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# The Quest for Normalcy in the Jazz Age

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**Lake Forest Papers Winner 2001  
Andrew T. Bayan**

Words from Andrew:

Chalk it up to fate. The first time I read *The Great Gatsby* was in the spring of 1994 when a student teacher from Lake Forest College assigned it to my American Literature class. Seven years later, I am a LFC graduate who wrote part of his senior thesis on F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel.

I'm glad I read *Gatsby* and even more ecstatic to be a LFC grad. Only in the forest could I have written a thesis about Americans reinventing themselves. American culture is predicated on liberty and freedom, grandiose abstract notions that—naively or not—guide us to believe that we can become anything we want and that greatness is out there for our taking. To read about Jay Gatsby's ascent from vagabond Minnesotan to new-money iconoclast is to read the story of America.

Now I prepare to enter that place enigmatically named the "real world." Armed with a good education and Fitzgerald's words of wisdom, I hope to constantly reinvent myself until I become the person I want to be. In the short term, this means waking up at 5:00 in the morning and wearing a suit. But if *Gatsby* has taught me anything, it's that life doesn't have to be lived one way forever.

**The Quest for Normalcy in the Jazz Age**

Socially minded critics rarely accept *The Great Gatsby* as an historically representative work of the 1920s. On the surface, Fitzgerald's novel merely tells the story of a millionaire bootlegger who is motivated by an adolescent dream of getting the girl; accordingly, the text is about rich people and ignores the concerns of the masses during the decade. In his treatment of Scott Fitzgerald, Morris Dickstein notes, "there are scholars who feel that Fitzgerald deals with much too narrow a class of privileged Americans" (73-4). Consider, however, Janet Gitrow's contention that "*The Great Gatsby* is valued for the vividness with which it renders an historical era; perhaps more than by any other American novel written in the 1920s, we are convinced that we hear the voices of people speaking from that decade" (1). *The Great Gatsby* is not a tribute to rich people; the story of Jay Gatsby the millionaire is a vehicle by which Fitzgerald could tell about America. Gatsby is rich because he is a self-made man who understood the conditions of the nineteen twenties as being amenable to his desire to become someone else. One discovers in Fitzgerald's novel what it means to say America is a country where individuals can reinvent themselves.

To understand 1920s American culture, and why it fostered Gatsby's ability to reinvent himself, one needs to step back into the period between 1912 through 1917 that Henry May calls the end of American innocence. Pre-World War I culture was full of optimism derived from the nineteenth-century American fascination with technological advancement and human progress. For members of the pre-war generation, America's best days lay ahead. But World War I, as historian George Reeves notes, "persuaded many Americans to abandon all forms of idealism that had been expanding for more than a generation" (81). The excitement over American progress died, May would contend, with the war. What was thought to be a six-week

war ended up as warfare's longest and bloodiest stalemate. The conflict that inspired America's commitment to war was not solved; lives were lost for naught. One can simply examine Woodrow Wilson's failed attempt at securing an American presence within the League of Nations as acknowledgment of the country's desire toward isolationism. After World War I, Wilson sought to form a coalition with European nations. The United States, however, wanted to stay out of non-American affairs and focus on its own interests. The populace was disillusioned by the war in Europe and was determined to reassert its American identity without the influence of others.

With the loss of "American innocence," many were scrambling to reassure the public that life, as they knew it prior to the War, was achievable again. In a 1922 speech, President Warren Harding declared that Americans had to "join in the effort to find our normal, onward way" (*Annals* 292). The goal for politicians, accordingly, was to reassure the public that the idealism of the "good old days" could return to the American consciousness. Now that the war was over, America could go back to normal. For others, the 1920s did not represent a loss of innocence. Post-war America, for some, provided the opportunity for indulgence. Rather than return to the past and normalcy, individuals looked forward and were only interested in fulfilling their desires. Fitzgerald coined the phrase "jazz age" with the notion of excess in mind.

