

# Oxymoron in *The Great Gatsby*

PETER L. HAYS

There are significant paradoxes throughout F. Scott Fitzgerald's (life and) work frequently represented by oxymorons, of which Wolfsheim's eating with "ferocious delicacy" (75) is only one of the most apparent and, as such, very possibly a clue to the paradoxes in the novel. Kirk Curnutt in a review of Fitzgerald's short stories remarks that the titles *Flappers and Philosophers* and *Taps at Reveille* "are clever conceits whose effectiveness depends upon one's fondness for oxymoron" (157). Keith Gandal, in a recent book, writes of "Gatsby's famous doubleness . . . as chivalrous lover and cold-blooded killer." Gandal continues, though I am using his words for a different purpose than his: "His doubleness may have a mainstream enough historical correlative" (119).<sup>1</sup>

One prominent instance of doubleness is evident in his approach to Daisy in the novel. Could a man who "knew women early"—I presume knew them in the Biblical sense—"and since they spoiled him he became contemptuous of them" (104), be so intimidated by Daisy, especially since he's already slept with her (156)? Could someone so ruthless in both the army and business be so timid in dating? Gatsby is plainly not a sexual innocent afraid of sex, another nearly 40-year-old virgin. Far from it. He has had five years of tutelage under Dan Cody, sailing three

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<sup>1</sup>See also Jackson Bryer's "Style as Meaning in *The Great Gatsby*: Notes toward a New Approach" (*Critical Essays on The Great Gatsby*, Ed. Scott Donaldson. Boston: G.K. Hall, 1984. 117-129) and Gail Sinclair's "A Poetic 'Capacity for Wonder': Fitzgerald and the Language of *The Great Gatsby*" (*Approaches to Teaching Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby*, Ed. Jackson Bryer and Nancy P. Van Arsdale. New York: MLA, 2009. 148-55).

times around the continent, having women rub champagne in his hair, and visiting the Barbary Coast (106-07), which Matthew J. Bruccoli glosses in his notes to the novel as San Francisco’s “honky tonk district” (213), plainly a euphemism. We don’t know what Gatsby did for the next five years (from Cody’s death in 1912 until America’s entrance into the war in 1917 [106]), but thereafter he rose through officer ranks to become a major in the army during World War I and then briefly attended Oxford. Are we to expect that he led a celibate life all those years except for his one brief affair with Daisy? There is, of course, a social gap between him and Daisy, and this causes him insecurity in approaching her and proposing that they start their life over. But he did date her before and successfully seduced her. And at Oxford he must have met women of a social status comparable to Daisy’s. In addition, he now foolishly believes that the money he has earned erases much of that social gap so that no one will think, as he tells Nick, that “I was just some nobody” (71), “some kind of cheap sharper” (145). He also believes, erroneously, that in social situations, as opposed to business ones, he must not do “anything out of the way” (84). That being the case, one has to wonder what he and Daisy do on their afternoons together at his house. Nevertheless, Fitzgerald has established him both as “a regular tough” (84), someone who looked like he had killed a man, and a very proper and timid individual on social and sexual matters, or as Fitzgerald himself phrases it, “an elegant . . . roughneck” (53), another oxymoron. What constrains Gatsby is his extreme romanticism, his belief in the American myth that one, through hard work, can achieve anything, whether reliving the past or marrying Daisy in proper social splendor in Louisville so as to confirm his rise in American society (see the paraphrase of Poor Richard’s Almanac and Horatio Alger at the end of the novel). He wants nothing to tarnish his ideal of marrying Daisy in society, the perfect couple on top of the wedding cake, and he wants the social acceptance and respect denied him at St. Olaf

College (105) and by the Sloanes and Buchanans of the world. What has happened, of course, is that following his seduction of Daisy and one special kiss, he “wed his unutterable visions to her perishable breath . . . and the incarnation was complete (117). The religious language, particularly for one raised as a Catholic, as Fitzgerald was, is telling. Daisy embodies the idea of perfection for Gatsby, an almost unapproachable ideal of social success and self-realization. Thus his Grail is “the unreality of reality” (105), another paradox, and as Tom attacks him in the suite of the Plaza Hotel, “only the dead dream fought on as the afternoon slipped away” (142).

