

Materialism portrayed by cars in the great gatsby

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



“ But as I walked down the steps I saw that the evening was not quite over. Fifty feet from the door a dozen headlights illuminated a bizarre and tumultuous scene (58).” After the first of Gatsby’s parties that Nick attends, Fitzgerald dedicates two pages entirely to a seemingly inconsequential car accident. The reader does not find out the name of the owner, or what really happened, so what is substantial about this part is its symbolic value. It is in these two pages that Fitzgerald introduces the notion of cars symbolizing the material carelessness of America before the Depression. Also, by associating certain characters with a certain brand of car, or establishing a parallel between a character and his relationship with cars, Fitzgerald sheds light upon character flaws, especially concerning gross materialism. By using cars as such significant symbols throughout the novel, Fitzgerald points out their manipulation value. Just as the characters in the novel use cars to escape, move, and loudly proclaim their wealth, the author similarly uses this to structure the book. By removing himself as the primary narrator, he is escaping. By his use of flashbacks and by placing scenes out of sequence, the author takes advantage of manipulating the story’s movement. Finally, Fitzgerald uses this novel to loudly proclaim his feelings towards America at the time of the story. Reverting back to the car accident at the end of Gatsby’s party, material carelessness proves an important theme. The person assumed responsible for the accident says, “ I know very little about driving-next to nothing. It happened, and that’s all I know (59).” When the true culprit emerges from the car, he says, “ At first I didn’t notice we’d stopped (60).” Despite the audience’s insistence that the car could not be driven, the criminal ignores such warning and says, “ No harm in trying

(60).” Both of these responses communicate carelessness and frivolity. The entire party scene foreshadowed this, describing the guests, as coming and going, “...like moths among the whisperings and the champagne and the stars (42).” Such portrayal of Gatsby’s guests cheapens their intentions and shows how they care only about having a good time among the finest goods. The party fruits provide another foreshadowing of this American carelessness. “ Every Friday five crates of oranges and lemons arrived from a fruiterer in New York? every Monday these same oranges and lemons left his back door in a pyramid of pulpless halves (43).” Just as the guests arrived on schedule every weeknight, they also left the party pulpless and empty. None of the guests really knew Gatsby, yet they showed up week after week to drink his champagne, eat his food, and mingle amongst the wealthy. They gain nothing from the party except superficial conversation and drunkenness. These shallow qualities of the party guests are epitomized at the end of the scene through the use of the car accident. The relationship between the carelessness of this accident as well as the carelessness of Jordan’s driving, gives further insight into Jordan’s character flaws. Jordan’s dishonesty is shown early in the novel by cheating in a golf tournament, and further defects, such as her pretentious and pompous attitude are revealed by her feelings towards driving. The first time Fitzgerald makes this point clear occurs when Jordan says, “ When we were on a house party together up in Warwick, she left a borrowed car out in the rain with the top down, and then lied about it...(62)” This dishonesty did not mean very much to Nick, however, and instead he is simply made curious by it. He did pay close attention to Jordan’s driving, which brings to light her rashness. When Nick

tries to tell her how terrible she drives, she responds by saying that although she is not careful, other people are. “ They’ll keep out of my way...it takes two to make an accident (63).” After Nick fires back with the possibility of meeting someone as careless as she is, Jordan ignorantly replies with, “ I hope I never will...I hate careless people (63).” This response completely shows Jordan’s lacking sense of responsibility as well as her sanctimonious perception of herself. Jordan’s logic lacks substance and her self-righteous opinions throw her into the crowd with the rest of the American careless. This accounts for the failure of Nick and Jordan’s relationship. Although the two tried to maintain a romantic relationship, Nick is searching for someone more genuine, someone who does not deny her own imperfections, and Jordan cannot provide him with that. Along with the overall American frivolity of the time, cars are used to almost personify each character. Nick mentions his own car only once throughout the entire novel. It is mentioned eight pages into the book, and on this page, he describes his only possessions when he moved out to the country. “ I had a dog, at least I had him for a few days until he ran away, and an old Dodge and a Finnish woman who made my bed and cooked breakfast and muttered Finnish wisdom to herself over the electric stove.” Taking into consideration the subjects of his description, the sentence denotes a sense of loneliness. He could have not mentioned the dog whatsoever, but instead, he writes that he once had a dog but no longer does. This creates a sense of loss as the immigrant woman speaking to herself creates a sense of loneliness. Nick’s regular human contact consists of his employee who doesn’t even speak his own language. Because of this, one gets the sense that his car must also carry some dreary

significance. Its old age and ordinariness conveys Nick's simplistic yet isolated life, as he innocently begins his narrative. This innocence, and somewhat removal from materialistic America, separates him from all the other characters and accounts for his failure in relationships and ultimately, for him moving back to the mid-west. Nick's departure from the East is an inevitable choice, as all the characters he meets are shown to be quite dishonest and materialistic. Fitzgerald strategically develops each character by epitomizing them through cars. For example, the first time Myrtle is introduced, it is by an association with her husband and cars. Fitzgerald introduces the couple by writing, "Repairs. GEORGE B. WILSON. Cars Bought and Sold...(29)." Just as George makes a profession selling what he owns to his patrons, he also gets his wife taken from him by one of his patrons. The fact that George makes repairs seems to make him second best, as if he cannot already own what is best, he must work to try and get it to that point. Just as Myrtle gives all of her love, and all of herself to Tom, George has to work to try and get her to love him. Another interesting twist is that George very much wants to buy Tom's car from him. When George finds out about Myrtle's affair, he desperately calls upon Tom to try and make a car deal in order to somehow save his marriage to Myrtle. Tom is responsible for the affair, and sickly agrees to sell his car during George's desperate plea, as if he is doing something honorable. Such deceiving acts mirror the deceit and manipulation the characters in the book all use. Although these characters play important roles in the narrative, Nick's relationship with Gatsby holds the most importance, and therefore, the association between Gatsby and his car proves very significant. The narrator once nonchalantly mentions that

