

Through a lens,
darkly: the use of eye
imagery to illustrate
the theme of an exti...

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Throughout history, the eye has always been an emblem of the deities. In the Egyptian pantheon, there is Horus, god of light, who is signified by his famous Eye; in the Roman pantheon, there is Juno, associated with the many-eyed peacock; and in the Hindu pantheon, there is the three-eyed Shiva, with his celestial left and right eyes and inner one of fire. Ergo, it is a common connection that F. Scott Fitzgerald makes in his novel *The Great Gatsby*, when he uses an ocular motif to link to the idea of God, and, more specifically, to develop and explore the theme of God's death in the materialistic and careless world of *The Great Gatsby*. Nowhere in the novel is there a clearer example of the tie between the death of God and the motif of eyes than in the valley of ashes. The eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg, left to the dust and ash of the valley "half way between West Egg and New York," hang over the characters, seemingly all-seeing, watching as the events of *The Great Gatsby* unfold before them. Nick says, describing the valley of ashes, "Evidently some wild wag of an oculist set them there to fatten his practice in the borough of Queens, and then sank down himself into eternal blindness, or forgot them and moved away. But his eyes, dimmed a little by many countless days, under sun and rain, brood on over the solemn dumping ground. (27-28) Given the characters' apotheosis of these eyes, it seems that Fitzgerald has intended to introduce a false god into the novel; indeed, it is to the billboard that George Wilson makes reference when he tells Myrtle, his philandering wife, that "' God knows what you've been doing, everything you've been doing. You may fool me, but you can't fool God!'" (167). However, the true God has died: the valley of ashes as Fitzgerald depicts it is a forsaken, barren place. The only figure of life in it is Myrtle, whose buxom

vitality strongly contrasts with her surroundings, and who is doomed to an untimely death. As he keeps company with George after Myrtle's murder, Michaelis, who runs the dining establishment door, is surprised by George's reference to the billboard, and remarks "' That's an advertisement'" (167). This deification of Dr. Eckleburg's eyes is rife throughout the novel, and it is of interest to note that the oculist's overpowering eyes are only a facsimile, an advertisement - it is as if the media itself has slipped into the place of a departed deity. The car that runs Myrtle Wilson down is driven by Daisy Buchanan, who is described as having a face that is " sad and lovely with bright things in it, bright eyes and a bright passionate mouth" (13-14). Daisy, while on the surface the very embodiment of her name, is nevertheless one of the most careless and irreverent people in the novel, but certainly one of the most powerful, through her marriage to Tom and Gatsby's obsession with her. Her eyes are described as " well-loved" (97), and upon the firing of Gatsby's coterie of servants, Nick is quick to jump to the conclusion that " the whole caravansary had fallen in like a card house at the disapproval in her eyes" (120). In Francis Cugat's famed artwork for the cover of *The Great Gatsby*, he depicts the eyes and lips of a flapper, presumably Daisy. As Cugat's painting was finished prior to the completion of the novel, Fitzgerald certainly was influenced by it. While the flapper's eyes appear bright and lovely at first glance, on closer inspection it is revealed that they also enclose recumbent nudes, a reference to Daisy's sybaritic and restless lifestyle. Daisy is a pivotal character in the novel, and certainly one of the most reckless; she mercilessly runs over Myrtle in Gatsby's car, takes advantage of Gatsby himself, and ultimately is untouched by any of this.

Nick says of her, “[Gatsby] knew that when he kissed this girl, and forever wed his unutterable visions to her perishable breath, his mind would never romp again like the mind of God” (117). Daisy is the most godless of all the characters in *The Great Gatsby*; while not without emotion or interest in others, she is ruled by her desire for money and the Good Life. Fitzgerald also utilizes other imagery to further his theme of God’s demise, but none as pervasive or convincing as the motif of eyes. Nietzsche’s well-known words come to mind at the close of the novel, “ God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him.” Daisy with her starry eyes, the avarice that drives her, and the media (as personified by Dr. T. J. Eckleburg’s disembodied ones) were certainly instrumental in the heartless killing, Gatsby and God alike. So Fitzgerald begins his novel, with his narrator Nick Carraway disillusioned, seeing the fading billboard of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg’s eyes for what it truly is.