

### **Some questions Marxist critics ask about literary texts**

The following questions are offered to summarize Marxist approaches to literature.

1. Does the work reinforce (intentionally or not) capitalist, imperialist, or classist values? If so, then the work may be said to have a capitalist, imperialist, or classist agenda, and it is the critic's job to expose and condemn this aspect of the work.
2. How might the work be seen as a critique of capitalism, imperialism, or classism? That is, in what ways does the text reveal, and invite us to condemn, oppressive socioeconomic forces (including repressive ideologies)? If a work criticizes or invites us to criticize oppressive socioeconomic forces, then it may be said to have a Marxist agenda.
3. Does the work in some ways support a Marxist agenda but in other ways (perhaps unintentionally) support a capitalist, imperialist, or classist agenda? In other words, is the work ideologically conflicted?
4. How does the literary work reflect (intentionally or not) the socioeconomic conditions of the time in which it was written and/or the time in which it is set, and what do those conditions reveal about the history of class struggle?
5. How might the work be seen as a critique of organized religion? That is, how does religion function in the text to keep a character or characters from realizing and resisting socioeconomic oppression?

Depending on the literary work in question, we might ask one or any combination of these questions. Or we might come up with a useful question of our own not listed here. These are just some starting points to get us thinking about literary works in productive Marxist ways. Remember, not all Marxist critics will interpret the same work in the same way, even if they focus on the same Marxist concepts. As always, even expert practitioners disagree. Our goal is to use Marxist theory to help enrich our reading of literary works, to help us see some important ideas they illustrate that we might not have seen so clearly or so deeply without Marxist theory, and, if we use Marxist theory the way it is intended to be used: to help us see the ways in which ideology blinds us to our own participation in oppressive sociopolitical agendas.

The following Marxist reading of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* is offered as an example of what a Marxist interpretation of that novel might yield. It focuses on what I will argue is the novel's critique of American capitalist ideology. In addition, I will try to show the ways in which the novel fails to push its critique far enough, becoming the unwitting prey of the capitalist ideology it attacks.

### **You are what you own: a Marxist reading of *The Great Gatsby***

Written and set during the post–World War I economic boom of the 1920s, F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925) can be seen as a chronicle of the American dream at a point in this nation’s history when capitalism’s promise of economic opportunity for all seemed at its peak of fulfillment. “Get-rich-quick” schemes abounded, and many of them succeeded, for it was a time when stocks could be bought on a 10 percent margin, which means that a dollar’s worth of stocks could be purchased, on credit, for ten cents. So even the “little man” could play the stock market and hope to make his fortune there. We see the tenor of the times in the feverish abandon of Gatsby’s party guests—confident that their host’s abundance of food and drink, like the nation’s resources, will never be depleted—and in Gatsby himself, whose meteoric rise from being the son of “shiftless and unsuccessful farm people” (104; ch. 6) to the proprietor of a “colossal” Long Island mansion with “a marble swimming pool and over forty acres of lawn and garden” (9; ch. 1) seems to embody the infinite possibility offered by the American dream.

*The Great Gatsby*, however, does not celebrate the heady capitalist culture it portrays but, as a Marxist interpretation of the novel makes especially clear, reveals its dark underbelly instead. Through its unflattering characterization of those at the top of the economic heap and its trenchant examination of the ways in which the American dream not only fails to fulfill its promise but also contributes to the decay of personal values, Fitzgerald’s novel stands as a scathing critique of American capitalist culture and the ideology that promotes it. In addition, we will see how a Marxist perspective shows us the ways in which the novel fails to push its critique of capitalism far enough, falling an unwitting prey to the very ideology it tries to undermine.

One of the most effective ways *The Great Gatsby* criticizes capitalist culture is by showing the debilitating effects of capitalist ideology even on those who are its most successful products, and it does so through its representation of commodification. As you may recall, a commodity, by definition, has value not in terms of what it can do (use value) but in terms of the money or other commodities for which it can be traded (exchange value) or in terms of the social status its ownership confers (sign-exchange value). An object becomes a commodity only when it has exchange value or sign-exchange value, and neither form of value is inherent in any object. Both are forms of social value: they are *assigned* to objects by human beings in a given social context. Commodification, then, is the act of relating to persons or things in terms of their exchange value or sign-exchange value to the exclusion of other considerations. Of course, commodification is a necessary function of buying and selling, and thus it is a necessary function of capitalism, which depends for its survival on buying and selling. However, as

the novel illustrates, commodification, especially in the form of sign-exchange value, is not merely a marketplace activity that we can leave at the office when we go home at the end of the day. Rather, it is a psychological attitude that has invaded every domain of our existence.