Psychologist Robert Lifton's notion of historical dislocation plays a significant role in defining one's understanding of the twenties friction between normalcy and the jazz age. Historical dislocation is the breakdown of social and institutional forces within a culture. In regard to the twenties, one can observe the breakdown of pre-war idealism and the ensuing tension between America's return to normal and its progression into the jazz age. Jay Gatsby, for one, is influenced by both ideas. He is the emblem of the jazz age because he throws lavish parties from his new-money West Egg home. Yet, he throws parties with the expectation of returning to the past, namely, reclaiming Daisy Fay's love. In fact, Nick notes of Gatsby,

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. His life had been confused and disordered since then, but if he could once return to a certain place and go over it all slowly, he could find out what the thing was (117).

Gatsby is caught in a culture that is both forward and backward looking. With the preceding passage in mind, one can see that Gatsby attempts to win Daisy's love by looking in both directions.

Ultimately, Gatsby's life is symbolic not only of historical dislocation but also of Lifton's idea that proteanism manifests itself in a simultaneous manner. Thus, the self can hold and act upon a "multiplicity of varied, even antithetical images and ideas held at one time by the self" (8). Lifton's simultaneity theory corresponds to Fitzgerald's declaration in "The Crack Up" that "the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function" (69). Jay Gatsby reinvents himself during a time when many were searching for normalcy and others for the irreverence of the jazz age. Gatsby represents a protean being who is cognizant of his presence in history; he

understands that twenties' culture fostered a battle among idealism, disillusionment and excess.

Gatsby's motivations bear a striking resemblance to Walter Lippmann's contention in *A Preface to Morals* that "the modern man is an emigrant who lives in a revolutionary society and inherits a protestant tradition. He must be guided by his conscience. But when he searches his conscience, he finds no fixed point outside of it by which he can take his bearings" (59). In Gatsby's case, the revolutionary society was America searching for stability, while the protestant tradition represented pre-war morals and idealism. In order to become the person he wants to be, and in order to attain Daisy's love, James Gatz has to reinvent himself into Jay Gatsby by accepting twenties American culture and all of its contradictions.

In the 1920s, the prominent symbol of cultural contradiction is the definition of the American Dream. It is important to trace the notion of American Dream when discussing reinvention in American culture because, in the quest to find normalcy, some hearken back to the days when individual industriousness was a virtue. Marius Bewley notes that the American dream historically "believed in the goodness of nature and man" (28). Thus, an individual, by virtue of the goodness of man, was willing to work hard in order to obtain the opportunity to attain his goals. In the 1920s, however, the notion that one's hard work and potential to achieve stopped being good enough.

The indulgent attitude of the jazz age suggested that it was not enough for any individual to work hard. As Bewley notes, "the American dream which had started innocently enough...had become brutal as the only means of realizing them had more and more been centered in money" (31). Similarly, Henry May notes that in the twenties, "the ultra-practical, anti-intellectual, pseudoidealistic gospel of Prosperity First reached great power" (394). The notion of "Prosperity First" goes to the heart of money's influence on the American dream. By taking Bewley and May's ideas in tandem, one can observe the redefining of the American dream from idealistic to individualistic. The hard-work motif was replaced by the "what's in it for me" mentality.

It is the materialistic state of mind that motivates Jay Gatsby to reinvent himself and which fuels nineteen-twenties American culture. As people strove for normalcy or the excitement of the jazz age, the American dream was redefined. The 1920s represented the ascendancy of capitalism into the American consciousness, which in turn fostered the individualistic tendencies of people who were motivated by consumerism and commodities. Consider the description of Tom Buchanan, Gatsby's rival, at the beginning of the book and from the narrator's vantage point:

His family were enormously wealthy—even in college his freedom with money was a matter for reproach—but now he'd left Chicago and come east in a fashion that rather took your breath away: for instance he'd brought down a string of polo ponies from Lake Forest. It was hard to realize that a man in my own generation was wealthy enough to do that (10).

