THE SEDUCER’S STRATAGEMS: THE GREAT GATSBY AND THE EARLY TWENTIES

The narrator of Francis Scott Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby (1925) is Nick Carraway, a young man from the American Middle West who, in the summer of 1922, moves to New York to learn the bond business. During that “crowded summer”\(^1\) he becomes increasingly fascinated with his next-door neighbour, the mysterious Gatsby, eventually becoming spellbound by him. However, Gatsby also appears to represent everything for which Nick has “an affective scorn” \((GG, 6)\).\(^2\)

Gatsby resides in Long Island in order to be close to Daisy Buchanan. As a self-made millionaire, he struggles to make Daisy fall in love with him again, thereby to recapture the dreams of his penniless youth. In this enterprise, he is “searching for a transfiguring vision, a world beyond the historical time”.\(^3\) The final failure of his enterprise is the necessary consequence of his attempt to recapture something unattainable: the past. But Gatsby is not totally enveloped in his dreams. On the contrary, I suggest that when Nick describes Gatsby as a “gorgeous” \((GG, 6)\) character who expresses in his actions “some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life” \((GG, 6)\), he singles out his friend as a paradigm of Twenties society.

In this article I wish to study the relationship between Gatsby’s personality and his times, and to highlight how well adapted he is to his urban environment. I will pay special attention to the way in which his perception of the new realities of his era manifests itself in the conscious construction of his personality. If he is a dreamer, his dreams are firmly anchored in the conventions and artefacts of his reality.

Gatsby’s “heightened sensitivity” is demonstrated by the way in which he makes his presence on Long Island known. His superior imagination manifests itself in the stratagem he employs to advertise his presence, organising a series of parties. Implicitly, he realises that if he is to supplant Daisy’s husband, he needs to display qualities which will show Buchanan in a poor light. Firstly, Gatsby displays more affluence and more refined tastes than Buchanan, whose behaviour and demeanour are either aggressive or violent. He also offers incentives which cannot be obtained within the conservative opulence of East Egg. He creates an extravagant atmosphere, captivating Daisy’s imagination and conveying to her the “romantic possibilities absent from her world” \((GG, 115)\). This new world is founded upon a sense of prodigality and disproportion: motor boats, a tower on his raft, an aquaplane, a Rolls-Royce which also functions as an omnibus. Gatsby even employs eight servants to repair the damage caused by one of his parties, and his mansion contains a high Gothic library, panelled
with carved English oak, Marie Antoinette's music rooms, and Restoration salons. Gatsby's affluence has secured the very best material possessions not only of his own time, but also from most periods of Western history.

Gatsby's dazzling world is based upon a number of areas in Long Island. Fitzgerald moved to the area of Great Neck in Long Island in the autumn of 1922, and his new surroundings provided much of the inspiration for the novel. The environment which he observed was created by the nouveaux riches, and represents a monument to their extravagant tastes. In American Wonderland Shane Leslie depicts the decadence common on Long Island: "Millionaires arrived, importing their own soil and gardens, and even their ancestral trees."^4

Buchanan's Georgian mansion, built by the oil tycoon Demaine, is part of a manufactured landscape that seeks to create the illusion of historical continuity. Unlike Gatsby's prodigal edifice, Buchanan's mansion represents harmony and an economical use of resources. Fittingly, Buchanan invites few people to dinner, and there is no mention as to whether he has ever thrown a party in his mansion.\(^5\) He defends this, remarking: "I know I'm not very popular. I don't give big parties. I suppose you've got to make your house into a pigsty in order to have any friends — in the modern world" (GG, 137). Buchanan's obsessive frugality is shown in the descriptions of his mistress's apartment: "a small living room, a small dining room, a small bedroom, and a bath" (GG, 33). The repetition of the adjective "small" gives us a hint as to how assiduously Buchanan refrains from spending money, never allowing his extra-marital romance to become costly.