Nowhere in *The Great Gatsby* is commodification so clearly embodied as in the character of Tom Buchanan. The wealthiest man in the novel, Tom relates to the world only through his money: for him, all things and all people are commodities. His marriage to Daisy Fay was certainly an exchange of Daisy's youth, beauty, and social standing for Tom's money and power and the image of strength and stability they imparted to him. Appropriately, the symbol of this "purchase" was the \$350,000 string of pearls Tom gave his bride-to-be. Similarly, Tom uses his money and social rank to "purchase" Myrtle Wilson and the numerous other working-class women with whom he has affairs, such as the chambermaid with whom he was involved three months after his marriage to Daisy and the "common but pretty" (112; ch. 6) young woman he picks up at Gatsby's party. Tom's consistent choice of lower-class women can also be understood in terms of his commodified view of human interaction: he "markets" his socioeconomic status where it will put him at the greatest advantage—among women who are most desperate for and most easily awed by what he has to sell.

Of course, Tom's acts of commodification are not limited to his relationships with women. Because capitalism promotes the belief that "you are what you own"—that our value as human beings is only as great as the value of our possessions—much of Tom's pleasure in his expensive possessions is a product of their sign-exchange value, of the social status their ownership confers on him. "I've got a nice place here," he tells Nick, adding, "It belonged to Demaine, the oil man" (12; ch. 1), as if the house's "pedigree" could confer a pedigree on him. We see this same desire to flex his socioeconomic muscles, so to speak, when he toys with George Wilson concerning the mechanic's wish to buy Tom's car in order to sell it at a profit. Given that Tom was born into enormous wealth, apparently more than he could ever spend, why should he need the socioeconomic ego boost provided by such posturing?

One of the ironies of commodification is that it creates desire even as it fulfills it. Because the sense of self-worth it fosters in us is always derived from external standards, such as fashion trends, we can never rest secure in our possessions: something new and better is always being sold, and others may purchase something we don't have, in which case they will be "better" than we are. In Tom's case, this kind of insecurity is increased by his awareness of a type of social status he can never acquire: the status that comes from being born in the East. Although he inherited his wealth from an established Chicago family—so his money is not "new" in the sense of having been earned during his lifetime—an

established Chicago family in the 1920s would not have been considered “old” in the East, where America’s “bluebloods” had lived since their English and Dutch forebears’ initial immigration. For Easterners, in the 1920s at least, one of the requirements of old money was that it be earned not only in the past but in the East. To be from the Midwest, regardless of the size or age of one’s fortune, was to be a latecomer in the eyes of Easterners.

Having attended Yale, Tom must be, as Fitzgerald was, painfully aware of the Eastern social requirement he can never by birth fulfill. Even if he and Daisy return to Europe or the Midwest, Tom carries the knowledge of his social inferiority inside himself. He therefore seeks a status other than the one he can’t have, a status that would declare his indifference to the issue of old money versus new. Thus his vulgarity—his lack of discretion with Myrtle Wilson; his loud, aggressive behavior; his rudeness—can be seen as an attempt to reassure himself that his money and power are all that count, an attempt to show that his wealth insulates him from considerations of class or refinement. The pseudoscientific “intellectualism” Tom adopts in referring Nick to a book he’d read about white civilization—as well as the racism endorsed by his reading—might be seen in this same light. He doesn’t need to belong to old money because he belongs to a larger and more important group: the Aryan race. As Tom puts it, “[W]e’ve produced all the things that go to make civilization—oh, science and art and all that” (18; ch. 1).

A corollary of Tom’s commodification of people is his ability to manipulate them very cold-bloodedly to get what he wants, for commodification is, by definition, the treatment of objects *and people* as commodities, as *things* whose only importance lies in their benefit to ourselves. In order to get Myrtle Wilson’s sexual favors, he lets her think that he may marry her someday, that his hesitation is due to Daisy’s alleged Catholicism rather than to his own lack of desire. And in order to eliminate his rival for Daisy’s affection, he sacrifices Gatsby to George Wilson, whom he deliberately sends, armed and crazed, to Gatsby’s house without even telephoning Gatsby to warn him. In addition, Tom’s sinister capabilities are hinted at through his familiarity with the underworld in the person of Walter Chase, who was involved in illegal activities with Gatsby.