The preceding passage represents not only the prominence of money in American culture, but what one can do when one has it. Buchanan is a man of status because he has the money to buy goods and is the beneficiary of the awe that wealth inspires in others.

When one speaks of Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* as a way to understand reinvention in American culture, one must first and foremost be cognizant of the tension that existed between a return to normalcy and the proleptic stance of the jazz age. While *The Great Gatsby* has been deemed a "jazz age" novel, it also contains elements of individuals who clamor for a return to the past. Old money versus new money struggles appear during the decade. While Gatsby seeks to reinvent himself, he can never complete the process because he is being kept out by Tom Buchanan, one of the gatekeepers of the old-money world. Moreover, the 1920s battle between past glory and immediate excess results in the new definition of the American dream, a definition that affected capitalism, individualism and consumerism. Thus, James Gatz's attempt to reinvent himself is spurred on by the pull of normalcy in a culture that also wants to forge ahead.

One can first observe the pull of normalcy through examining one of Gatsby's first encounters with Nick. Gatsby says to his guest, "I am the son of some wealthy people in the middle-west—all dead now. I was brought up in America but educated at Oxford because all my ancestors have been educated there for many years. It is a family tradition" (69). Gatsby is aware of the reverence that old money has in American culture. Thus, when he creates his new persona, he makes sure that his biography is complete with elements of traditional wealth, notably inherited money and attendance at one of the world's oldest and most prestigious institutions. To be accepted by the old-money world he wishes to join, he has to play upon that group's notion of nineteenth-century convention.

But, as previously stated, Gatsby can never complete his reinvention because he cannot enter the old-money world. The pull of normalcy does help Gatz conceptualize his desire to become Gatsby because he is aware of the code words that will help him to convince people that he is old money, too. Unfortunately, the effect of normalcy comes into play when discussing Tom Buchanan, a real old-money denizen. Tom is insulted by Gatsby's attempt to enter his idealistic and traditional world:

I suppose the latest thing is to sit back and let Mr. Nobody from Nowhere make love to your wife. Well if that's the idea you can count me out... Nowadays people begin by sneering at family life and family institutions and next they'll throw everything overboard and have intermarriage between black and white (137).

Buchanan's notion of the traditional is grounded in family values, particularly the sanctity of marriage and the woman's obedience to her husband. Tom's violent reaction to Gatsby can be attributed to his wife's infidelity and the idea that Daisy would cavort with Gatsby. Tom shows his further disdain for the jazz age when he laments, "I know I'm not very popular. I don't give big parties. I suppose you've got to make your house into a pigsty in order to have friends—in the modern world" (137). His jab at the "modern world" reinforces the idea that Tom is a man who defines himself in the values of normalcy. He will not accept the idea that America is swaying from his value system, towards one that fosters Gatsby-like attitudes. While the pull of normalcy in *The Great Gatsby* is prominent, however, it is first and foremost a jazz age novel. While many Americans sought to return to nineteenth-century glory days, others sought the excitement and excess of the future. The tension between past and present, accordingly, represents a dislocation that fosters a culture where Americans can reinvent themselves. One can observe the effects that said dislocation has on capitalism, individualism and consumerism in the novel

and during the decade, to understand how Gatsby was able to reinvent himself during the 1920s.

1920s capitalism provides the framework through which one can understand Gatsby's attempt to reinvent himself. Money is at the center of the text. The main characters have an affluent background and money is used to define status. The prominence of capital, while always important in American life, is magnified during the twenties. George Reeves notes that "business leaders were fond of labeling the 1920s the New Era, calling attention to its productivity and wealth." The historian also notes that "American industrial output nearly doubled between 1922 and 1929, and the gross national product rose by 40 percent" (83). When President Harding declared in a 1922 speech that "it is well understood that business has the right to pursue its normal, legitimate, and righteous way unimpaired," he underscored the primacy of the private sector (*Annals* 292). Business and capitalism would be the forces that restored America to normalcy and to greatness.

