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## Foreshadowing Destiny

[G]audy ... primary colors, and hair shorn in strange new ways, and shawls beyond the dreams of Castile. ... [T]he air is alive with chatter and laughter, and casual innuendo and introductions forgotten on the spot, and enthusiastic meetings between women who never knew each other's names. ... The party has begun. (40-41)

The beauty and splendor of Gatsby's parties masks the decay and corruption that lay at the heart of the Roaring Twenties. The society of the Jazz Age, as observed by Fitzgerald, was morally bankrupt and thus continually plagued by a crisis of character. Jay Gatsby, though he struggles to be a part of this world, remains unalterably an outsider. His life is a grand irony in that it is a caricature of Twenties-style ostentation: his closet overflows with custom-made shirts; his lawn teems with "the right people," all engaged in the serious work of absolute triviality; his mannerisms (e.g., his false British accent, his old-boy friendliness) are laughably affected. Despite all of this, he can never truly be a part of the corruption that surrounds him: he remains intrinsically "great." Nick Carraway reflects that Gatsby's determination, his lofty goals, and most importantly the grand character of his dreams set him above his vulgar contemporaries. F. Scott Fitzgerald constructs Gatsby as a true American dreamer, set against the decay of American society during the 1920s. This is the same world that produced what Gertrude Stein called the "Lost Generation"; this is the same world that T.S. Eliot condemned in "The Wasteland." By eulogizing the tragic fate of dreamers, Fitzgerald thereby denounces 1920s America as an age of blindness and greed, an age hostile to the work of dreaming. In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald heralds the ruin of his own generation.

Since America has always held its entrepreneurs in the highest regard, one might expect Fitzgerald to glorify this heroic version of the American Dreamer in the pages of his novel. Instead, Fitzgerald suggests that the societal corruption that prevailed in the 1920s was uniquely inhospitable to dreamers; in fact, it was these men who led the most unfortunate lives of all. The figure of Dan Cody exemplifies the hardships faced by the dreamer. Cody is a miner, "a product of the Nevada silver fields, of the Yukon, of every rush for metal since seventy-five" (99). He becomes a millionaire through hard work, ambition, and a little bit of fine American luck.

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Despite these admirable qualities, he dies alone, drunk, and betrayed. Through Dan Cody, Fitzgerald suggests that 1920s society manipulated its visionaries, milked them for their hard-earned money, and then promptly forgot them.

This formula is reiterated through the story of Gatsby. A child growing up in a nameless town in the middle of Minnesota, Gatsby dreams of the impossible and makes the impossible a reality. He begins this grand undertaking in an endearingly methodical way by making a list of "General Resolves": "Study electricity," "Baseball," "Practice elocution, poise and how to attain it" (173). Less than two decades later, he is one of the richest men in New York. Gatsby, too, is exploited by the very society in which he longs to take part. At his own parties, "girls were swooning backward playfully into men's arms, even into groups, knowing that someone would arrest their falls -- but no one swooned backward on Gatsby, and no French bob touched Gatsby's shoulder, and no singing quartets were formed with Gatsby's head for one link" (50). His home was full of the Leeches, Blackbucks, and Klipspringers -- or at least it was while the champagne was flowing, at Gatsby's expense. When he dies, no one attends his funeral. Gatsby dies alone, and only a handful of people mourn his passing. In a healthy society, dreamers are respected and encouraged; in Fitzgerald's version of the American Twenties, they are exploited, maltreated, and discarded. For Fitzgerald, the destruction of dreams is the hallmark of his Lost Generation.

Another symptom of the decline of American society is its inability to fulfill its dreamers' desires. As a child, Gatsby dreams of wealth and success, hoping to become a part of the social elite. When Gatsby finally invites members of that elite (as exemplified by the Sloanes and Buchanans) to his home, they have nothing but contempt for him. After Gatsby accepts Mrs. Sloane's invitation to dinner, the entire party rebukes him behind his back. They leave without him, hissing that they "couldn't wait" (103). Though Gatsby is now wealthy and successful, the hypocritical division between those with "new money" and those with "old money" keeps him, despite all his striving, barred from high society.

Gatsby's longing for Daisy -- which is, of course, inseparable from his desire to be a part of her social class -- is another dream that remains unfulfilled. Since Daisy initially refuses to marry

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him because of his poverty and low birth, Gatsby resolves to elevate himself. It never occurs to him to condemn her for her cruelty, nor for her indefensible snobbery; instead, Gatsby strives to live up to her misconceived ideal. His idea of Daisy is of a woman pure, a woman perfect, as clear as a green light in June. When he and Daisy are reunited after a five-year separation, Nick incisively remarks, "There must have been times that afternoon when Daisy tumbled short of his dreams. No amount of fire or freshness can challenge what a man will store up in his ghostly heart" (96). Daisy is tainted by her association with the brutal and loutish Tom; she is, in fact, more like him than she is like the idealistic Gatsby. During this first meeting, Fitzgerald focuses on the fact that she is no longer dressed completely in white: the "brass buttons on her dress gleamed in the sunlight" (90). She is not "the grail" that Gatsby has sought, nor will he ever find it. Daisies are seasonal flowers that decay in the heat (the passion) of summer. Fitzgerald uses Daisy as an emblem of "old money's" pompous hypocrisy: it can never be equal to Gatsby's dreams.

The tragedy of Gatsby's life -- a tragedy that is painfully clear to Nick -- remains invisible to the rest of society. Blindness is one of the novel's central themes: it is populated almost entirely with people who wish not to see. They seek out blindness in the form of drunkenness: Daisy binges on alcohol the night before her wedding in order to obliterate her vision of a miserable future. Jordan, Daisy, Tom, and the other "jet-setters" of the 1920s drive recklessly; they remain blind to danger, so caught up are they in the selfish pursuit of pleasure. They thoughtlessly risk their own lives and the lives of others. Nick says to Jordan, "You're a rotten driver. Either you ought to be more careful, or you oughtn't to drive at all." Jordan responds, "They'll keep out of my way. It takes two to make an accident" (58). For Fitzgerald, Twenties society was "[driving] on toward death through the cooling twilight" (136). Only Nick, who is above all else an *observer* -- the novel is, in some sense, his memoir, and thus a collection of his observations -- truly sees. He is Fitzgerald's representative within the narrative.

Throughout the novel, Fitzgerald heralds the decay of his generation. During the climactic confrontation between Tom and Gatsby when Gatsby learns that Daisy will never be his, Nick muses, "I just remembered it's my thirtieth birthday." This signifies the end of the corrupt lifestyle of the Twenties; now it is the dawn of the Thirties. The characters attempt to escape the calamity represented by the end of the decade by moving West, away from the decaying East. Tom and Daisy leave New York in an attempt to escape the violence they themselves have caused; Nick remarks, "they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their

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money or their vast carelessness" (179). America was once a land meant for dreamers, but the mindless pursuit of wealth destroyed the American dream. Fitzgerald saw a society hurtling recklessly onward, without direction, unwilling to take responsibility for its actions; for him, this represented the annihilation of the very fabric of America. His book was meant as a grim harbinger of that destruction.

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