Gatsby's exuberance in acquiring and displaying possessions mirrors the possibilities for the consumer in an era characterised by overproduction. He spends his money on a multitude of commodities: aquaplanes, telephones, machines which extract "the juice of two hundred oranges in half an hour" (GG, 43–4). In Gatsby's era, "variety was the watchword whether applied to automobiles, vegetables [or] clothes".\(^6\) However, Gatsby's excessive consumerism is only a means to seduce Daisy; as soon as he has won her, his display of affluence ceases. The strategies that Gatsby uses to attract Daisy highlight both his understanding of, and his ability to manipulate, the new American social environment. Gatsby is partially successful in adapting to this new reality in three ways: firstly, he advertises his own personality exceedingly efficiently; secondly, he is interested in technological innovations; thirdly, he possesses excellent entrepreneurial skills.

Nick describes the atmosphere of Gatsby's parties as that of an "amusement park": an orchestra plays cocktail music and there is a bar with a real brass rail. By using novelty to attract crowds of people to his parties, Gatsby shows his awareness of the preconceptions of his culture, specifically of the assumption that everything new must be desirable. This notion lies at the heart of modernity, as J. H. Plumb emphasises.\(^7\)
Gatsby also creates his own personality, often resorting to methods which are derived from contemporary advertising techniques. He appears to realise that in an era of increasingly impersonal bureaucracy and the depersonalisation which is associated with modern capitalism, there is a need for emotional satisfaction and a desire for the intimate. The search for these qualities played an essential part in shaping the American consumer's demands in the early Twenties. Roland Marchant remarks that, "mobility, greater generational separation, and modern complexities of living had created a vacuum of personal advice. [Accordingly,] advertisers exploited new ways to personalize their relationship with the consumer." Many advertising companies of the period created a simultaneously authoritative and approachable persona in their attempts to cater for contemporary urban longings. The Fleischmann company used an English surgeon, Sir W. Arbuthnot Lane, both as a paradigm of the professional pharmaceutical adviser and as a distinct (because personalised) mouthpiece. The companies used personae as an attempt to foster the consumer's confidence in the efficacy of an impersonal commodity. Gatsby's exotic aura allows his guests to project their own dreams onto his nebulous personality. This is demonstrated by the way in which Nick describes his first encounter with Gatsby:

He smiled understandingly – much more than understandingly. [The smile] faced – or seemed to face – the whole external world for an instant, and then concentrated on you with an irresistible prejudice in your favor. It understood you so far as you wanted to be understood, believed in you as you would like to believe in yourself and assured you that it had precisely the impression of you that, at your best, you hoped to convey. (GG, 52-3)

With his "understanding smile", Gatsby allows his audience to project their inner fantasies outwards. When they talk to him, his guests confront facets of themselves.

Gatsby's ultimate success lies in his ability to create the distinctive aura of a unique individual. "Gatsby" began life as James Gatz, a man from North Dakota who changed his name at seventeen to become the Great Gatsby, a mythological dandy (GG, 104). His guests reconstruct his past through rumours: he is variously a murderer, a German spy, and an American soldier. Gatsby himself provides snippets of information about his life, as when he mentions that he has inherited his fortune which allows him to live "like a young rajah in all the capitals of Europe – Paris, Venice, Rome – collecting jewels, […] painting a little, […] and trying to forget something very sad that had happened to [him] long ago" (GG, 70). The conjunction of clichés creates an atmosphere of "romantic speculation" (GG, 48), and thereby serves both to arouse the curiosity of some of his guests, and to rekindle Daisy's interest. He is aware that within the new
culture of the advertisement, the connotations of a name are fundamental to its success.\(^\text{10}\)

Through his attempts to create both his personality and his destiny, Gatsby stands out from the mediocrity of his guests, who often seem unable to find any meaningful identity. Their behaviour is clumsy and purposeless, and it is through them that the narrative depicts the outbursts of uncontrolled yet passive mass behaviour associated with the Twenties: fundamental to these scenes is the need to relinquish the responsibility of making decisions. This last point is made most tellingly when the character who meets Nick and Jordan in Gatsby's library asks: "Who brought you?" and then adds: "I was brought. Most people were brought" (\(GG\), 50). He implicitly assumes that Nick and Jordan could not have taken the decision to go to the party by themselves. His questions are symptomatic of an era in which automation, disorientation, indecisiveness and lack of individuality are pronounced, and in which urban individuality appears to be especially scarce. When Fitzgerald describes his first experiences of the city he exhibits the same signs of disorientation as those of many of the characters in \(The Great Gatsby\): "Within a few months after our embarkation on the Metropolitan venture we scarcely knew any more who we were and we hadn't a notion what we were."\(^\text{11}\) Nick describes this feeling of chaos and disorientation when he expresses the effect that music has on Gatsby's guests:

