

The Weary Wilson

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About halfway 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 ash-grey men, who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air.

—F. Scott Fitzgerald

Who mines the coal that heats their Georgian Colonial mansions in the winter, who builds the tracks for the trains bringing in their shipments of lemons and oranges, and who pumps the gas for the Long Islanders headed to the city, because what else will they possibly do with themselves all afternoon? These are the residents of the Valley of Ashes—the proletariat of characters in a Marxist reading of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, similarly analyzed in Marcos Antonio Norris's "Her Voice Is Full of Money." A story rooted in the jazz age with themes both inclusive and applicable to today's diversifying nation, the novel serves as an archetype of the American dream, though exposes its emptiness through the contradictions within American capitalism that hinder George Wilson's socioeconomic mobility in which he envisions no escape.

In *The Great Gatsby*, a striking divide exists between the East and West Eggers, and the dwellers of the Valley of Ashes—between the "haves" and the "have-nots," or the *bourgeoisie* and the *proletariat*. Gatsby, Daisy, and Tom are of the bourgeoisie, while Myrtle and Wilson are of the proletariat. In a capitalist society, the bourgeoisie are those who control the means of production; the proletariat are those of the working class living in substandard conditions and

that “fill the coffers of the rich” (Tyson 52). Here, the divide is larger than any created by race, ethnicity, religion, or gender; it is a divide accounted for by their differences in class, for example, the differences highlighted in Nick Carraway’s descriptions of Tom and Gatsby’s lover versus his descriptions of Wilson’s lover.

In describing Daisy and Myrtle, Nick promotes *classism*, or an ideology of capitalism “that equates one’s value as a human being with the social class to which one belongs,” to convey that the attractiveness of a married woman is a symbolic depiction of the social class to which her husband belongs (Tyson 56). Daisy lives in East Egg: the representation of old money; while Myrtle lives in the Valley of Ashes: the representation of poverty. In Nick’s first description of Daisy, he uses words like “thrilling” and “lovely.” He says regarding her voice: “a singing compulsion, a whispered “Listen,” a promise that she had done gay, exciting things just a while since and that there were gay, exciting things hovering in the next hour.” However, when Nick first describes Myrtle, he uses words like “thickish” and “stout.” He says “...she carried her flesh sensuously as some women can. Her face, ... contained no facet or gleam of beauty,” (Fitzgerald 11, 20). Because of Daisy’s social class, she is assumed to be better in quality than that of Myrtle; Nick assumes this, too. In Marcus Antonio Norris’s “Her Voice is Full of Money,” he asserts that Nick believes her voice “embodies the essence of great wealth, economic prosperity, and social privilege... for voice, according to Aristotle, is a direct manifestation of selfhood, the ontic nature of one’s identity” (Norris). Though Nick includes no description of Myrtle’s voice; pedigree *and* financial status constitute one’s position in the class hierarchy, and so with an inferior identity, why give Myrtle a descriptive voice?

The position of Tom and Wilson within a class hierarchy is determined by their socioeconomic status which affords power accordingly. Because economic systems are the base

in which the superstructure of social, political, and ideological realities of society are formed, Marxists refer to *socioeconomic* class: “[a] Marxist analysis of human events and productions focuses on relationships among socioeconomic classes, both within a society and among societies, and explains all human activities in terms of the distribution and dynamics of economic power” (Tyson 52). Thus, economic power assumes social and political power, allowing Tom to extract more and more from the Valley of Ashes. His socioeconomic status explains his affair with Wilson’s wife and his negligence surrounding it. When Myrtle shouts Daisy’s name, “Tom Buchanan broke her nose with his open hand” (Fitzgerald 27). Because of Tom’s vast wealth and economic superiority over Wilson, Tom’s social power, his ability to engage in sexual relations with married women, is also enhanced. Even when abusive, and even when plainly putting her at a level lower than his *real* love interest, Myrtle prefers the union of Tom rather than Wilson. And when Wilson says to Tom “Works pretty slow, don’t he?” regarding a potential new car, rather than pushing for a faster repair to secure Wilson’s favor, Tom replies “No, he doesn’t. And if you feel that way about it, maybe I’d better sell it somewhere else after all” (Fitzgerald 20). However much respect Tom can give, if any, to the man whose wife is in his bed, his social power requires none of him, and Wilson’s religious practices keep him oblivious to it all.

Aside from Wilson, there is an absence of religion in the novel; in fact, God and religion tend to be largely ignored as infidelity, bootlegging, and premarital sex are common practices. Nonetheless, Norris claims that “Wilson invests the persistent stare of Dr. T.J. Eckleburg with divine significance, asserting, before his murder-suicide, that ‘God sees everything’” (Norris). Though Norris does not include the significance that the role of religion plays in the lives of working-class Americans. The novel’s absence of religion among the rest of the characters is explained by J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur’s in his book *Letters from an American Farmer*.

In “Letter III: What is an American?” he says, “the American is a new man, who acts upon new principles. He must...entertain new ideas and form new opinions. From involuntary idleness, servile dependence, penury, and useless labor, he has passed to toils of a very different nature, rewarded by ample subsistence—This is an American” (Crèvecoeur 326). The period before the American Revolution gave rise to industry and religious liberty. Rather than Wilson, who waits for God to say when, behaves on behalf of His approval, and works for Him without any drive for promotion— Crèvecoeur describes America has a haven detached from old-world order and the chains of the church. Tom, Gatsby, and Daisy are not religious because, by the 1920s, success was no longer accredited to God, it was accredited to the self-made man who pulled himself up by his bootstraps and made his own fortune, or inherited it from the self-made man who did.

