The Romance of the Commodity

The Cancellation of Identity in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Great Gatsby*

If *The House of Mirth* reveals the insidious nature of the American dream's commodified ideology, *The Great Gatsby* (1925) has served to underscore our blindness to it. Perhaps more than any other work of American literature, F. Scott Fitzgerald's best-known novel has elicited a critical response that reveals Americans' desire to sustain their nostalgia for an idealized America—and an idealized American ideology—as an absolute positive value of pristine origin. What Marius Bewley said of Jay Gatsby in 1954 has long represented the feeling of a good many readers: Gatsby is "the energy of the spirit's resistance" and "immunity to the final contamination" of "cheapness and vulgarity" (13); he is "an heroic personification of the American romantic hero, the true heir of the American dream" (14). As Charles C. Nash puts it, "Emerson's 'Infinitude of the Private Man'" is "best represented by Jay Gatsby, for whom all things are possible" (23). Gatsby is thus seen as "a sensual saint" (Dillon 50) whose "dream . . . enables him (Cartwright 229), "a representative American hero . . . though of course not average" (Hart 34). Even when the protagonist's darker side is acknowledged, it is excused: "Gatsby can be both criminal and romantic hero because the book creates for him a visionary moral standard that transcends the conventional and that his life affirms" (Cartwright 232).¹ For these readers, the American dream, like the character of Gatsby with whom it is identified, represents something pure and true—a "sacred energy" (Dillon 61)—that has been corrupted over time by the influence of the moral wasteland that continues to extend its borders farther into the core of American society. The corruption, they believe, lies not in the American dream or in Jay Gatsby but in what surrounds and victimizes the protagonist: Wolfsheim's exploitativeness, Daisy's duplicity, Tom's
treachery, and the shallowness of an American populace—represented by Gatsby’s parasitical party guests—whose moral fiber has declined with each passing year.

The Great Gatsby’s title character, however—far from being, as Bewley puts it, Tom’s “opposite number” (24), “all aspiration and goodness” (25)—is the Buchanans’ mirror image. Tom, Daisy, and Gatsby all reveal the psychological politics of the American dream’s commodification of identity. As we shall see, Tom and Daisy reveal the psychology of the commodity as it is manifest in gender-specific cultural roles: Tom personifies commodity culture as the subject of desire, and Daisy personifies commodity culture as the object of desire. Gatsby does not stand in opposition to the Buchanans’ relationship to commodity culture; rather, he is its abstraction, a distinction that has been missed by the victim model of subjectivity informing most analyses of the protagonist. That is, to understand Jay Gatsby, we must understand Tom and Daisy Buchanan as the concrete manifestations of the culture that, in its abstract form, constitutes Gatsby’s desire to cancel his own identity, to obliterate his past, as a means of avoiding the existential inwardness that accompanies the experience of lack, loss, or limitation.

Thus, this chapter will argue that The Great Gatsby does not portray the American dream as an absolute positive value of pristine origin that somehow gets corrupted. Rather, because it is a commodity—in this case, a sign invested with the desire for consumption as the principal mode of production—the American dream is itself a source of corruption. Gatsby’s emotional investment in this dream does not indicate that he is somehow immune to contamination but that he is its representative. And I will suggest that readers who judge Gatsby to be of finer stuff than the world surrounding him might do so, in part, from a desire to protect their ideological investment in an American dream of their own. Finally, I will examine an important strand of the narrative that operates as a powerful countermovement against the novel’s insights into commodity psychology: the seductive appeal with which the commodity is portrayed in this text, an appeal that is behind much of Jay Gatsby’s emotional seduction of narrator Nick Carraway and of the many readers who rally to his cause.