Laughter is easier, minute by minute, spilled with prodigality. [...] The groups change more swiftly, swell with new arrivals, dissolve and form in the same breath — already there are wanderers, confident girls who weave here and there among the stouter and more stable, become for a sharp, joyous moment the center of a group and then excited with triumph glide on through the sea-change of faces and voices and color under the constantly changing light. (\(GG\), 44–5)

As he describes the way that the guests form groups and emit stereotyped laughter, Nick conveys their lack of individuality. All the dancers seem to be enveloped in a mesh of repetitive faces and voices which do not permit any differentiation.\(^\text{12}\) However, when he describes Gatsby, Nick emphasises the isolation of his physical position, and stresses that his distance from the crowd increases his aura of romantic detachment and glamorous sophistication. When the party is over, Nick describes Gatsby's final gesture, which re-emphasises this aura: "A sudden emptiness seemed to flow now from the windows and the great doors, endowing with complete isolation the figure of the host who stood on the porch, his hand up in a formal gesture of farewell" (\(GG\), 60). By showing the emptiness of the house as the guests melt away, Nick aggrandises Gatsby's profile and highlights his isolation. His final posture underscores his romantic aura, just as his ironic salute to his guests reinforces his sophistication. The party's frenzy notwithstanding,
Gatsby remains master of all he surveys, exuding composure and self-control.

Gatsby's detached pose epitomises the concerns shown in the advertisements which attempted to persuade their audience of the merits of their products by stressing their connections with the individualistic man. Implicitly, they portray mass movements as a threat, and often equate crowds with mobs. It is by this implicit, negative comparison that the virtues of men who stand out are established. Marchand claims that "advertisers frequently [promoted] products on the strength of their capacity to lift the individual out of the crowd." Gatsby's personality is paradigmatic of just such transcendence: indeed, Nick stresses that Gatsby's sudden rise to social prominence is partly due to his ability to transform his own identity. There is nothing purposeless about his performance: behind the mask of the dandy lies a determined actor with precise objectives:

The truth was that Jay Gatsby, of West Egg, Long Island, sprang from his Platonic conception of himself. He was a son of God—[...] So he invented just the sort of Jay Gatsby that a seventeen year old boy would be likely to invent, and to this conception he was faithful to the end. (GG, 104)

Gatsby's creativity is a testimony to his dynamism. Equally, his determination shows his capacity to follow his dream. A paradoxically stereotypical non-conformist, he is ready— even driven— to step away from the herd and to construct his own personality. He is reminiscent of the advertisements for International Correspondence Schools in 1924, the motto of which read: "Out of the Crowd— the Man". He employs a similar set of strategies to impress his guests and attract Daisy, but the novel stresses that beneath his mask he knows how to differentiate himself from his means; paradoxically, his usage and manipulation of these dreams and ideals partially unites him with the mass he appears so separated from. This was a time in which many intellectuals expressed anxiety regarding the masses, as can be seen in the works of T. S. Eliot, Ortega y Gasset, H. G. Wells and Ezra Pound, among others. Gatsby, however, feels comfortable amongst crowds. Rather, he becomes their leader (and manipulator) by creating his own environment and history. While his guests only make erratic movements, he is utterly self-possessed and self-obsessed. This self-control is reinforced in Nick's narrative when he suggests that Gatsby also exerts a considerable influence over the technological and economic realms.

Command over, or indeed any understanding of, things technological is noticeably absent during Gatsby's party, as we see when a new coupé is suddenly "shorn of one wheel" (GG, 58). When the confused driver tries to give an account of the accident, he expresses not only carelessness, but total disorientation:
“Wha’s matter?” he inquired calmly. “Did we run outa gas?”