While a character such as Tom Buchanan is likely to make us sympathize with anyone who is dependent upon him, Daisy is not merely an innocent victim of her husband’s commodification. In the first place, Daisy’s acceptance of the pearls—and of the marriage to Tom they represent—is, of course, an act of commodification: she wanted Tom’s sign-exchange value as much as he wanted hers. And certainly, Daisy is capable, like Tom, of espousing an idea for the status she thinks it confers on her, as when she commodifies disaffection in order to impress Nick:

"You see I think everything's terrible anyhow," she went on in a convinced way. "Everybody thinks so—the most advanced people. And I *know*. I've been everywhere and seen everything and done everything." Her eyes flashed around her in a defiant way, rather like Tom's. . . .

The instant her voice broke off . . . I felt the basic insincerity of what she had said. . . . [I]n a moment 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. (21–22; ch. 1)

Even Daisy's extramarital affair with Gatsby, like her earlier romance with him, is based on a commodified view of life. She would never have become interested in him had she known that Gatsby was not from "much the same strata as herself . . . [and] fully able to take care of her" (156; ch. 8), and when she learns the truth during the confrontation scene in the hotel suite, her interest in him quickly fades. The apparent ease with which she lets Gatsby take the blame for Myrtle's death, while she beats a hasty retreat with Tom, indicates that her commodification of people, like that of her husband, facilitates the cold-blooded sacrifice of others to her convenience.

The Buchanans' commodification of their world and the enormous wealth that makes it possible for them to "smas[h] up things and creatures and then retreat[t] back into their money" (187–88; ch. 9) are rendered especially objectionable by the socioeconomic contrast provided by the "valley of ashes" (27; ch. 2) near which George and Myrtle Wilson live. People like the Wilsons don't stand a chance in a world dominated by people like the Buchanans. The "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; ch. 2)

—is a powerfully chilling image of the life led by those who do not have the socioeconomic resources of the Buchanans. Ashes are what's left over after something is used up or wasted, and, indeed, the area is a literal "dumping ground" where "occasionally a line of grey [train] cars . . . comes to rest, and immediately the ash-grey men swarm up with leaden spades and stir up an impenetrable cloud" (27; ch. 2) as they remove the refuse from the cars. It's obviously a human "dumping ground" as well: aside from the men who remove the trash from the train, there is only "a small block of yellow brick" (28; ch. 2) containing a shop for rent, "an all-night restaurant approached by a trail of ashes" (29; ch. 2), and George Wilson's garage above which he and Myrtle occupy a small apartment.

It is precisely from settings such as this that the American dream is supposed to emerge, that a shaky but persistent business enterprise is supposed to lead to financial security for oneself and one's children. But the language used to

describe this scene makes it clear that this is a land of hopelessness, not of dreams likely to be fulfilled: it is a “grey land,” “impenetrable,” with “spasms of bleak dust . . . drift[ing] endlessly over it” and “bounded . . . by a small foul river” (27–28; ch. 2). And there are no children here, no emblems of hope for a better future, except for the “grey, scrawny Italian child . . . setting torpedoes [firecrackers] in a row along the railroad track” (30; ch. 2), hardly the embodiment of a promising tomorrow. The only way to survive this hell on earth is to let someone like Tom Buchanan exploit you, as George does when he tolerates Tom’s humiliating banter in the hope of getting a good price on Tom’s car and as Myrtle does when she accepts Tom’s mistreatment in the hope of getting out of the valley of ashes for good. But the only way out of capitalism’s “dumping ground,” as George and Myrtle both finally learn, is in a coffin.

Even Jay Gatsby, the character who seems at first to embody the American dream and the hope capitalism thereby offers to all, reveals, upon closer inspection, the hollowness of that dream. In true rags-to-riches style, Gatsby has risen from extreme poverty to extreme wealth in a very few years. His boyhood “schedule,” in which he divided his time, in the self-improvement tradition of Benjamin Franklin, among such pursuits as the practice of “elocution” and the study of “needed inventions” (181; ch. 9), resonates strongly with the American dream’s image of the self-made man. And even his motive for amassing wealth seems pure: he did it to win the woman he loves. If Gatsby is the novel’s representative of the American dream, however, the dream must be a corrupt one, for Gatsby achieves it only through criminal activities, a fact that severely deflates the image of the honest, hardworking man that the dream is supposed to foster. And although Gatsby is certainly more charming than Tom and Daisy, and more sympathetically portrayed by Nick, he commodifies his world just as they do. In fact, one might argue that he commodifies it more.