It should come as no surprise that Nick Carraway, *The Great Gatsby's* narrator, brings with him from the Midwest "a dozen volumes on banking and credit and investment securities" (8). Nick realizes that he needs to learn about banking and finance in order to gain material success. After all, others were cashing in on the era's economic boom, and Nick did not want to be the exception to success. Fitzgerald notes in *Gatsby* that "Americans, while occasionally willing to be serfs, have always been obstinate about being peasantry." While Americans try their best to disavow class distinctions, one can observe that they do exist. No American wants to think of or actually be a peasant. Certainly, James Gatz does not, and he becomes Jay Gatsby to avoid the peasantry .

While Nick Carraway's life hints at the importance of capitalism in 1920s American culture, Jay Gatsby explicitly highlights its influence. The reason Gatsby can reinvent himself is because he lived in a society that allowed people to work toward attaining wealth. The only obstacles in his way are the ones he had no control over in the first place. When he first meets Nick, Gatsby makes the point that he is "the son of some wealthy people in the middle-west" (69). In Carraway's mind, Gatsby becomes "the proprietor of an elaborate roadside house next door," which is the reaction Gatsby intended to elicit.

Even before Jay Gatsby came to exist, James Gatz had his own concept of how money in a capitalist society defined people and provided the resources to buy goods. Gatsby tells Nick the story of when he met Dan Cody, Gatsby's mentor, who docked near his Minnesota home on a yacht. Nick notes, "to young Gatz, resting on his oars and looking up at the railed deck, that yacht represented all the beauty and glamour in the world" (106). Gatz is intrigued by the yacht but knows the only way to get it, and the lifestyle it represents, is to change his station in life. He had to escape his James Gatz and become someone new.

The fact that James Gatz could reinvent himself underscores the redefinition of the American dream in a capitalist culture. Gatz understood that social status was attainable with money. Rather than working hard in order to obtain the opportunity for success, Gatsby wanted the success and the spoils that came with it. As Ann Douglas notes in *Mongrel Manhattan*, her treatment of 1920s New York, Fitzgerald once told his editor Max Perkins that "culture follows money" (4). Accordingly, the course of American life followed the influence of money. Big business was making substantial profits. Wild speculation in the stock market made formerly middle-class people rich. With the presence of money engrained in twenties American culture, one should not be surprised that Gatsby believed he needed it to be a success.

Because capitalism influenced the American dream, the perceptions of rich people underwent a dramatic change. The dichotomy between rich and poor was magnified, and those with money felt the need to show it off. Nick observes West Egg "as a

world complete in itself, with its own standards and its own great figures, second to nothing because it had no consciousness of being so (110). Thus, the rich live life according to their capitalist mores. Tom Buchanan brings his polo ponies down from Lake Forest. Gatsby throws lavish parties and drives the most modern automobile. Money ceases to be a pragmatic need; it becomes a status symbol. Thorstein Veblen's 1899 *Theory of the Leisure Class* anticipates actions of men like Gatsby and Buchanan. In his treatment of people who emulate the rich, Veblen notes, "property is still of the nature of the trophy, but, with the cultural advance, it becomes more and more a trophy of successes scored in the game of ownership" (28). It would not be illogical for one to consider money as property. Accordingly, the idea of money as status symbol helps one understand 1920s America as a country where individualism becomes more than an idea but a way of life. Since individuals looked out for their own welfare, no one questioned Gatsby's attempt at reinvention. He was merely looking out for his own interest.

Next to capitalism, individualism was the dominant ideology of the 1920s. In a 1928 speech, President Herbert Hoover declared "national character cannot be built by law. It is the sum of the moral fiber of its individuals" (*Annals* 428). Americans have always embraced the idea that individuals, not entities, had the ultimate authority in deciding America's course. During the 1920s, however, there was a strong hostility toward government, a decline in voting and a rejection of civic responsibilities which resulted in a shift to the private and personal (Dumenil 26, 86). Since the onus for determining one's life lay with the individual, he had the opportunity to engage in any activity he saw fit in order to become the person he wanted to be. For James Gatz, forming a new identity was his brand of individuality.