“Look!”

Half a dozen fingers pointed at the amputated wheel – he stared at it for a moment and then looked upward as though he suspected that it had dropped from the sky.

“It come off,” someone explained.

He nodded.

“At first I din’ notice we’d stopped.”

A pause. Then taking a long breath and straightening his shoulders he remarked in a determined voice:

“Wonder’ff tell me where there’s a gas’line station?”

At least a dozen men, some of them little better off than he was, explained to him that wheel and car were no longer joined by any physical bond.

“Back out,” he suggested after a moment. “Put her in reverse.”

“But the wheel’s off!”

He hesitated.

“No harm in trying,” he said. (GG, 59–60)

This conversation epitomises one of the novel’s leitmotifs: the portrayal of urban America as a world of bad drivers. The unknown driver, quoted above, is just another paradigm. When he asks “Did we run outa gas?”, he shows not only that he is a bad driver, but that he is also too disorientated to realise it: he cannot see the link between his lack of mechanical and navigational expertise and the functioning of the machine that he is nominally in charge of. What highlights his catatonic ignorance is the suspicion, however brief, that the amputated wheel fell from the sky rather than from his car. When he asks the other drivers if they can help him to find a gas station, his ignorance becomes underscored by impotence. Here, the only victim of hopelessly bad, drunken driving and technical incompetence is “an amputated wheel”. Elsewhere in the novel the consequences of bad driving are tragic: Daisy Buchanan’s recklessness kills Myrtle Wilson. The image of Myrtle Wilson’s “left breast […] swinging loose like a flap” (GG, 145) is connected to that of the “amputated wheel”: both episodes emphasise the dangers of technology when it is used incompetently.16

The proliferation of the car in America was one of the main features of the Twenties. In 1920 the number of cars registered was approximately 9,000,000. The disproportionate growth of the automobile industry provided one of the most profitable markets for the steel companies, and for the manufacturers of glass and tyres. The frenzied rush to cater for the mass usage of cars caused many states to run into debt; attempting to meet the demands of motorists, they embarked on expensive highway construction programmes which bridged the gap between rural and urban life.17 In fact, the suburban estate boom, illustrated in The Great Gatsby by the sudden erection of new mansions on Long Island, could not have been achieved (and certainly would not have been necessary) without the sudden increase in motor vehicle ownership. New stores and garages were built to
attract new customers coming from both urban and rural areas. In fact, the average car owner did not live in the city but in a prominent town, which as Peter J. Ling has pointed out, was the “half-way house [between] the open country and metropolis”. The majority of motorists (60%) used their cars for business purposes. In the novel, George B. Wilson’s garage in the Valley of the Ashes between West Egg and New York exemplifies the new market which addressed the needs of motorists living in suburbia. Cars were the core of the new way of life, tokens of a new technological reality which transformed the nation. The car answered the call for romance and adventure, and gave millions of people the opportunity to seek the illusion of freedom from the routine of industrial society, and to respond to the allure of the mysterious or unexpected destination. Cars were also the symbols of individual self-assertion and independence. The importance that Nick attaches to the way people drive their cars is intended to highlight the gap between the use of a machine and the illusion of controlling it. The novel meditates upon the consequences of large-scale consumption of cars and of reckless driving, and by extension, upon the challenges that machines represent.

Like other works of the era such as Ernst Junger’s *Der Arbeiter* (1931), Fitzgerald’s novel warns of the potential dangers of misusing the new technology. In *The Great Gatsby*, cars suddenly develop autonomy and do not respond to the controls only when their drivers cease to be capable of making spatially co-ordinated and informed decisions. Through a series of images of bad driving, the novel implies that few individuals can cope with such challenges: the appearance of power which some of the novel’s drivers display is seen to be no more than an alarming illusion.