As Edwin Fussell notes, the underlying assumption in The Great Gatsby is “that all the magic of the world can be had for money” (44), and as the novel reveals, it is the paradoxical “meeting” of these two terms—
money and magic—that defines the American dream. Nowhere in the novel is the magical power of money more efficiently and successfully exploited than by Tom Buchanan. He does not, as Roger Lewis claims, understand “that polo ponies or cufflinks are all he is buying” (51); he has learned how to buy social status and self-image as well. He is a perfect representative of pure agency: a subjectivity for whom all else must be object, and for a rich man who relates to the world through his money, all objects are commodities.

Tom’s marriage to Daisy Fay was clearly an exchange of Daisy’s youth, beauty, and social standing for Tom’s money and power and the image of strength and stability they imparted to him. Appropriately, the symbol of this “purchase” was the $350,000 string of pearls Tom gave his bride-to-be. Jordan’s reference to the necklace, during her account of Daisy’s wedding, defines it in terms of the purchase—and the oppression—it represents, especially as we see Daisy wearing the pearls for the first time right after her failed attempt to call off the marriage. The diction of Jordan’s portrait of Daisy at this moment—“When we walked out of the room, the pearls were around her neck and the incident was over” (77–78; ch. 4)—subtly emphasizes Daisy’s submission: the pearls, not Daisy, are the subject of the sentence, and they are “around her neck,” a phrase easily associated with a slave collar or a noose. Similarly, Tom uses his money and social rank to “purchase” Myrtle Wilson and the numerous other working-class women with whom he has affairs, such as the chambermaid with whom he was involved three months after his marriage to Daisy and the “common but pretty” (107; ch. 6) young woman he picks up at Gatsby’s party.

Of course, Tom’s commodity psychology is not limited to his relationships with women. Much of Buchanan’s pleasure in his expensive possessions is a function of their sign-exchange value, of the social status their ownership confers on him. Social status is important to him not just to impress others but to impress himself as well. Like Sartre’s Julien Fleurier, Tom’s sense of his own identity is largely a product of how he believes others see him. His desire to impress others is great because his desire to impress himself is great. “I’ve got a nice place here” (7; ch. 1), he tells Nick, but he is saying it to himself as well. In this context, his house’s “pedigree” is an important detail: “It belonged to Demaine, the oil man,” he points out (8; ch. 1), as if the house’s “pedigree” could confer a pedigree on him.

Why should a man like Tom—rich, good-looking, physically
strong—need to impress himself? One reason is provided by Nick: Tom "had been one of the most powerful ends that ever played football at New Haven—a national figure in a way, one of those men who reach such an acute limited excellence at twenty-one that everything afterward savors of anticlimax" (6; ch. 1). The view that Tom is trying to re-capture past glory is supported by his seductions of women exclusively from the working class. With women of a lower socioeconomic standing than his, he can be the hero they’ve been hoping would rescue them from the limitations placed upon them by their class. Certainly, this is the role in which Myrtle Wilson casts him, as we see when she tries to play the part of the society hostess at the apartment Tom keeps for their rendezvous (29–32; ch. 2). In this way, he can experience a facsimile of the kind of attention, the feeling of power, the ego gratification, he must have experienced with the young women he was sure to have impressed during his college football career.

There is, however, another, more important reason for Tom’s desire to purchase status, a reason with roots deep in his birthplace in the Midwest, a region to which our attention is brought again and again. The importance of sign-exchange value for Tom, it can be argued, is largely a product of his desire to belong to a world that recognizes one necessary, if not sufficient, requirement for social prestige: one must be born and raised in the East. Without this "pedigree," Tom Buchanan’s enormous wealth is just so much coin. Tom’s fortune is not, as Roger Lewis would have it, "old money" (51). Although he inherited his wealth from an established Chicago family—so his money is not "new" in the sense of having been earned during his lifetime—an established Chicago family in the 1920s, the period in which the novel is set, would not have been considered "old" in the East, where America’s "aristocracy" had lived since their forebears’ initial immigration from Great Britain and Europe. For Easterners, in the 1920s at least, one of the requirements of old money was that it be earned not only in the past but in the East. To be from the Midwest was to be a nouveau arrivé in the eyes of Easterners, regardless of the size or age of one’s fortune.