Chapter seven opens with Nick Carraway relating his discussion with Gatsby, a discussion in which the latter exposes the motivations for reinventing himself. Carraway notes, "the truth was that Jay Gatsby, of West Egg, Long Island, sprang from his Platonic conception of himself"... "he invented 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). Gatsby concocted an idea to reinvent himself and was able to, not because his of secretive nature but because American society embraced individualism. Gatsby knew the lifestyle he wanted to lead and followed what he thought was the appropriate course.

In some way, Gatsby's life reflects the sentiment of the American philosopher George Santayana, who in his 1920 work *Character and Opinion in the United States* wrote that "the American has an imaginative life; for where life is intense, imagination is intense also. Were he not imaginative he would not live so much in the future" (174-5). Part of Gatsby's individualism is based on an imaginative conception that he could recreate himself in order to attain money, status and Daisy Buchanan's love. As Santayana intimates, the imaginative life is an integral part of the American spirit. Moreover, the American imagination, as part of a greater individualistic ideal, is proleptic. Gatsby reinvents himself with the notion that he will reap benefits in the future.

By examining Santayana's contentions in tandem with *The Great Gatsby*, one can observe another aspect of 1920s American individualism: restlessness. Since the individual is given the opportunity to determine his station in life, he is presented with a seemingly infinite number of choices. Similarly, one should look at Ronald Berman's suggestion that during the twenties "restlessness was thought to be peculiarly American, equally a necessity and a virtue signifying individualist dissatisfaction with the way things were and incentive to improve them" (15). Gatsby realized that he could be rich and have all the material goods he wanted if he was proactive in reinventing himself.

Gatsby's life also reflects Tocqueville's sentiment in *Democracy in America*, particularly chapter twenty one of Part II, "Why American's Are So Restless in the Midst of Their Prosperity." Tocqueville observes of Americans that "they clutch everything but hold nothing fast, and so lose grip as they hurry after some new delight" (536). Gatsby lives his life in the same way Tocqueville describes; he buys a mansion and cars, and throws lavish parties because he has the ability to do so. Gatsby is an individual in the jazz age who lives the appropriate, ostentatious lifestyle.

To witness this restlessness unfold, one should examine the seemingly innocent scene at the beginning of chapter four, where Gatsby and Carraway go to lunch. The narrator observes that Gatsby

was balancing himself on the dashboard of his car with that resourcefulness of movement that is so peculiarly American—that comes, I suppose, with the absence of lifting work or rigid sitting in youth and, even more, with the formless grace of our nervous, sporadic games. This quality was continually breaking through his punctilious manner in the shape of restlessness (68).

Nick later goes on to describe Jay Gatsby as being influenced by his heart, which, "was in a constant, turbulent riot. The most grotesque and fantastic conceits haunted him in his bed at night" (105). Gatsby, in his reinvented state, exudes an aura of restlessness inherent to a person whose life was shaped by the nineteen-twenties emphasis on individualism. Since he has wealth and the status it affords, he can project an image of restlessness, of being in a hurry and always wanting more. The notion of always wanting more is magnified in a culture that embraces individuality. In the 1920s, individuality helped to redefine the American dream. I spoke of the American dream being reshaped by capitalist values, insofar as 1920s individuals worked to gain money under the veneer of Protestant work ethic. It is not enough to state that having money was on its own sufficient. Money provides people with the capital to buy goods. In terms of 1920s individuality, money defines one as a person. The American dream during the decade became a game of who could get the most stuff. In the novel, Jay Gatsby and the Buchanans have a wealth that puts them in a separate sphere from the rest of America, a sphere where individuality, while highly important, was defined in different terms from the rest of society. When Nick arrives from the Midwest to New York, he dines with the Buchanans and notices upon meeting Daisy that "she looked at me with an absolute smirk on her lovely face as if she had asserted her membership in a rather distinguished secret society to which she and Tom belonged" (22). Daisy, indeed, belongs to a distinguished secret society, a society of wealthy people who live their lives according to the redefined American dream where they are respected because of their money.

