

A great american dream

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



The Great Gatsby and " Babylon Revisited," both by F. Scott Fitzgerald, are stories about the emptiness and recklessness of the 1920s. Each story has its distinctions, but Fitzgerald's condemnation of the decade reverberates through both. Fitzgerald explores and displays insufficiencies of the vacuous period, and does so with sharp clarity and depth, leaving no crude, barbarous habit to imagination. Fitzgerald had a deep and personal affliction with the 1920s (most notably in the Eastern United States), and in both The Great Gatsby and " Babylon Revisited," he hones his conflicts into a furious condemnation. The 1920s were a period of sloth, habitual sin, exhausted illustriousness, and moral despondency; the black mark of a society and world usually tilted more toward attempted civility. Fitzgerald conveys this theme through the use of character, symbolism, and wasteland imagery. First, Fitzgerald uses characters to personify the vast recklessness of the generation. The characters in both are incomprehensibly selfish and carefree, though more noticeably in The Great Gatsby. Tom Buchanan, for instance, is almost flippant in acknowledging his affair with Jordan Baker, a local miscreant golf pro. Tom leaves Nick, Daisy, and Jordan at the dinner table to take a call from her. An exchange between Nick Carraway and Jordan while Tom is gone illuminates the situation. "' Is something happening' (Fitzgerald, Gatsby 19), says Nick. To which Jordan Baker replies, ' I thought everybody knew.... Why-... Tom's got some woman in New York'" (Fitzgerald, Gatsby 19). Tom Buchanan has an acknowledged mistress in New York, and he politely and confidently leaves the dinner table to speak with her. He is the absolute personification of the reckless actions and attitudes that characterize the era. Duncan Shchaeffer and Lorraine Qualles,

appearing briefly in “ Babylon Revisited,” also represent reckless and selfish behavior. They burst in to a private meeting at the Peters residence just as Charlie is coercing Lincoln and Marion in to granting him custody of his child. Fitzgerald describes their behavior: “ They were gay, they were hilarious, they were roaring with laughter.... They slid down another cascade of laughter” (Fitzgerald, Babylon 385). This after bursting in to the house of a stranger. They are drunk, juvenile, reprehensible in behavior, and acting more like children than adults. Fitzgerald asserts, however, that their actions characterize the generation of lost souls, and these characters are only used to articulate his condemnation of it. Secondly, Fitzgerald uses symbolism to convey a feeling of futility and hopelessness throughout the novel and short story. Doctor T. J. Eckleburg, especially, symbolizes the distorted perceptions and priorities of the decade. Eckleburg watches over the gray ash-heap near Mr. Wilson’s garage with what Wilson thinks an all-knowing eye. Wilson has an unusual reverence to Dr. Eckleburg: he considers him God. In a conversation between Wilson and Michaelis, Wilson discusses a conversation he had previously with Mrs. Wilson just before she died: ‘I spoke to her [about her affair with Tom Buchanan].... I told her she might fool me but she couldn’t fool God. I took her to the window—’ With an effort he got up and walked the rear window and leaned with his face pressed against it, ‘-and I said ‘ God knows what you’ve been doing, everything you’ve been doing. You may fool me but you can’t fool God.’ Standing behind him Michaelis saw with a shock that he was looking at the eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg. (Fitzgerald, Gatsby 167) Wilson is hopeless and disillusioned, and his connection to Dr. Eckleburg exemplifies the widespread futility of the era.

Lastly, Fitzgerald uses wasteland imagery to show how society circa 1920 was dysfunctional and reckless. The apartment of Myrtle Wilson's relation, where Tom and Myrtle usually conduct their affair, is the perfect example of this. Fitzgerald describes the scene at the apartment: The apartment was on the top floor—a small living room, a small diningroom, a small bedroom and a bath. The living room was crowded to the doors with a set of tapestried furniture entirely too large for it so that to move about was to stumble continually over scenes of ladies swinging in the gardens of Versailles.... Several old copies of "Town Tattle" lay on the table together with a copy of "Simon Called Peter" and some of the small scandal magazines of Broadway. (Fitzgerald, *Gatsby* 33) The apartment's amenities are showy and overdone, and somehow seem more representative of conformity than affluence. The whole generation is caught up in the times, an unthinking, unknowing mob of followers, riding the unenviable wave of recklessness. The apartment is empty, devoid of any substance at all, a perfect example of the wasteland image. It is where forbidden lovers meet to flirt and cackle, and where people get drunk for only the second time in their life, where people smoke, drink, and live recklessly together, and the only place where none of it matters: the wasteland. The 1920s were an era of lost personality. The people were caught up in the teeming exuberance, riding the inertia or recklessness further in to itself. Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and "Babylon Revisited" are fitting and definitive condemnations of the irrational time, and critics are right in deeming them so. Fitzgerald, too, is right: The 1920s were wasted years, and fit for condemnation.