Having attended Yale, Tom must be, as Fitzgerald was, painfully aware of the Eastern social requirements he can never by birth fulfill; and even if he and Daisy return to Europe or the Midwest, Tom carries this knowledge inside himself, where it will always inform everything he does. He therefore seeks a status other than the one he can’t have, a status that would declare his indifference to the issue of old money ver-
sus new. Thus his vulgarity—his lack of discretion with Myrtle Wilson; his loud, aggressive behavior; his rudeness—can be seen as an attempt to reassure himself that his money and power are all that count, an attempt to show that his wealth insulates him from considerations of class or refinement. The pseudoscientific "intellectualism" Tom adopts in referring Nick to a book he'd read about white civilization—as well as the racism endorsed by his reading—might be seen in this same light. He doesn't need to belong to old money because he belongs to a larger and more important group—the Aryan race: "We've produced all the things that go to make civilization—oh, science and art, and all that" (14; ch. 1).

A corollary of Tom's commodification of people is his ability to manipulate them very cold-bloodedly to get what he wants. In order to get Myrtle Wilson's sexual favors, he lets her think that he may marry her someday, that his hesitation is due to Daisy's alleged Catholicism rather than his own lack of desire. And in order to eliminate his rival for Daisy's affection, he sacrifices Gatsby to Wilson, whom he deliberately sends, armed and crazed, to Gatsby's house. (Tom's excuse to Nick—that he had no choice in the matter as Wilson was armed and Daisy was upstairs—wouldn't have prevented him from telephoning Gatsby to warn him.) In addition, Tom's sinister capabilities are hinted at through his familiarity with the underworld in the person of Walter Chase, who was involved in illegal activities with Gatsby. In fact, the last time we see Tom, we are led to associate him with Meyer Wolfsheim, the novel's most overtly sinister character. When Nick runs into Tom at the novel's close, he speculates that Tom's purpose in entering the jewelry store before which he is standing is "to buy a pearl necklace or perhaps only a pair of cuff buttons" (181; ch. 9). The pearl necklace, of course, reminds us of his commodification of women: either he's "paying an installment" on his purchase of Daisy, or he's "buying" another woman. The reference to cuff buttons, however, resonates powerfully with the human-molar cuff buttons of Meyer Wolfsheim.

It is no coincidence that Tom Buchanan has a very commodified psyche and very well-developed sinister capabilities. There is, in fact, a logical connection between these two aspects of personality, between commodity psychology and the cold-blooded manipulation of others. For exchange value demands subject-object (rather than subject-subject) relations among people: commodification is, by definition, the treatment of objects and people as commodities. From this perspective, Myrtle
is merely a five-and-dime-store toy intended for the diversion of a rich white man who enjoys "slumming." Similarly, Daisy is merely Tom's property: it is quite right and natural for him to eliminate a trespasser—Gatsby—or, perhaps a more accurate articulation of Tom’s viewpoint, to see that the debris that washed up on his shore is hauled away.

While a character such as Tom Buchanan is likely to make us sympathize with anyone who is dependent upon him, Daisy is not merely an innocent victim of her husband's commodified psyche. Rather, she and Tom are conspirators, from their marriage of convenience to their oft-noted tête-à-tête over cold chicken and ale in their pantry after Myrtle Wilson’s death. In the first place, Daisy’s acceptance of the pearls—and of the marriage to Tom they represent—is, of course, an act of commodification, a trade: she wanted Tom’s sign-exchange value as much as he wanted hers. And, certainly, Daisy is capable, like Tom, of espousing an idea for the status she thinks it confers on her, as when she commodifies disaffection in order to impress Nick:

"You see I think everything’s terrible anyhow," she went on in a convinced way. "Everybody thinks so—the most advanced people. And I know. I’ve been everywhere and seen everything and done everything." Her eyes flashed around her in a defiant way, rather like Tom’s. . . .