Nick suggests that Gatsby, the proprietor of a hydroplane and a rich cream-coloured car, possesses the technical knowledge necessary to be a good driver: for Gatsby embodies the tradition of the American inventor-entrepreneur, in the manner of Edison, Franklin or Samuel Pratt. When Nick encounters Gatsby’s schedule in one of his boyhood books, we are able to connect the persona of the flamboyant Long Island gangster with that of the traditional American self-made man. Like the self-made man of Franklin’s *Autobiography*, Gatsby studied “electricity [and] needed inventions” (*GG*, 181). Franklin’s model citizen must control not only his economic destiny but also his tools and machines, thus obtaining a substantial degree of independence. Similarly, Gatsby’s scientific interests show his awareness of the real issues of his time. He wishes to control his technological reality. The Twenties witnessed the rapid rise of the electricity industry, accompanied by revolutionary technological advances: hydroelectric plants, electric cookers and toasters. Because of his awareness of this, Gatsby has the qualities of a modern Prospero rather than of a Trimalchio: he creates an environment whose secrets are concealed from his guests.
Gatsby's independence is stressed not only by his technical knowledge but also by his sensitivity to market developments; he also displays a series of qualities which reveal him as a modern entrepreneur. The first of these is highlighted by the implicit comparison of Buchanan's attitude to the economic world with Gatsby's. During his first visit to East Egg, Nick discovers that Buchanan's financial knowledge is minimal. On hearing the name of Nick's firm, Buchanan remarks decisively, "Never heard of them" (GG, 14). He is clearly ignorant of the movements of the markets occurring a few miles away from his mansion. Unlike Buchanan, Gatsby is interested in the markets, and his intimate knowledge of their shadier aspects is revealed by the invitation extended to Nick to participate in a business venture involving stolen bonds. In the Twenties many amassed fortunes by speculating on the stock market. Peter Fearon stresses that: "A growing proportion of the nation's wealth, during the 1920s, was going to those who were savers rather than spenders, who used the stock market as the barometer of their economic fortunes." In spite of his careful spending habits, Buchanan's position as a millionaire appears vulnerable, especially considering his ignorance of the undercurrents of economic activity in the stock market. Gatsby, unlike Buchanan, shows some interest in the bond business, albeit that he participates only in a criminal capacity. His sensitivity to the demands of business is shown during his parties. Unlike Buchanan, who only uses the telephone to speak with his mistress, Gatsby is always quick to answer business calls from Chicago (GG, 53). He behaves like any executive, employing sophisticated technology such as telephones and tele-type to oversee the shipment of goods personally, whatever the geographical distance. Whatever the amorality of his business, Gatsby conducts himself like a legitimate entrepreneur. He remains aware of the demands of his business even while he uses it to achieve the fulfilment of his hopelessly romantic dreams. Gatsby is reminiscent of the figure of the executive who appears in a Goodrich truck-tyre advertisement of 1924. A company manager is depicted before his office window, which overlooks his factory. This image conveys the feudal power of the modern executive over his domain, and highlights the warmth of his relationship with his employees. On the right-hand side of the advertisement there appears a semi-pneumatic tyre, implying that the executive's technical knowledge is the cause of his social superiority. The image stresses the quality of the product by its association not just with the factory but with the man who is at once separated from it, and responsible for it. The advertisement embodies the power of practical imagination just as Gatsby does.

However, Gatsby's adaptation is not wholly successful. His social skills attract guests to his parties and stimulate the attention of Daisy; but they disintegrate when he tries to conform to the requirements of East Egg. When Gatsby joins Daisy, Buchanan, Jordan and Nick in a suite in the Plaza Hotel in Central Park, he argues with Buchanan. Merely by alluding
to Gatsby’s obscure past, Buchanan shows the social vulnerability and flaws of the sophisticated host of West Egg: Buchanan claims that Gatsby is a bootlegger, and that he has set up a chain of side-street drugstores with connections to the underworld. Gatsby’s reaction to these accusations is spontaneous. His mask suddenly dissolves and, instead of countering slurs with solid evidence (his involvement in these affairs is peripheral, and only his associate Walter Chase is actually implicated), he can only manage, “[Chase] came to us dead broke. He was very glad to pick up some money, old sport” (GG, 141). His words sound unconvincing; indeed, they affirm his connections with the drugstore network. Although Gatsby realises his mistake, it is too late to amend it, and Daisy’s reaction reveals how unconvincing he has appeared:

He began to talk excitedly to Daisy, denying everything, defending his name against accusations that had not been made. But with every word she was drawing further and further into herself, so he gave that up and only the dead dream fought on as the afternoon slipped away. (GG, 142)

As soon as Gatsby’s source of income is suggested, Daisy’s confidence in her hero vanishes and “his presumptuous little flirtation [was] over” (GG, 142). In spite of his money, Gatsby remains a bootlegger. Given his background, his victory over Tom can only be transitory – a fact that he is not conscious of until it is too late.

