

The valley of ashes as a main symbol in the great gatsby

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The Great Gatsby: Symbolism in The Valley of Ashes

The Great Gatsby by F. Scott Fitzgerald has become a literary classic of the 1900's. This book, set in the 1920's, takes place in Long Island Sound and New York. the valley of ashes is found between West Egg and New York City, however in contrast to East and West Egg's rich preeminent society, the valley of ashes is where the poor people live. Its inhabitants are the casualties of the rich who are dumped on by the rest of the world in the same way ashes are dumped on them. The Valley is literally defined by its dust and ash, this is where the ashes from the city's industries are dumped. The alley of ashes, with its brooding eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg,, its grey and dreary backdrop and its contrast to East and West Egg, uses various forms of symbolism. Fitzgerald's use of symbolism, exemplified by the valley of ashes, gives the novel a timeless appeal and saves it from becoming just another period piece.

Within the valley of ashes, above everything else, there stands a billboard with an advertisement for an optometrist. " The eyes of Doctor T J. Eckleburg are blue and gigantic- their retinas are one yard high. They look out of no face, but instead, from a pair of enormous yellow spectacles which pass over a non-existent nose." (Fitzgerald 26) In this novel these behemoth eyes are made to represent God, or more accurately a dead God that sits and stares while we destroy everything. They act as a constant reminder of society's moral decay, but observe silently, offering neither guidance nor comfort. This theme is still very common today. It seems that fewer and fewer people believe in God, and those who do, see him as a punisher, not a savior. The

idea of a dead God is rampant in our society. There is so much destruction, wastefulness and corruption, that it almost seems as if God is a lifeless entity which "Broods on over a solemn dumping ground" (Fitzgerald 26).

The valley of ashes is described as being a dark dirty place covered in grey ash. The colour grey has its own symbolism within the book as it implies the disappearance of hopes and dreams. "transcendent effort of ash-grey men" (Fitzgerald 26) refers to the men who work in the valley of ashes. Their existence is hardly living, they have no dreams. In reference to the valley itself, the colour grey is used as a descriptor, "Above the grey land and the spasms of black dust" (Fitzgerald 26). In this context grey is meant to describe the valley itself, and the hopelessness of its inhabitants. Grey in today's society continues to be a colour of depression, sadness, misfortune and the poverty-stricken. Fitzgerald uses a lot of colour symbolism, but in the valley of ashes the predominant one is grey. The colour symbolism is easy to understand because grey still has a lot of the same associations, it also allows people to relate easily to the material.

The valley of ashes is situated right between the places where the wealthiest people choose to live and work. East and West Egg are home to the wealthy aristocrats, and New York City is the ritzy metropolis where all the money is made, but right in the middle is the valley of ashes. "This is a valley of ashes- a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat 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 powdery air" (Fitzgerald 26). This is where all

the book's death and decay converges, producing a sharp contrast between it and the ritzy atmosphere of the Eggs. This contrast is also very notable in today's society. There is still such a gap between our wealthiest and poorest peoples, that the valley of ashes is as much a symbol of our time, as it is of the 1920's. You can read the vividly depicted scenes of the valley of ashes and make connections to similar experiences in your own life.

The Great Gatsby can be enjoyed by anyone. It's use of simple symbolism, such as the colour grey, and the eyes of Doctor T J. Eckleburg, are easy to understand and at the same time easy to relate to one's own life. The stark contrast between the valley of ashes and the Eggs, or New York is also easily related to every day life. Most of the issues addressed in this novel haven't gone anywhere, though they may have altered slightly. Grey is still associated with death, poverty and depression. God is still thought of by some as a lifeless entity, who watches idly, doing nothing while people are murdered and our society destroys everything. The thing that has changed the least since the 1920's is the difference between the rich and the poor. the valley of ashes, if it represents nothing else, represents the contrast between wealthy and poor. If we can relate so much to a novel that was written so long ago, then how far has our society really come?