Another Fitzgerald work, "The Rich Boy" [1926], examines the idea of old-money reverence in American society through the life of Anson Hunter, whose first sense of superiority came to him when he realized the half-grudging American deference that was paid to him... he accepted this as the natural state of things, and a sort of impatience with all groups of which he was not the center—in money, in position in authority—remained with him for the rest of his life" (319).

"Rich Boy" is useful as a source for Fitzgerald's reinforcement of American culture's deference to old money. In an individualistic society like 1920s America, the distinction between old and new money helped to define identity. While Gatsby does reinvent himself, he cannot attain everything he wants because those who symbolize high-status do not accept him.

In fact, Daisy does not fully accept Gatsby into her world. Nick observes of Gatsby that "he let her believe that he was a person from much the same strata as herself—that he was fully able to take care of her. As a matter of fact he had no such facilities" (156). Gatsby's idealism fails to prepare him for the realities of life with Daisy and the rest of old-money society. Daisy is an old-money debutante who has no desire to leave her life of luxury. Gatsby is convinced that all he needs is money to win her love. His belief is commensurate with Lippmann's idea that "the great majority of Americans have risen in the world... but more and more often have moved not only out of their class but out of their culture" (61). Gatsby has made money and, accordingly, has moved out of the working-class Minnesota life. Unfortunately for Gatsby, by becoming wealthy-- a function of his reinventing himself-- he exposes himself to an old money class and culture of tradition and normalcy that he is ill prepared for.

The scene from chapter nine best represents the scourge of old-money antipathy toward new money: "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" (187-8). The Buchanans' old-money mentality instills in them a sense of entitlement, that they can do anything they want because they have money. The Buchanan's brand of individualism presents the motivation for and the barrier to Gatsby's ability to reinvent himself. Although Gatsby realizes that Daisy's "voice is full of money," he believes that her love is worth having (127).

Regardless of the Buchanan's old-money values, one must consider that Gatsby does become a wealthy man. For James Gatz, any wealth is sufficient to realize his dreams, mostly having the opportunity to reunite with Daisy. As John Callahan observes, "to win Daisy he gathers money and property...in the quick and illegal ways open to him" (382). With that in mind, one must consider the person whom Gatsby becomes, a bootlegger. Fitzgerald never writes explicitly that Gatsby bootlegs; he hints at Gatsby's criminal activities through his association with Meyer Wolfshiem (who is credited with "fixing" the 1919 World Series). Gatsby, accordingly, could make his fortune because the individualistic, anti-government mentalities of the American populace made the rebellion against Prohibition thrive.

Dumenil notes, "Prohibition did not create organized crime, but it helped it flourish. There were fortunes to be made from the illicit trade" (223). Thus, one can reason that Jay Gatsby was able to make his fortune in bootlegging because it was easy to do so. Moreover, his position in West Egg, near Long Island, New York, is important because "Prohibition ...was a joke in most of urban America, but in New York, it was an all-out full scale farce" (Douglas 24). While supporters of the temperance movement claimed that Prohibition was a success, they failed to recognize the shift in values and behavior from Victorian patterns to the recognizably modern emphasis on 1920s personal fulfillment (Pegram 175-6). When saloon houses and similar institutions were forced to close, the romance that surrounded underground drinking was heightened. Jazz age individualists in search of a "good time" drank illegal spirits that men like Gatsby were happy to provide.

