elusion/illusion mentioned earlier. The orgastic future eludes us precisely because it is illusory. And just as the orgastic future eludes us, so too does the certainty of meaning.

We can view this temporal disjunction as what Derrida calls an *aporia*, a paradox or contradiction that threatens to unravel the meaning of the text. And yet this contradiction also produces meaning in the final lines of the novel. It is through this temporal paradox that the meaning of the text is disseminated; or, perhaps more acutely stated, the “literal” meaning is dislocated, allowing the symbolic to finally emerge. The final sentence of the book, “So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past” (189), offers an inviting analogy to the concept of the “floating signifier” developed by Lévi-Strauss and later picked up by Lacan and others. Each individual word in a sentence acts as a “floating signifier” because its meaning cannot be fully known or comprehended until the sentence is completed and the broader meaning crystallizes.
This brings us back to the connection between subjectivity, language, and temporality that pervades the novel. I suggest that we approach the temporal disjunction and linguistic uncertainty of the final lines through Lacan's notion of the future anterior: “I identify myself in language, but only by losing myself in it as an object. What is realized in my history is neither the past definite as what was, since it is no more, nor even the perfect as what has been in what I am, but the future anterior as what I will have been, given what I am in the process of becoming” (Ecrits 247). Lacan suggests that the subject must continually reinvent itself by anticipating what it will become in a future moment of psychological harmony. This unified conception of self, however, can only be recognized retrospectively, sending the subject into a repetitive rummaging of the past. It is this compulsion to repeat—or more deeply to reconstitute his past and rewrite his questionable lineage as racial outsider—that plunges Gatsby back into the oedipal drama that ultimately punishes him for transgressing not only the Law of the Father, but also the racial boundaries that have been erected against him.

Notes
1. I would add, also, that what follows is a preliminary reading that leaves much to be said. I hope others will take up this issue further.
2. For an excellent interpretation of the novel’s internal contradictions, see Hilgart, whose essay “resist[s] the conclusion that contradiction in the novel defines Nick’s limitations, arguing on the contrary that contradiction is very much Nick’s overt technique, serving not only to undercut his critique of commodity culture but to mount it” (88).
3. “The French word, given its indissoluble relationship to all the rest of Lacan’s teaching, including his mathemes or his logical and topological formulae, is difficult to translate into English. Lacan himself was aware of the problem and favored a combination of ‘enjoyment’ and ‘lust’; however, all translators have noted the conceptual loss that is sustained in the use of these terms, and therefore the great majority prefer to keep the French word, without italics, as a word already recognized by the OED and as a psychoanalytic contribution to the English language” (Braunstein 103).
4. “Objet ‘a’ designates the lost object as an abject remnant and uncanny revenant of the Real. Its lower-case ‘a’ stands for autre or little other in order to distinguish it from the Big Other of the general language system. In French objet a was pronounced by Lacan as objet petit a, ‘object small a,’ both in order to preserve its quasi-algebraic character as an abstract symbol for the absence of the lost object and also to sound like objet petit tas, ‘a little pile of shit’” (Levine 67). Lacan maintained that the term should remain untranslated, wishing it to resemble an algebraic sign. As a result, it is represented by English translators as objet petit a, objet a, and at times simply objet. It is also—against Lacan’s wishes—often translated as object a, little object a, and so on. For this reason, the reader may assume that the various terms are used interchangeably in this essay and refer to the same concept.
6. See Godden, “A Diamond Bigger than the Ritz,” for more on Daisy’s voice.
Works Cited


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