But there are other contradictions as well, such as the characterization of Wolfsheim as a sentimental crook (77), and Gatsby’s facial expression, “definitely unfamiliar and vaguely recognizable” (127). Throughout there is Gatsby’s real criminal corruption fronting his romantic “incorruptible dream” (162). Nick, too, has his doublenesses. Initially Nick’s father tells him that “all the people in this world haven’t had the advantages you’ve had” (5), presumably material advantages. But Nick interprets the statement to mean “a sense of fundamental decencies is parcelled out unequally at birth” (6), something very different, and a belief that qualifies Nick very much as a snob. Nick praises himself for honesty after writing the woman others believe him engaged to, because of his affair with Jordan Baker (63), but he doesn’t bother writing her two pages earlier while he’s conducting a relationship with a girl from the accounting division of his bank, incongruously named Probity Trust; the reason is obvious: the girl from accounting is clearly not from his social station and thus not marriageable, as Jordan is, and thus the putative fiancée need not be bothered by a mere summer romance while Nick takes his pleasure with the girl from New Jersey. Nick also assures Daisy and Jordan that the telephone call Tom receives from Wilson, after Wilson has discovered Myrtle’s infidelity, is “a bona fide deal” (122); the deal Tom has offered Wilson, however, is anything but in good faith: he has used the potential sale of the car as a way to approach

Wilson’s garage to talk with Myrtle. His actions, car for woman, are repeated when he takes Gatsby’s car to drive to New York City in exchange for Daisy. And Nick describes Tom oxymoronically as a priggish libertine (137).

We also have Fitzgerald’s assault through Tom Buchanan and Jordan Baker on the remnants of muscular Christianity and the Frank Merriwell novels he grew up with. The 20s were the era of Babe Ruth’s carousings and infidelities, missing games due to what sports writers reported euphemistically as stomach aches, due to the Babe’s prodigious eating, which they may have been, in conjunction with massive hangovers, or possibly alcohol poisoning or even venereal disease.<sup>2</sup> His two daughters were born out of wedlock, not reported by the papers. Nor was Ty Cobb’s racism, not that most Americans at the time would have cared. Sports writers protected athletes to preserve the image of them as role models. The book jacket from a Frank Merriwell reprint says Frank’s “deeds will appeal to every boy and girl who strives for fair play and seeks to improve or to excel.” The inside copy calls the series of novels “Fascinating stories of athletics. . . . They are extremely high in moral tone and cannot fail to be of immense benefit to every boy who reads them” (251).<sup>3</sup> Merriwell was an All-American football player at Yale, linking him to Tom Buchanan, who was a “national figure” at Yale (10), and who is not of high moral tone, cheating on his wife during their stay at Santa Barbara (82), in Chicago (139), and again on Long Island . But unlike the Merriwell book copy that calls the book beneficial only to boys, Fitzgerald is an equal-opportunity

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<sup>2</sup>[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Babe\\_Ruth](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Babe_Ruth).

<sup>3</sup>The Merriwell books were initially serialized in newspapers from 1896-1913, then collected into 208 volumes from 1908-1933 (Burt L. Standish [penname for Gilbert Patten], *Frank Merriwell's Foes*, ed. Jack Rudman. New York: Smith Street Publications, 1972). They sold 125 million copies; there was both a silent film of Merriwell’s adventures (1910) and a 12-part serial in the 1936, as well as a comic strip and a radio show, all featuring his heroics and moral decency.

employer, allowing Jordan Baker to be both a sportswoman and an incorrigible liar and cheat at golf (62).

Why write about national figures in sport only to tear them down? Why pepper the novel with paradoxes and oxymorons? Fitzgerald saw contradictions in the national psyche. Malcolm Cowley's image of Fitzgerald as the man at a dance and also the poor boy outside with his nose pressed to the glass admiring and wondering how much everything cost is apropos (xv): Fitzgerald saw both sides and recorded both. His statement in *The Crack Up* that "the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposing ideas in the mind at once, and still retain the ability to function" (69) speaks to his awareness of doubleness and contradictions in America, and he strove to record them, even as one reality denied another dream. His awareness of his own self-contradictions—realistic romantic, spoiled priest—created a style incorporating contradictions.

The country was changing in many ways. It was still ostensibly a Puritan nation, yet sex was everywhere. A production-mode economy was shifting to a consumer economy. The automobile had changed living, travel, dating, and business in the United States (subject of other books, not this paper), and Fitzgerald emphasizes this change with his frequent mention of cars—Nick's, Tom's, Gatsby's several, Wilson's—and "wayside garages [with] new red gas-pumps" (25). The middle classes were rising on the post-war prosperity that, until 1929, seemed as if it could not end. Nick is a bond salesman, and "Young Englishmen . . . were all selling something: bonds or insurance or automobiles. They were . . . agonizingly aware of the easy money in the vicinity and convinced it was theirs for a few words in the right key" (46). Myrtle dreams of marrying Tom and improving her station, and Mr. McKee needs only an introduction to Tom's East Egg friends to move up the social and financial ladder, figured by that Jacob's ladder, the blocks of the sidewalk that "mounted to a secret place above the trees" (117). Fitzgerald's allusion to Lothrop Stoddard by way of Tom points to the fervent eugenics