Whereas the Buchanans’ childish lack of human concern is shown by their “vast carelessness” (GG, 188), Gatsby’s immaturity is exhibited by his inability to transcend his adolescent dreams: both are utterly unaware of the social and human contexts which surround their illusions. This flaw in Gatsby’s social conscience is responsible for the ultimate failure of his plans to seduce Daisy and the eventual devaluation of gentlemen’s manners. In spite of his power over economic and technical reality, and his ability to manipulate people through his appropriation of advertising techniques, Gatsby never reaches a level of self-awareness which would allow him to break free from his adolescence. The hazy romanticism of his objective is mirrored by the amorality of his means. By seeking to accomplish his goal outside of society’s rules, he becomes almost as careless a driver as his guests. His defeat is a testimony to his heroic imperfections.

In spite of his lack of conscience, his ruthless pursuit of Daisy, and the amorality of his business ventures, Gatsby’s most fascinating facet remains his personality, which represents a partial embodiment of the myth of the self-made man. In his struggles to realise his dreams, he displays the qualities of the pragmatic imagination which shaped American capitalist ideology from the 18th century onwards. Like Franklin, Rockefeller or Morgan, Gatsby is an individual who regulates his own life without reference to normal social codes of conduct, and his skills are used to attain a distinctive individuality. The novel suggests this by highlighting his will to
achieve individuality through his construction of a new personality. He has none of the disorientation of other characters such as Tom Buchanan, whose mental chaos is defined by Nick as the confusion “of a simple mind” (GG, 131). Gatsby’s personality is centred upon the figure of the dynamic individual; his tragedy is due to the fact that this is only a persona. The novel can be seen as a product of its times and represents an insight into the dangers of the modern world: we, like our fictional counterparts, are happy in the belief that we control our own technical and economic destiny, despite the considerable body of evidence to the contrary.

School of English and American Studies
University of Exeter
Exeter
EX4 4QH
United Kingdom

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3 This interpretation of the novel has been stressed by Richard Ruland & Malcolm Bradbury in From Puntatism to Postmodernity A History of American Literature (London, 1992) pp 300-301
4 Shane Leslie, American Wonderland Memories of Four Tours in the United States of America 1911-1935 (London, 1936), p 43
5 For a comparative study of both mansions, see Tony Tanner’s penetrating introduction to The Great Gatsby (London, 1990), pp VII-LVI (XL-XLI). The meaning and function of money in the novel has been studied with acute detail in Richard Godden’s Fictions of capital: The American novel from James to Mailer (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 78-103
6 See Donald R McCoy, Coming of Age. The United States during the 1920’s and 1930’s (Harmondsworth, 1973), pp. 116-26. For the importance of the automobile during the era and its social implications, see Peter J. Ling, America and the Automobile technology, reform and social change, 1893-1923 (Manchester, 1990), pp 13-36
8 Roland Marchand, Advertising the American Dream. Making Way For Modernity, 1920-1940 (Berkeley, 1985), p 16
9 Ladies’ Home Journal (Oct 1928), 117
10 Marchand, p 14
12 On the meaning of the music performed, see Darrel Mansell, “The Jazz History of the World in The Great Gatsby”, English Language Notes, 15 (1987), 57-62
13 Marchand, p. 269
14 Saturday Evening Post (1 March 1924), 80
Another novel of this period on careless driving is Booth Tarkington's *The Magnificent Ambersons* (New York, 1918).


Sec, for instance, the advertisement of the Reo Motor Car Company in *Saturday Evening Post* (9 June 1928), 69.


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