The fact that people were willing to spend money to have a good time underscores the nineteen twenties as a decade of consumerism. Gatsby is a millionaire bootlegger, ostensibly to win Daisy's love. He reinvents himself in part because twenties culture fostered a capitalist and individualist society. With that in mind,

consider that when people have money and look out for their own interests, there is a tendency to show off one's wealth. To say that 1920s American culture is a consumer-driven one acknowledges Lynn Dumenil's contention:

The twenties are a critical period...for the decade embodies what constitutes consumer culture: the cornucopia of material goods...and a shift in behavior and values away from the Victorian "production" ethos of work, restraint and order, toward one that embraces leisure, consumption, and self-expression as vehicles for individual satisfaction (57).

Keeping Dumenil's statement in mind, one can observe the influence of consumerism in *The Great Gatsby*. According to O'Meara's analysis of the automobile as commodity in the novel, "the successful metamorphosis of Jimmy Gatz depended on material things; the acquisition and display of commodities grounded his vision of Jay Gatsby firmly within reality" (2). Not only does Gatsby purchase commodities to enhance his status but his purchasing power enables his reinvention. Showing that he has the ability to obtain goods with his money allows James Gatz to prove he has become Jay Gatsby. Moreover, Gatsby's life, when taken in conjunction with Dumenil's contention, supports Veblen's belief that "power conferred by wealth also affords a motive to accumulation" (32-3). To say that 1920s America was a consumerist society begs the question "how did it get to be so?" As Veblen observes, "wealth is now itself intrinsically honourable and confers honour on its possessor" (29). Accordingly, one must purchase material goods to show off one's wealth and claim the honor that it bestows. To examine how the decade's culture becomes consumer driven, one should analyze the rise of advertising during the 1920s.

When historians note that advertising blossomed during the nineteen twenties, they refer to the following numbers: "in 1914 the volume of advertising stood at \$682 million; by 1929 it had grown to \$2,987 million" (Dumenil 88-9). In fifteen years, advertising's volume rose by more than fifty percent. Accordingly, its influence over American culture was dramatic. But how exactly did advertising influence twenties society? Consider Roland Marchand's contention, as suggested in his work *Advertising the American Dream*, that "the cumulative, crowning parable of advertising simplified the American dream by proclaiming, 'you can have it all.' In the truth of that proposition, most Americans devoutly wished to believe" (363). The notion of "you can have it all" underscores the impact of individualism and capitalism in twenties America culture. I have discussed individualism and capitalism during the decade; these factors, in part, contribute to the decade's consumerist tendencies. When a culture embraces the primacy of the individual, and tells him that it is acceptable to make as much money as one can, then the individual is compelled to show off his affluence. Moreover, the advertising medium provides the justification for an individual's desire to buy goods. Advertising offered satisfying forms of individualism, equality and personal interaction, and cost-free progress within the emerging mass society (Marchand xxii). Consumers had the advertisers tell them that a particular product enhances the purchaser's individuality and simultaneously suggest that purchasing power makes one a recipient of the American dream. Before examining the impact of consumerism and commodities in *The Great Gatsby*, one should look at Fitzgerald's 1922 "Winter Dreams," a story that examines the relationship between the entrepreneur Dexter Green and the woman he loves Judy

Jones. When first describing Dexter, Fitzgerald notes that Dexter "wanted not association with glittering things and glittering people—he wanted the glittering things themselves" (220-1). Like Gatsby, Dexter is also convinced that having wealth would help him win the girl. His chain of laudromats, lavish house and nice car are glittering things, but so is Judy Jones. Dexter is driven by commodities; he a consumer with seemingly infinite financial resources and can buy anything he wants. Similarly, one needs only to examine Jay Gatsby as consumer in order to understand the importance of commodities in a consumerist society. Chapter three, for example, opens with Nick Carraway's observation of preparations for Gatsby's party. Nick sees that "a corps of caterers came down with several hundred feet of canvas...a bar with real brass rail...and an orchestra full of oboes and trombones and saxophones" (44). Such grandiose ornamentation reflects Gatsby's desire to show off his wealth and his ability to purchase anything he wants. His parties, moreover, help reinforce the idea that Gatsby enables his reinvention through purchasing commodities. He has the wealth to hold events like the one described in chapter three and simultaneously perpetuates his reputation as a well-to-do West Egger.