However much the Buchanans’ possessions are important to them in terms of sign-exchange value, they also have use value: we see the couple reclining on their sofas and eating at their tables. In contrast, we are told that the only room Gatsby occupies in his magnificently furnished mansion is his simple bedroom, and during the only time we see him there his purpose is to show it to Daisy. He almost never uses his library, pool, or hydroplane himself; and he doesn’t drink the alcohol or know most of the guests at his lavish parties. It seems that for Gatsby the sole function of material possessions is sign-exchange value: he wants the image their ownership confers on him and nothing more. Furthermore, Gatsby’s commodity signs are almost all empty: his Gothic library filled with uncut (and, therefore, unopened) books, his “*imitation . . . Hôtel de Ville*” with its “spanking new” tower “under a *thin beard* of raw ivy” (9; ch. 1, my italics), and his photo of himself at Oxford are all surfaces without interiors, all images

without substance. It seems fitting, then, that he acquired them in order to acquire the ultimate image of sign-exchange value he wants to possess: Daisy.

Possession of Daisy would give Gatsby what he really wants: a permanent sign that he belongs to her socioeconomic class, to the same bright, spotless, airy, carefree world of the very rich that Daisy embodied for him when they first met. For Gatsby, her presence gave the house in which she lived a feeling of “breathless intensity,”

a hint of bedrooms upstairs more beautiful and cool than other bedrooms, of gay and radiant activities taking place through its corridors, and of romances that were . . . redolent of this year’s shining motor cars and of dances whose flowers were scarcely withered. (155–56; ch. 8)

Possession of Daisy, the ultimate commodity sign, would, in Gatsby’s eyes, “launder” his “new money” and make it “old,” would make his “spanking new” imitation Hôtel de Ville an ancestral seat. Thus, in accumulating material goods in order to win Daisy, he accumulated one kind of commodity sign in order to acquire another.

Gatsby’s commodification of his world is linked, like Tom’s, to the cold-blooded aggression with which he pursues what he wants. The lap of luxury in which Gatsby lives does not exist in a vacuum. It is supported by a very dark and sinister world of corruption, crime, and death. The underworld activities from which his wealth derives include bootlegging and the selling of fraudulent bonds. This is the underworld of Meyer Wolfsheim, who has such unlimited criminal connections that he was able to “fix” the 1919 World Series. And this is the man who takes credit for giving Gatsby his start.

We get a glimpse of this world in the “villainous” looking servants (119; ch. 7) Wolfsheim sends to work for Gatsby and in the phone calls Gatsby receives (and which, after Gatsby’s death, Nick receives by accident) from obvious criminal sources. This is a world of predators and prey in which illegal—and thus often imperfect—liquor is sold over the counter to anyone with the money to pay for it and in which fake bonds are passed in small towns to unsuspecting investors. Some of the people who buy the liquor may become ill from it; some may die. All of the small investors who buy the fraudulent bonds will lose money that they can’t afford to lose. And when the inevitable mistakes are made and the law steps in, someone will have to be sacrificed as Gatsby sacrifices Walter Chase.

Even the protagonist’s desire for Daisy is informed by an underworld perspective. When Gatsby first courted Daisy at her parents’ home in Louisville, he “let her believe that he was a person from much the same strata as herself” when, in fact, “he had no comfortable family standing behind him and he was liable at the whim of an impersonal government to be blown anywhere about the world” (156; ch. 8):

However glorious might be his future . . . he was at present a penniless young [soldier] without a past, and at any moment the invisible cloak of his uniform might slip from his shoulders. So he made the most of his time. He took what he could get, ravenously and unscrupulously—eventually he took Daisy one still October night, took her because he had no real right to touch her hand. (156; ch. 8)

This language—“he took what he could get, ravenously and unscrupulously”—is hardly the language of love. Rather, it is the kind of language that would be used to describe a hoodlum, the kind of language that resonates strongly with Gatsby’s dubious association with Dan Cody before meeting Daisy and with his criminal activities subsequent to their initial affair.

Thus, Gatsby is not exempt from the novel’s unflattering portrait of the wealthy. Indeed, his characterization suggests that the American dream does not offer a moral alternative to the commodified world of the Buchanans but produces the same commodification of people and things as does Tom and Daisy’s inherited wealth. *The Great Gatsby’s* representation of American culture, then, reveals the debilitating effects of capitalism on socioeconomic “winners” such as Tom, Daisy, and Gatsby, as well as on “losers” such as George and Myrtle.