The instant her voice broke off, ceasing to compel my attention, my belief, I felt the basic insincerity of what she had said. . . . I waited, and sure enough, in a moment she looked at me with an absolute smirk on her lovely face, as if she had asserted her membership in a rather distinguished secret society to which she and Tom belonged. (18; ch. 1)

Even Daisy’s extramarital affair with Gatsby, like her earlier romance with him, has as its prerequisite her assumption that he is a member of her class, and when that assumption is challenged by Tom during the confrontation scene in the hotel suite, her enthusiasm for Gatsby dampens considerably. In short, Daisy can commodify with the best. Nevertheless, her primary use to us, in terms of commodity psychology, is not as a commodifier but as a commodity. An examination of Daisy’s role as commodity—in addition to granting her a more complicated personality than she is often allowed²—foregrounds what the novel reveals about the social and psychological functions of woman as the object of male desire in a commodity culture.

According to Luce Irigaray, in a patriarchal society, women, like
goods and signs, are commodities traded among men. Women “have value only in that they serve the possibility of, and potential benefit in, relations among men” (172). From this perspective, the social roles imposed on women, Irigaray believes, are limited to mother, virgin, and prostitute. Daisy, I think it can reasonably be argued, fills all three roles, sometimes separately, sometimes simultaneously, for different characters at different moments. Mothers, Irigaray explains, are

reproductive instruments marked with the name of the father and enclosed in his house. . . . [They] must be private property, excluded from exchange. . . . [They] cannot circulate in the form of commodities without threatening the very existence of the social order. . . . Their responsibility is to maintain the social order without intervening so as to change it. (185)

This conception of the function of the mother in a patriarchy helps explain one of the roles in which Tom sees Daisy. Although his behavior toward his wife does not foreground her biological function as a reproductive instrument, Daisy nevertheless provides this function: she has a child who bears his name and she is capable of having others. More important in terms of the social implications of Irigaray’s notion of the mother, Tom considers Daisy his private property, and his belief in the dependence of the social order on the inviolability of that role becomes ludicrously clear when he fears he may lose her to Gatsby: “I suppose the latest thing is to sit back and let Mr. Nobody from nowhere make love to your wife. Well, if that’s the idea you can count me out. . . . Nowadays people begin by sneering at family life and family institutions and next they’ll throw everything overboard and have intermarriage between black and white” (130; ch. 7). The importance to Tom personally of Daisy as his private property—as the Irigarayan mother—is evident in the great lengths to which he goes to keep her in that role, from his investigation into Gatsby’s past, to his vicious verbal attack on his rival before Daisy, Nick, and Jordan in a hotel suite in New York, to his central role in Gatsby’s murder.

Daisy also has many of the role functions of Irigaray’s virgin. Although by the time we meet Daisy she is no longer a biological virgin, for both Tom and Gatsby she functions symbolically in that role. “The virginal woman,” writes Irigaray, “is pure exchange value. . . . In and of herself, she does not exist: she is a simple envelope veiling what is really at stake in social exchange” (186). I think it is safe to suggest that Irigaray’s use of the term exchange value implicitly merges exchange
value with sign-exchange value. For, as is especially clear in the case of Tom Buchanan and Jay Gatsby, relations among men, to which Irigaray refers woman’s value, are semiotically saturated. Looked at from this point of view, it is not surprising that Tom often treats Daisy (until he fears losing her) as if she didn’t exist. In her role as virgin, she has meaning for Tom only as sign, not as physical being. Daisy is the sign of the “good girl”: she bears the name of a flower; she is always dressed in white; she always looks cool, even in hot weather. She has the appearance of the virginial, innocent woman a man marries for reasons related to social status. Tom also uses Daisy’s sign-exchange value as virgin to define and inflate his relations with the numerous “bad girls” with whom he has affairs. His marriage to the sign of the virgin necessarily and conveniently circumscribes his adulterous relationships (he can’t marry a bad girl because he’s already married, and as he lies to Myrtle, his good girl doesn’t believe in divorce) and defines them (deliciously) as cheating.