Up until the death of his wife, Wilson’s lone religious practices prevented him from prioritizing his best interests over the belief that he will be compensated in heaven. According to Marxism, *religion* “helps to keep the faithful poor satisfied with their lot in life” (Tyson 57). Wilson works at his garage in the Valley of Ashes every day, toiling in the blistering heat all while Tom remains comfortably in his mansion, possibly enjoying a cigar in his parlor or entertaining guests for lunch. Wilson accepts his fate in life—his suffering business, extensive manual labor, and abusive wife—because, if he remains nonviolent, then he will be rewarded by God in the end. So, when Tom stops in the Valley asking Wilson “how’s business?” and Wilson replies, “I can’t complain,” it’s because he really can’t—his gratitude confused with naivety, his position on the socioeconomic ladder fastened tightly by his faith in God (Fitzgerald 20).

In addition to religion, the novel endorses *racial capitalism* that prevents Wilson’s socioeconomic mobility by promoting working-class Americans as the marginalized group over

racial minorities. Nick says, “As we crossed the Blackwell’s Island a limousine passed us, driven by a white chauffeur, in which sat three modish negroes, two bucks and a girl” (Fitzgerald 44). According to Norris, “the ‘modish’, or fashionable, black passengers, driven by a white chauffeur, look condescendingly at Gatsby and Nick, thus inverting their normative racial stations” (Norris). However, Marxists are more concerned with socioeconomic class than they are race, and Norris neglects to consider the plausibility of Black passengers being driven by a white chauffeur. When Nick makes this observation, in addition to saying “a pale well-dressed negro stepped near,” he is placing the novel’s Black characters at a higher social status than Wilson by placing a white driver in a car of Black passengers, and by equating whiteness to one of the novel’s only Black characters by calling him “pale” (Fitzgerald 87). So, in *The Great Gatsby*, racial capitalism refers to the residents of the Valley as the marginalized group rather than the novel’s Black characters. Racial capitalism is an ideology that assumes racism and capitalism to be mutually dependent on one another. To produce capital, capitalism relies on “a system of racialized ‘dispossession, extraction, accumulation, and exploitation’ for power and profit in which human elements are both commodified and devalued” (Brito). In the novel, Tom devalues Wilson’s intelligence to extract more power for himself. Inquiring again about the car, Wilson says to Tom, “I didn’t mean to interrupt your lunch, but I need money pretty bad, and I was wondering what you were going to do with your old car” (Fitzgerald 77). By keeping Wilson in this position, a position in which he has no other financial option but to remain in, Tom exploits Wilson and attains power for himself.

In a capitalist society, those with the most power are those who have extracted the most profit from their private ownerships. Tom *consumes*, or the idea that one is only as good as what they buy, to display his profits, thus giving the average American an illusion that they can be just

as good as Tom if they buy what he buys. Nick says referring to Tom "... and the day before the wedding he gave her a string of pearls valued at three hundred and fifty thousand dollars" (Fitzgerald 48). Tom bought the pearls to reinforce he is worthy to be with Daisy, but his purchase of the pearls also aligns with conspicuous consumption, or the purchasing of expensive goods with the sole purpose to impress others. Tom bought them to show Daisy, and to conveniently show the world, how much money he has and how socially superior he is. In contrast, Wilson and Myrtle's marriage was not so extravagant: "He borrowed somebody's best suit to get married in, and never even told me about it,"—Wilson's wedding attire telling Myrtle everything she needs to know about the insufferable and unhappy marriage soon to transpire.

Gatsby, too, consumes in excess to impress Daisy, though finds it will be his ultimate demise, as Norris states: "attempts to conceal his lower-class origins through consumer purchases... sometimes betray his false aura" (Norris). Everything Gatsby bought—his mansion, car, library, and pool—were all means to prove to Daisy that he is good enough to be with Old Money from the East. However, when confronted by his gardener indicating his intentions to drain the pool before the fall season, Gatsby says, "Don't do it today, ... You know, old sport, I've never used that pool all summer?" (Fitzgerald 94). Gatsby's expensive purchases coupled with his negligence to use them go on to prove that their only purpose is to serve as an illusion.

"There was a faint, barely perceptible movement of the water as the fresh flow from one end urged its way toward the drain at the other. With little ripples that were hardly the shadows of waves, the laden mattress moved irregularly down the pool."

F. Scott Fitzgerald

Gatsby dies in the very thing that was supposed to afford him the status of achieving the American Dream by the hands of whom that same dream is impossible to grasp. The pool and the dream are both illusions. Marxist theory exposes the forces acting against working-class

Americans in a capitalist society that remain just as forceful as today than in 1925. With America's wealthiest 1 percent of families holding 40 percent of the country's wealth, there are far more Wilsons than there are Toms and Gatsbys (Leiserson). There are far more people in substandard living conditions than there are people living in Georgian Colonial mansions. There are far more victims of racial capitalism than there are perpetrators who benefit from it. And there are far more Americans who do the work and play by the rules but who never get to see a cocktail garnished with a lemon or an orange peel.

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