

Restless in west egg

[Literature](#), [American Literature](#)



To many Americans, wealth and happiness are inextricably intertwined. After all, the democratic ideals of our country are predicated on the notion of the "self-made" man. Ironically, it is sometimes the striving for wealth or the striving for happiness through wealth that leads to our downfall. In *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald presents us with a vivid picture of three different strata of society and their common thirst for wealth. We meet Daisy and Tom Buchanan of the "old money" community of East Egg; they seem to have everything, yet they lead double lives and destroy others in their quest for excitement and self-fulfillment. On the other side of Manhasset Bay in West Egg resides Jay Gatsby, a newly wealthy man who throws lavish parties and seems to encompass the "self-made" man ideal. However, Gatsby also longs for happiness, in the form of Daisy Buchanan. Situated in the middle of the vast wealth of East and West Egg is the Valley of Ashes, home to the utterly poor Wilsons. Although the Valley of Ashes is essentially a despair-inducing locale, the Wilsons, envious of the wealth of their surroundings, go to great lengths to try to attain the "ideal life" that they incorrectly believe East and West Eggers lead. It is thus from these discrete yet connected societies the springs Fitzgerald's warning of the superficiality and longing for happiness in the form of wealth that pervades communities of extreme wealth or poverty. Our introduction to the Buchanans begins in their enormous house, a "nice place" (12) that Tom ostentatiously displays to Nick Carraway. Tom and Daisy seem to have everything: secured wealth, a beautiful little girl, and a position in high society. Their immense wealth causes them to believe that they are indestructible and omnipotent; furthermore, they believe that

wealth gives them a license to manipulate others. Tom clearly takes Nick's friendship for granted, for he drags him to the city and expects that Nick will approve of his behavior. With regard to Tom's insistence that Nick follow him to New York to see Myrtle, Nick remarks, "The supercilious assumption was that on Sunday afternoon I had nothing better to do" (28). Ultimately, when Tom and Daisy leave East Egg in the wake of Myrtle's murder, Tom decides that he no longer needs Nick as a friend and he moves away without notifying him. The superficiality of Tom and Daisy's marriage is manifested in a longing for something that is "real" or "true." Tom's dissatisfaction and restlessness lead him to pursue an affair with Myrtle Wilson, the poor wife of a gas station owner. In Myrtle, Tom hopes to find adventure or something to ease his boredom. When Myrtle fails to live up to Tom's expectations, he believes that, because she is more of his property than a human, he has the right to discipline her accordingly. After Myrtle refuses to stop saying Daisy's name despite Tom's request that she not, Tom, "making a short deft movement [...] broke her nose with his open hand" (41). Myrtle bestows on Tom, her "sweetie" (39) much affection and admiration. He, however, shows his arrogance and lack of caring for her when, after Daisy accidentally kills Myrtle, he and Daisy quickly leave East Egg, seemingly without a care for poor Myrtle or Wilson. Across the Bay, in West Egg, Gatsby also leads a superficial life saturated with longing. However, unlike Tom and Daisy, Gatsby knows exactly what will make him happy: Daisy's love. Gatsby believes that ostentatious displays of wealth and lavish parties will bring Daisy to him. When Daisy visits, he insists on giving her and Nick a tour

of his extravagant house: "We went upstairs, through period bedrooms swathed in rose and lavender silk and vivid with new flowers, through dressing rooms and poolrooms, and bathrooms with sunken baths" (96). All that Gatsby wants is to "repeat the past," a time when he had Daisy. Ironically though, Gatsby won Daisy's love when he was a poor soldier. Gatsby's sustained efforts to win Daisy's love and his happiness through money ultimately result in his downfall. It is by association with Daisy and Tom that Gatsby becomes embroiled in the killing of Myrtle Wilson, and that Gatsby is killed by Wilson. Between the lavishness of West Egg and East Egg lies a desolate area inhabited by two appropriately depressed people, Myrtle Wilson and her husband Wilson. The Valley of Ashes is preyed upon by its surrounding wealthier communities. The East and West Eggers use the train station in the Valley of Ashes to get Manhattan, but they try to spend as little time as possible in this "terrible place" (30). Furthermore, those living in the Valley of Ashes are corrupted by the envy they have for the surrounding communities. Myrtle Wilson has such a strong desire for wealth and what she believes will be ensuing happiness, that she is instantly willing to destroy her relationship with Wilson when she meets Tom on a train. Myrtle is clearly most attracted to Tom's wealth: "He had on a dress suit and patent leather shoes and I couldn't keep my eyes off him" (40) When Myrtle spends time with Tom, she too begins to act like a money-driven, obnoxious East Egger. She tells Nick and her sister that she married Wilson because she "though he was a gentleman," (39) but when she learned that he had "borrowed somebody's best suit to get married in," (39) she

rendered him unfit *to lick my shoe* ? (39). Although Myrtle may think Tom is her *sweetie* ? (39) and be superficially happy when they are together, her desire to sustain her relationship with him ultimately results in her death. As she is rushing away from Wilson to greet the car that she believes Tom is in, with out-flailed arms symbolic of her desire to reach for greater things, she is run over and killed. Through his vivid portrayal of the corruption and superficiality that pervades lives of extreme wealth or extreme poverty, Fitzgerald seems to suggest, through his representation of Nick Carraway's middle-class status, what socio-economic class may be *right*. Nick lives on West Egg in a *small eye-sore* ? (10) of a house, sandwiched between Gatsby's mansion and other luxurious residences. However, unlike the other residents of East and West Egg and the Valley of Ashes, Nick's desire for wealth is clearly transitory. He refuses a *fast-money* ? scheme presented to him by Gatsby because he has no desire to become extremely wealthy through illegal means. Although Nick is surrounded by money, he remains remarkably free of envy for his friends' wealth. Furthermore, Nick is the only character who is not restless and who does not long for something that he cannot have. Nick recognizes the *distortion* ? (185) and the money-driven corruption that pervades the lives of Easterners, and he ultimately renders himself *subtly unadaptable to Eastern life* ? (184). It is thus that Fitzgerald seems to belie the common wealth-happiness mindset of Eastern Americans, and suggest that happiness cannot be derived from any single concrete factor, but instead from a balanced life.