In addition, Daisy has a virginal role function in Gatsby’s eyes. She is the symbol of the identity he wants to acquire and of the imaginary past he wants to substitute for his actual past; that is, she is the symbol of his virginal dream, the dream he keeps pure and untouched by time or circumstance. In his vision of Daisy, she, too, is untouched by the passage of time. From his perspective, she is never really touched by Tom: “She never loved you,” he tells Tom; “in her heart she never loved any one except me” (131; ch. 7). Therefore, Gatsby cannot quite bring himself to believe that Daisy has a child: “He kept looking at the child with surprise,” Nick informs us. “I don’t think he had ever really believed in its existence before” (117; ch. 7).

Perhaps Daisy’s most interesting function, at least in terms of commodity psychology, is her role as prostitute. “Prostitution,” Irigaray explains, “amounts to usage that is exchanged. Usage that is not merely potential: it has already been realized” (186). “Usage that is exchanged” is, of course, one way to describe Daisy’s marriage. In a very real sense, Daisy simply sold herself to the highest bidder. In addition, her use value, as sexual object, was “not merely potential” but had “already been realized” by the time she married Tom: although her husband didn’t know it, she and Gatsby had already had sexual relations. Furthermore, Irigaray observes that “the woman’s body is valuable because it has already been used. In the extreme case, the more it has served, the more it is worth” (186, my emphasis). This aspect of the prostitute role
is part of what Gatsby finds particularly appealing about Daisy: “It excited him, too, that many men had already loved Daisy—it increased her value in his eyes” (148; ch. 8). It doesn’t matter whether or not Daisy actually slept with any of these former lovers; the operative element here is that their love relations with her, whatever those relations were, increased her sign-exchange value for Gatsby. Her image as a woman “possessed” by other men, symbolically if not literally, increased his desire to possess her himself. Ironically, because Gatsby views all roles in terms of their sign-exchange value, Daisy’s value as prostitute (as usage exchanged) enhances, in his eyes, her value as virgin (as pure sign-exchange value).

Daisy herself seems to understand all too well the significance of woman as commodity when she describes the birth of her daughter, Pammy, to Nick: “I woke up out of the ether with an utterly abandoned feeling, and asked the nurse right away if it was a boy or a girl. She told me it was a girl, and so I turned my head away and wept. ‘All right,’ I said, ‘I’m glad it’s a girl. And I hope she’ll be a fool—that’s the best thing a girl can be in this world, a beautiful little fool’” (17; ch. 1). This passage does not reveal, as Susan Resneck Parr believes, Daisy’s “ennui”; nor is its significance circumscribed by Daisy’s “recognition of just how painful intelligence and consciousness can be” (68). Rather, Daisy knows that a “beautiful little fool” is the best thing a girl can be because, given that woman is a commodity, she had better be marketable. Being beautiful and a fool is a very marketable combination. Also, if she is a fool, perhaps she won’t know the despair of struggling against her fate, for perhaps she won’t even suffer the awareness of her fate (one can be a commodity unconsciously as well as consciously). Thus it is a very particular kind of consciousness—consciousness of being female in a patriarchy—that Daisy recognizes as painful.

Daisy’s speech in this excerpt is certainly a bitter lament for the condition of women in a man’s world, but it is also an acceptance of that condition and a desire to see her daughter profit by it. Daisy’s acceptance of women’s oppression—that is, her belief that it is an inescapable given in what we today call a phallocentric culture—explains, in part, her willingness to commodify herself. In a gender war game in which the enemy has all the big guns, mere survival, which is all the Myrtle Wilsons of the world can hope for, is not enough for Daisy. She wants the same narcissistic reinforcements Tom wants—financial and social
hegemony and the attention and esteem such success commands—and as a woman of her time and place, her quickest and surest method to achieve these desiderata is to commodify herself.

