

Lost in translation

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



With its unforgettable characters, unique love story and dazzling setting, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* has been a popular source of inspiration for filmmakers since its publication in 1925. The six film adaptations of the novel to date vary considerably in their generally agreed upon degrees of success in interpreting Fitzgerald's work. While some loss of meaning is inevitable in any translation from literature to film, this challenge is especially prominent in the adaptation of a work so driven by the powerful diction of Nick Carraway's narration. One such loss of meaning can be seen in the depiction of Nick's first visit to the Buchanan house for dinner in Jack Clayton's 1974 adaptation of the novel. Fitzgerald's precise use of diction in describing the characters of Tom and Daisy Buchanan and in creating a motif of movement in this scene provides valuable insight into the relationship between Tom and Daisy in a way that Clayton's translation fails to do.

In the reader's introduction to the character of Tom Buchanan in this scene of the novel, Nick's repetitive use of words associated with size, power and aggression in describing him creates a clear characterization of Tom as a dominant force. Words such as "enormously" (11), "sturdy" (12), "hulking" (16) and "boom" (13) provide a powerful image of the physical power Tom holds, as do descriptions of his stance, as he is said to be "standing with his legs apart" (12) and "leaning aggressively forward" (12). The description of his stance as aggressive seems to add a negative connotation to this power, as do the characterization of his body as "cruel" (12) and "defiant" (12).

This negative description of Tom's strength and power contribute to the characterization of Tom as dominant, a word Nick uses in describing Tom on page 12 and a topic that Tom brings up himself in the discussion of his desire

to “ control” and “ beat” the non-white races (17). It is not difficult for the reader to connect this sense of power and dominance to Tom’s control over Daisy, something that proves key in the climax of the novel. While the actor cast to play Tom in Clayton’s adaptation is indeed large and strong, the sense of his cruel aggression and inferred dominance over Daisy is lost without Nick’s descriptive narration.

Equally as important as the language used in conveying the dominance of Tom’s character is that used to define the vacancy of Daisy’s character. The use of the color white in describing Daisy is a motif present throughout the entirety of the novel, including several times in this scene. While this could be seen as a suggestion of innocence and purity, as is also implied by her floral name, a closer examination of this scene provides a second interpretation of the meaning of this characteristic color, that which in reality is not a color at all but rather the absence of color. While Nick repetitively employs descriptions of Daisy as “ charming” (13), “ lovely” (14), and “ exciting” (14) to convey a very positive and alluring image of her in the beginning of the scene, as the passage progresses this image is replaced by words such as “ absence” (16), “ insincerity” (21), and “ trick” (21). This leads to the second interpretation of the color white, as denoting not innocence but rather emptiness. The reader begins to see Daisy’s charming and exciting demeanor as a facade, an act put on by a “ beautiful little fool” (21). As a blank palette, forming herself to please others, Daisy is easily controlled by the dominant Tom, as well as society’s insistence that she remain him. Again, without Nick’s narration this foreshadowing suggestion of Daisy’s true

character is completely lost in the 1974 film, and Daisy is left portrayed as nothing more than charming and perhaps foolish.

The final key element in the characterization of Tom and Daisy's relationship in the Buchanan dinner-party scene that is lost in Clayton's translation from text to picture is the motif of movement, created once again by Fitzgerald's precise descriptive abilities. While the first description of the couple cites them as having "drifted . . . unrestfully" (11) for the past year, a quotation included as a voice-over in the Clayton film adaptation, it is revealed several lines later that it is Tom that Nick truly believes will "drift on forever" (11). Tom's association with movement and unease, alluded to again by the usage of the word "restlessly" (12, 14) twice in describing his movements, seems to hint at Tom's restlessness in his relationship with Daisy. This turmoil is further symbolized in the turbulent description of the Buchanan house, with its curtains "twisting" and "ripp[ing]" with a "whip and snap" (13). In contrast, Daisy is found on "the only completely stationary object in the room" as if she were "anchored" there (13). Everything around Daisy seems to be moving, the curtains, her dress, even her "turbulent emotions" (20), yet she is "paralyzed" (13). While Daisy's quote regarding her paralyzation is included in Clayton's film, without the rest of the motion motif it seems to lose all significance. What this motif ultimately serves to do in this scene in the novel is to once again highlight Daisy's inability to act of her own free will, her paralyzation. Instead she is anchored to Tom, moving along with him wherever he restlessly drifts.

Fitzgerald's use of language in the scene of Nick's first visit to the Buchanan household provides a great deal of insight into Tom and Daisy's relationship, insight that is lost in Jack Clayton's 1974 film adaptation of the novel. The dynamic presented in this scene of the novel is key understanding the climax and resolution of the story, in which Daisy ultimately decides to stay with Tom rather than leaving him for Gatsby, her true love. While viewers of Clayton's film may be surprised by this decision, readers of Fitzgerald's novel know that Daisy, lacking any sort of personal agency, has no choice but to follow what Tom and society expect of her.