Operating against *The Great Gatsby’s* powerful critique of capitalism is the novel’s subtle reinforcement of capitalism’s repressive ideology. This counter-movement operates in three ways. First, the unflattering portraits of George and Myrtle Wilson deflect our attention from their victimization by the capitalist system in which they both struggle to survive. Second, because Nick is seduced by the American dream Gatsby represents, his narrative romanticizes the protagonist, obscuring the ways in which Jimmy Gatz’s investment in the dream produced the amoral Jay Gatsby. Third, the lush language used to describe the world of the wealthy makes it attractive despite the people like the Buchanans who populate it.

Perhaps *The Great Gatsby’s* most obvious flaw, from a Marxist perspective, is its unsympathetic rendering of George and Myrtle Wilson, the novel’s representatives of the lower class. George and Myrtle try to improve their lot the only way they know how. George clings to his foundering business, and Myrtle, in a sense, tries to start one of her own by marketing the only commodity she has in stock: she “rents” her body to Tom Buchanan, hoping he’ll want someday to “purchase” it by marrying her. They are victims of capitalism because the only way to succeed in a capitalist economy is to succeed in a market, and, as neither George nor Myrtle succeed in the only markets open to them, they are condemned to the “valley of ashes.” Their characterizations, however, are so negative that it is easy to overlook the socioeconomic realities that control their lives. Indeed, one might argue that George and Myrtle are negative stereotypes of a lower-class couple: he’s not very bright; she’s loud, obnoxious, and overtly sexual. We may

feel sorry for George, but our sympathy is undercut by his personal failings. That is, instead of feeling sorry (or angry at the system) that he is a victim of class oppression, we feel sorry (or angry at him) that he doesn't have what it takes to "pull himself up by his bootstraps" and better himself, as the American dream tells us he should: we blame the victim instead of the system that victimizes him. Similarly, Myrtle's cruel rejection of George and brazen pursuit of Tom make her an easy target for our disapproval: our awareness of Myrtle's severely limited options is dimmed by the very fact that she does her best to use them.

In a more subtle manner, the novel is also flawed, from a Marxist perspective, by Nick's romanticization of Gatsby. Nick may like to think he disapproves of Jay Gatsby—because he knows he *should* disapprove of him for the same reasons he disapproves of the Buchanans—but it is clear from the beginning that the narrator is charmed by him. As Nick tells us, "There was something gorgeous about him, some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life. . . . [I]t was an extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness such as I have never found in any other person and which it is not likely I shall ever find again" (6; ch. 1).

This idealization is foregrounded in Nick's narrative through his focus on romantic images of Gatsby: the rebellious boy, the ambitious young roughneck, the idealistic dreamer, the devoted lover, the brave soldier, the lavish host. Gatsby's criminal connections are acknowledged, but because of Nick's response to them, they don't influence his opinion of the man. For example, Nick's manner of discussing Gatsby's criminal life tends to deflect attention away from the moral implications of Gatsby's underworld activities, as when Nick reports the following conversation he overheard at one of Gatsby's parties: " 'He's a bootlegger,' said the young ladies, moving somewhere between his cocktails and his flowers" (65; ch. 4). The rhetoric of this phrase is typical of Nick's defense of Gatsby against his detractors, even when those detractors are right: his statement focuses on Gatsby's generosity and on the willingness to abuse it of those who gossip about him, thereby sidestepping the fact that "his cocktails and his flowers" weren't rightfully his at all: they were purchased with funds obtained from his criminal activities.

Similarly, Nick influences our reaction to Gatsby by his own emotional investment in those events that show Gatsby in a good light. For example, when Gatsby, confronted by Tom, admits in front of everyone that his Oxford experience was provided by a government arrangement for American soldiers who remained in Europe after World War I, Nick "wanted to get up and slap him on the back" (136; ch. 7). This small concession to reality on Gatsby's part elicits in Nick a renewal "of complete faith in him" (136; ch. 7). Despite what Nick knows about the underworld sources of Gatsby's wealth, despite the "unaffected scorn" Nick says he has for Gatsby's world, Gatsby himself is "exempt" from

Nick's disapprobation: "Gatsby turned out all right at the end; it is what preyed on Gatsby, what foul dust floated in the wake of his dreams" (6; ch. 1) that elicits Nick's disaffection—and that of many readers. It is easy to be influenced by the warmth of Nick's feelings because these feelings so strongly inform the portrait he paints. Following Nick's lead, and typical of the response of many literary critics to the title character, Tom Burnam says that Gatsby "survives sound and whole in character, uncorrupted by the corruption which surrounded him" (105), and Rose Adrienne Gallo believes that Gatsby "maintained his innocence" to the end (43).<sup>1</sup>