Fitzgerald's description of a Gatsby party gives one only a superficial account of the titular hero's lust for commodities. In fact, when Gatsby gives Daisy and Nick a tour of his place, he is quick to point out the many lavish items he owns, for example, his shirts. Gatsby says to Daisy, "I've got a man in England who buys me clothes." He then proceeds "throwing them one by one before us, shirts of sheer linen and thick silk and fine flannel which lost their folds as they fell and covered the table in many-colored disarray" (97). What is more noteworthy is Daisy's reaction: " 'they're such beautiful shirts,' she sobbed, her voice muffled in the thick folds. 'it makes me sad because I've never seen such—such beautiful shirts before'" (98). The interaction between Gatsby and Daisy is significant in discussing twenties consumerism for two reasons. First, Gatsby makes sure to note that his shirts are brought in from England, which, common-sensically to the reader, is a pricey expenditure. In his mind, since he has the money to buy imported shirts, he should do so. Similar to Dan Cody's boat that Gatsby saw at seventeen, the shirts are indicative of an elite status he craved to join. The shirts as commodities enable Gatz to become Gatsby and show off to Daisy that he does indeed belong in her world. Secondly, the fact that Daisy cries over shirts represents her acceptance of material goods as status-affirming products. In her mind, Gatsby's beautiful shirts are a symbol of wealth and represent what could have been of their relationship had he been rich when they first met.

Through examining the party and shirt scenes, one gets the sense that Gatsby, Daisy and the rest of Fitzgerald's characters are materialists who value goods for the status they provide. Similarly, the automobile reinforces the importance of consumerism and commodities both in the book and during the decade. Witness the exchange between Gatsby and Carraway, when Nick notices Gatsby's car with admiration:

I'd seen it. Everybody had seen it. It was a rich cream color, bright with nickel, swollen here and there in its monstrous length with triumphant hatboxes and supper-boxes and tool-boxes, and terraced with a labyrinth of windshields that mirrored a dozen suns (68).

Note the detail in which Carraway describes Gatsby's car. Carraway's attention to detail underscores Gatsby's obsession with showing off his material goods. The fact

that "everyone had seen it" has to be pleasing to Gatsby, because he and his goods have to be noticed in order to prove the efficacy of his reinvented persona. The notion of the reinvented persona is integral to understanding Gatsby's motivations to claim Daisy, the ultimate commodity. Gatsby's desire to win Daisy's love may have some basis in genuine affection; however, it is also a function of his desire to enter American society's upper echelon. By being with Daisy Buchanan, Gatsby's reinventing of himself would become complete. Gatsby tells Carraway about his relationship with Daisy prior to World War I, and the latter responds with the observation that "it excited him too that many men had already loved Daisy—it increased her value in his eyes" (156). That other men had lusted after Daisy motivates Gatsby to take action. The other men provide competition. Thus, Gatsby had to undergo a radical change in his life, namely leaving James Gatz behind while embracing the new, rich Jay Gatsby. As Berman notes in his treatment of the novel, "Fitzgerald understands that the real issue in the early twenties is what people think of themselves because of the way that other people think of them" (92). Because Daisy's value has increased, Gatsby wants her love because she would provide him with the ultimate symbol of his status.

1920s American culture was defined by post-World War tension between nineteenth-century idealism and post-war disillusionment. To say that the decade represented a search for normalcy during the jazz age highlights the sources of twenties discontent. Thus, one observes two disparate ways of thinking at work. Do Americans want a return to the ideal past, or do they want to be forward looking? The fact that those questions were being asked underscores the historical dislocation needed for individuals to reinvent themselves. Gatsby's attitude is commensurate with the 1920s culture of instantaneous luxuriance fueled by individualism, capitalism and consumerism. Caught in between the pulls of normalcy and the jazz age, James Gatz propels himself toward excess in order to become Jay Gatsby.

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