

Appearance and disappearance: the theme of evanescence in the great gatsby

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



The Great Gatsby is a novel that has been evaluated by countless critics since its original publication in April of 1925. What makes it such an incredible piece of literature is that it seems to contain endless levels of meaning, and the reader has the ability to delve deep into specific ideas that appear in the text. Countless critics have picked the text apart, thoroughly weighing and discussing various aspects of the novel's multifaceted components. There is one theme, however, that seems to stand out from all the rest: we see it in the evasive quality of Jay Gatsby, or the vanishing of the obscene word scrawled on Gatsby's steps at the end of the novel—it's what gives this book its mysterious, ethereal quality that so many are drawn to. The specific theme is evanescence, or vanishing, and countless scholars have focused on it in their critical works.

One of the ways that select scholars explored the theme of evanescence was through the specific language and text of the novel. It's important to establish the fact that Fitzgerald chose none of the language or wording in this story randomly. Both A. E. Elmore and James E. Miller, Jr. (an author in Lockridge's collection of essays) discuss the deep intentionality of Fitzgerald's word choice, and how he consciously thought out the whole process of word selection. In his essay, Miller quotes Fitzgerald discussing Gatsby, in that what he "cut out of [the novel] both physically and emotionally would make another novel." (Lockridge 27) Fitzgerald went through an extensive editing process for his book, and so what was left in the final product was extensively edited and the language was clearly intentional. Barbara Will discussed the language and theme of "vanishing" in the Gatsby text, and clarified that "'vanished' is indeed the predominant

term in this text," (Will 129) citing moments such as " at the end of Chapter I Nick first encounters Gat" (Will 129). These are just two of the many instances in *wsby*, only to find ' he had vanished, and I was alone again in the unquiet darkness'; or when, after an awkward meeting with Tom Buchanan, Nick ' turned toward Mr. Gatsby but he was no longer there which Jay Gatsby's character is associated with " vanishing". Additionally, Will discusses more general moments of appearance and disappearance not just in the language, but also in Gatsby's overall persona. She deliberates on Gatsby's inability to be present at his own parties, and also the evanescent quality of his past history and his business dealings. She also cites a line from the text describing " his smile, which " assure you that it had precisely the impression of you that, at your best, you hoped to convey. Precisely at that point it vanished?" (Will 129). There are multiple more instances in which Gatsby's character engages in other moments of vanishing, but Will addresses the important general prevalence of evanescence in the language *The Great Gatsby* the novel, as well as Jay Gatsby the character.

However, language is not the only component of *The Great Gatsby* in which scholars explored the theme of appearance and disappearance. Other authors, namely Arnold Weinstein and Ronald Berman, emphasize Fitzgerald's personal relationship with the phenomenal, vanishing quality of the world, and therefore its translation into *Gatsby*. Ronald Berman highlights how Fitzgerald held an intense love and respect of the phenomenal world, and how he worked to enchant everyday things into something remarkable. In his book *The Great Gatsby and Fitzgerald's World*

of Ideas, he observed that, “ Fitzgerald seems to simply have a strong and romantic sense of phenomenology... [He] evidently, is about the business of making an entertaining illusion, endowing sordid material life with temporary novelistic value” (Berman 72-73). This insight provides a deeper look into the theme of evanescence in *The Great Gatsby*. If Fitzgerald’s goal in writing *Gatsby* was to enchant material life and give it temporary value, then the vanishing that exists in the text marks the de-enchantment of whatever phenomenal idea Fitzgerald was trying to make novel.

Not entirely unrelated to his love of phenomenology, Fitzgerald also seemed to greatly appreciate the temporary appearance of things and things being made out of nothing, which, when you think about it in a historical context, is inherently the idea of the American dream. Some scholars trace the theme of evanescence to Fitzgerald’s view of the deflation of the American dream that occurred in the 1920’s. Arnold Weinstein explores this notion in his article “ Fiction As Greatness: The Case of *Gatsby*,” concluding “ Fitzgerald seems altogether more committed to the project of making things from nothing. Daisy does not measure up, because *Gatsby*’s dream cannot be outfitted with checks and balances, or any kind of external referent; it is, instead, supremely autonomous, auto-generative, fed from within... ‘ Appearance made real,’ is not only an American theme but also a paradigmatic formula for literature itself. *The Great Gatsby* depicts things being made from nothing, and objects becoming enchanted objects” (Weinstein 26). This idea of “ appearance made real” and something coming from nothing is a direct reference to the prevalent idea of the American

dream. In the essay "Scott Fitzgerald's Criticism of America" in Lockridge's collection, author Marius Bewley informs that, "critics of Scott Fitzgerald tend to agree that *The Great Gatsby* is somehow a commentary on that elusive phrase, the American dream," (Lockridge 37). In the 1920's, the American dream was such a sought-after idea, that it existed as more of an illusion than a reality. For further evidence, in his essay, Bewley confidently stated that, "the theme of *Gatsby* is the withering of the American dream... as it exists in a corrupt period, and it is an attempt to determine that concealed boundary that divides the reality from the illusions," (Lockridge 37-38). For these various authors, the theme of vanishing plays out as a commentary on an important historical idea: the American dream.

Though these scholars explore the theme of evanescence through different components of *The Great Gatsby*, whether they are language, Fitzgerald's personal ideas, or his views on the American dream, all the authors acknowledge that this theme of appearance and disappearance is vital in the novel. However, that sense of importance should lead us to question why Fitzgerald included so much evanescence in his story. Is there a significant meaning behind this explicit theme, or was Fitzgerald trying to send a message with the inclusion of this important idea? In his essay, Richard Lehan shares his belief that *Gatsby* is a novel, "the meaning of which refuses to be limited" (Lehan 78). However, other authors hypothesize that the significance of *Gatsby*'s theme has cultural meaning, such as the previously discussed American dream, or Laura Barrett discusses in her essay the possibility that it could have something to do with the substantial

presence of materialism in the 1920's. To this day, countless scholars still cannot come to a coherent conclusion as to the true meaning behind the theme of evanescence in *The Great Gatsby*, and we wonder whether it is a question that will ever be answered.

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