movement of the day (208), and Tom fear's that his aristocratic position is challenged by non-Nordic races and by nobodies from nowhere (137) is seconded by Mr. Sloane from East Egg who is “haughtily” determined that Gatsby should not attend his dinner party (109). And their fears have some justification, as the guest list from Gatsby's party reveals, with its intermingling of old money and *nouveaux riches*, of elegant and coarse: Homeric Ulysses linked to common Swett, Southern nobility Stonewall Jackson married to Jewish Abrams, a menagerie of Civets, Hornbeams, Blackbucks, and Leeches together with such obvious immigrants as Mulready, Cohen, Da Fontano, and Rot-Gut Ferret, along with Belchers, Smirkes, and a Hip (66-67). The old established order, figured by Daisy's and Jordan's privileged white girlhood in segregated Louisville, is under assault, as indicated by the incursion into society of recent immigrants and by the Negroes driven by a white chauffeur (73). Gandal states that Gatsby's officership was another such sign of change, promotion by meritocracy rather than by family or education alone.

But these changes in reality were not accompanied by corresponding changes in the national myths. Athletes were heroes, reality be damned. African-Americans could hire white chauffeurs, but their opportunities, even in the non-segregated North, were limited, and they were still subject to prejudice, as Nick's reaction to them makes clear. Despite our myth of a classless society, classes were still very distinct in 1925, as Fitzgerald knew all too well from his experience as a poor boy at Princeton and in his courtship of Ginevra King,<sup>4</sup> and as Nick points out in his distinction between West Egg and East Egg (9). Mr. Sloan and Tom Buchanan insist on their own social superiority to Gatsby, just as Nick does to Wolfsheim and to the girl from the accounting department of his bank. Even Daisy finally realizes the safety of staying “with her own kind,” those of her social class, however repellent her husband is.

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<sup>4</sup>At a party with Ginevra, Fitzgerald was pointedly told that “Poor boys shouldn't think of marrying rich girls” (*Ledger* 170).

Despite our national myth of equal opportunity, it does not exist, as we know but Gatsby doesn't. He thinks that he can do anything, even repeat the past (116). Not being a sports hero, like the aforementioned Babe Ruth or Ty Cobb (who retired wealthy with Coca Cola and GE stock), Gatsby's opportunities for the quick cash to win Daisy are limited, so he turns to crime, as did many during Prohibition. Corruption was pandemic, from Al Capone to Teapot Dome, the sale of national oil reserves by the Secretary of the Interior. Fitzgerald mentions two so-called robber barons, men who built huge industries through monopolization, John D. Rockefeller (31) and James J. Hill (176) (whose mansion was up the street from the Fitzgeralds' St. Paul home), men who "saw the opportunity" (78), just as Wolfsheim did in fixing the World Series. The line between sharp business practice and criminal activity was thin and almost invisible then (and recently as well), as Fitzgerald has Gatsby imply when talking to Tom about Walter Chase (141), a friend of Tom's who came to Gatsby looking for money. One day selling alcohol was legal; the next it wasn't. One day monopolies were good business; then they were declared illegal. Getting a card from the police commissioner to fix traffic violations is simply a courtesy; fixing the World Series is criminal.

Tom, Myrtle, Jay, and Daisy all commit adultery. Some students may think Tom and Myrtle's affair is cheap and disgusting, Jay's and Daisy's romantic, but both are the same morally and legally, yet we still have the myth of family values preached to us, despite the behavior of our legislators. Nick feels himself morally superior to Tom's infidelities, Jordan's lies, to Wolfsheim's and Gatsby's criminal acts, yet he's an accessory after the fact of murder, concealing vital evidence from the police. Myrtle's sister Katherine lies at her sister's inquest, a loyal act of perjury that Nick praises as showing a "surprising amount of character" (171). Lovely Daisy is a hit-and-run killer. Appearances are deceiving. The America that Fitzgerald portrays is riddled with corruption, yet we still maintain the myth of the city on the hill,

“the green breast of the new world” (189), the beacon to the world for democracy and opportunity.

I have difficulty crediting Gatsby as a coherent human being, but as a symbol of the elusive American dream, I find him perfect. He consummately embodies the contradictory qualities of this country, our saying one thing while doing another, our clinging to myths that have little basis in reality. As a well-behaved, socially conscious crook, he is a paradox, an oxymoron, and an exemplary American.

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PETER L. HAYS is professor emeritus of the University of California, Davis, and is editor of the “News and Notes” section of the *Fitzgerald Newsletter*. His forthcoming book is *Views of the Sun* (Camden House), a history of the criticism of Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* from 1926-2009.



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