Gatsby owns a Rolls Royce, the first time great attention is given to one of his cars, draws extreme parallels to Gatsby's personality. Nick's admiration is exposed through his description of the car. " I'd seen it. Everybody had seen it. It was a rich cream color, bright with nickel, swollen here and there in its monstrous length with triumphant hatboxes and supper-boxes and tool-boxes, and terraced with a labyrinth of wind-shields that mirrored a dozen suns (68)." The concision of the first two sentences, as well as calling the car " it" in both sentences conveys a sense of entrancement for Nick. He loses himself in the beauty of the car, and for a second, he cannot really talk, except to state the obvious. The color of the car means a great deal since it was normal at that time for factory-made cars to all be black. Therefore, his customized cream-colored car screams of his wealth which in turns symbolizes his materialistic intentions. The adjectives Nick uses also paint a picture of majesty. Words such as, " bright," " swollen," " Monstrous," and " triumphant" all create images of might, splendor, yet also grotesque. Although this would be fine if it was just meant to describe the car, the trouble is that it is soon after this point in the book, that Nick starts to confuse the greatness of Gatsby's possessions with the greatness of Gatsby himself. Therefore, this entrancement with the car, and the grand adjectives prove to be dangerous, as Gatsby soon completely entralls Nick. For example, despite all the signs pointing towards Gatsby's criminal activity, Nick defends him during speculation by his party guests. Also, a similar sense of entrancement occurs at the end of Chapter VI during a conversation between Nick and Gatsby. " For a moment a phrase tried to take shape in my mouth and my lips parted like a dumb man's, as though there was more

struggling upon them than a wisp of startled air. But they made no sound and what I had almost remembered was uncommunicable forever (118).” At this point, Gatsby lures Jim into his scheme of achieving Daisy and achieving happiness. The novel soon takes a turn for the worse. The beginning of the end of *The Great Gatsby* occurs in climax of the book, which begins and ends with cars. Setting up the scene, Tom insists that he drive Gatsby’s “circus wagon” to the city while Gatsby drives Tom’s coupe. This switching of cars parallels the switching of Daisy’s love from first Gatsby to Tom and then the confusion between the two. Tom calling the car a “circus wagon” is a blow towards Gatsby, making it seem as if Gatsby should not be taken seriously. At this point in the book, Tom knows about Gatsby’s involvement with bootlegging, and therefore finds him to be a sham, something that can be laughed at, something simply put on display for entertainment, just as if he was a circus act. After the intense scene revealing the truth of Gatsby’s source of income as well as his affair with Daisy, Tom insists that Daisy leave with Gatsby in Gatsby’s car. In this scene, his car seems to be mimicking their entire affair. Since Tom contemptuously made them leave together, and since he revealed Gatsby’s criminal involvement, the majesty of Gatsby’s car is suddenly seen for its shallowness. It is only appropriate at this point for Gatsby’s car to be the “death car,” since his corruption of the American Dream inevitably leads to failure. Gatsby perverted the idea of success, and in an effort to achieve his dream of reliving the past with Daisy, he lost sight of the importance of honesty and genuine hard work. His distortion of the American Dream can be seen in the distortion of the plot at the end of the story. The fact that Tom told George it was Gatsby driving the

car, and that he allows George to believe Gatsby was the one having the affair with Myrtle, the fact that it was really Daisy driving the car, and the fact that it was Tom who insisted Gatsby and Daisy leave the city when they did, shows how warped American life became when one lost sight of honesty. Such integrity is the basis for achieving happiness, so when this is distorted, happiness cannot be accomplished. Therefore Gatsby's car, which so vividly displayed his wealth and phony happiness, fittingly leads to tragedy. The fact that his own car not only kills Myrtle, but it consequently leads to Gatsby's own death, shows the destruction of confusing happiness with materialism. This carelessness is developed from beginning to end, and shows Nick's unavoidable discontent with his life on the East Coast. The repeated appearance of cars in *The Great Gatsby* significantly symbolizes the materialism of the time, and of the isolated characters in the book. From overall carelessness to individual distorted perceptions of what a car means, Fitzgerald ingeniously portrays America's obsession with spectacular materialism. As Nick begins his story quite innocently with a simple hidden car of his own, he becomes wrapped up in riding in Gatsby's grand car, and after the deaths of both Gatsby and Myrtle, he loses some of his innocence, and gains insight. "One night I did hear a material car there...Probably it was some final guest who...didn't know the party was over (188)." By the end of the book, Nick sees the story for its failure and can no longer be a part of the material world and the party he had grown accustomed to living. Nick sells his car, and fittingly heads back to his real home.