Why should Nick deceive himself, and us, about Gatsby? Why should he foreground all the positive, likable qualities in Gatsby's personality and shift responsibility for the unpleasant ones onto others' shoulders? I think it is because the narrator is himself seduced by Gatsby's dream. At the age of thirty, and still being financed by his father while he tries to figure out what he should do, it is not surprising that Nick wants to believe life still holds promise because he is afraid that it doesn't. He fears that all he has to look forward to is, as he puts it, "a thinning list of single men to know, a thinning brief-case of enthusiasm, thinning hair" (143; ch. 7). With his summer in New York—his latest in a series of adventures—having ended in disaster, he wants to believe in the possibility of hope. Nick believes in Gatsby because he wants to believe that Gatsby's dream can come true for himself: that a young man at loose ends can make the kind of outrageous financial success of himself that Gatsby has made, can find the woman of his dreams, and can be so optimistic about the future. Nick doesn't want to be reminded that Gatsby's glittering world rests on corruption because he wants that kind of hopeful world for himself. He is in collusion with Gatsby's desire, and his narrative can lead readers into collusion with that desire as well.

The appeal to readers of Gatsby's desire to belong to the magical world of the wealthy—as Andrew Dillon puts it, "Gatsby has possessed what the reader must also desire: the orgiastic present" (61)—is also a testimonial to the power of the commodity. Gatsby may not make the best use of his mansion, his hydroplane, his swimming pool, and his library, but many of us might feel that we certainly would. Thus another flaw in the novel, from a Marxist perspective, is the way in which the commodity's appeal is powerfully reinforced for the reader by the lush language used to describe this world of leisure and luxury. Consumer goods are invested with magic—with the capacity to transform reality—which suggests that the commodity is *itself* transcendent, beyond earthly limitation. Even the refreshments at Gatsby's parties, for example, seem enchanted: a "tray of cocktails *floated* at us through the twilight" (47; ch. 3, my italics), and on "buffet tables, garnished with glistening hors-d'oeuvre, spiced baked hams crowded against salads of *harlequin* designs and pastry pigs and turkeys *bewitched* to a dark gold" (44; ch. 3, my italics).

The commodity is especially compelling in the following description of the Buchanans' home on East Egg:

Their house was . . . a cheerful red and white Georgian Colonial mansion overlooking the bay. The lawn started at the beach and ran toward the front door for a quarter of a mile, jumping over sun-dials and brick walks and burning gardens—finally when it reached the house drifting up the side in bright vines as though from the momentum of its run. The front was broken by a line of French windows, glowing now with reflected gold, and wide open to the warm windy afternoon. . . .

[T]he front vista . . . [included] in its sweep a sunken Italian garden, a half acre of deep pungent roses and a snub-nosed motor boat that bumped the tide off shore. . . .

We walked through a high hallway into a bright rosy-colored space, fragilely bound into the house by French windows at either end. . . . A breeze blew through the room, blew curtains in at one end and out the other like pale flags, twisting them up toward the frosted wedding cake of the ceiling—and then rippled over the wine-colored rug, making a shadow on it as wind does on the sea. (11–12; ch. 1)

This passage is a delicious appeal to every one of the five senses, with language so sensual that the house seems to breathe with a life of its own. This setting thus has an existence independent of the characters who inhabit it: the estate doesn't need Tom and Daisy in order to be gorgeous; it was gorgeous before Tom bought it, and it will be gorgeous after the Buchanans are gone. In fact, we could easily, and happily, imagine this place without its occupants. That is, the setting is bigger than the Buchanans—it contains and exceeds them. They neither use it up nor exhaust its possibilities. And it is impervious to their corruption: we are not led to associate the place with the events that occur there. Therefore, it can exert a magnetic appeal on many readers. As much as Fitzgerald is the critic of capitalism, he is also its poet laureate, and his poetry can attract readers to the very thing that, on a more overt level, the novel condemns.

While *The Great Gatsby* offers a significant critique of capitalist ideology, it also repackages and markets that ideology anew. This double movement of the text gives the closing line a special irony: if we do “beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past” (189; ch. 9), there is in this novel that which strengthens the back-flow, bearing us ceaselessly back under capitalism's spell. In the end, Gatsby fails to realize the American dream, but because the novel falls prey to the capitalist ideology it condemns, many readers will continue to invest in it.