Just as Tom’s commodity psychology is manifested in the ways in which he commodifies his world, Daisy’s is manifested, in large part, in the ways in which she commodifies herself. In Daisy’s case, however, the behavior that is most psychologicafully revealing is the behavior that is emotionally self-destructive, for even when her behavior is destructive of others, it is ultimately grounded in her own self-destructiveness. Daisy’s brand of self-destructive behavior is one familiar to many women and men, although in our culture it has been stereotypically associated with women: self-destructive love. Obviously, Daisy didn’t love Tom when she married him or she wouldn’t have tried to call off the marriage after receiving an overseas letter from Gatsby. By the time the couple returned from their three-month honeymoon, however, Jordan reports that she had “never seen a girl so mad about her husband” (78; ch. 4). The juxtaposition, in Jordan’s narrative, of Daisy’s prenuptial indifference with her posthoneyoom ardor forces the reader to wonder what happened in that short time to change Daisy’s attitude so drastically. Is Daisy’s alteration the result of marital bliss? Jordan’s description of Tom’s infidelity on their return from the honeymoon suggests a different answer. “A week after I left Santa Barbara Tom ran into a wagon on the Ventura road one night, and ripped a front wheel off his car. The girl who was with him got into the papers, too, because her arm was broken—she was one of the chambermaids in the Santa Barbara Hotel” (78; ch. 4).

Given this incident, and what we already know about Tom’s affair with Myrtle, it is quite probable that by the time he and Daisy arrived in Santa Barbara, Daisy already knew that her husband was unfaithful. This would explain her discomfort whenever Tom was out of her sight: “If he left the room for a minute she’d look around uneasily, and say: ‘Where’s Tom gone?’ and wear the most abstracted expression until she saw him coming in the door” (78; ch. 4). Surely, she had good reason to fear that unless he was with her, Tom might be pursuing another woman because he had already done so on their honeymoon. Rather than hate him for his mistreatment of her, however, Daisy falls in love with him: “She used to sit on the sand with his head in her lap by the hour, rubbing her fingers over his eyes and looking at him with unfath-
omable delight” (78; ch. 4). Daisy loves, as Sylvia Plath puts it, “the boot in the face” (223). Daisy loves the brute. And loving the brute is related to being a commodity.

By definition, a commodity is the object of the verb, not the subject: the commodity doesn’t make a purchase; it is the purchase. That is, a commodity is never an agent. Furthermore, its sign-exchange value is a function not of anything inherent in itself but of the market’s current rate of exchange. In terms of women as commodities in a male-dominated market, this means that the woman has no control over the definition of her own sign-exchange value. In the first place, she is not an agent; in the second place, her sign-exchange value doesn’t reside in anything inherent in herself but is produced by the current rate of exchange among men. This state of affairs encourages low self-esteem in women, and the corollary of low self-esteem is self-destructiveness, especially in love: if I’m no good, then anyone who loves me must be of little or no value; the lover who is kind to me will ultimately be found lacking, but the lover who mistreats me thereby proves his worth. Enter Tom.

Although Gatsby is certainly more charming than Tom and Daisy, and more sympathetically portrayed by Nick, he nevertheless represents their desires in abstraction. However much the Buchanans’ possessions are important to them in terms of sign-exchange value, they also have use value: we see the couple reclining on their sofas and eating at their tables. In contrast, we are told that the only room Gatsby occupies in his magnificently furnished mansion is his bedroom, which is “the simplest room of all” (3; ch. 1). We see him in this room only once, and even then his purpose is to show it to Daisy. He almost never uses his library, pool, or hydroplane himself; and he doesn’t drink the alcohol or know most of the guests at his lavish parties. It seems that for the protagonist the sole function of material possessions is sign-exchange value: he wants the image their ownership confers on him and nothing more. For Gatsby, the commodity is commodity sign. Furthermore, while all three characters accumulate commodity signs, Gatsby’s signs are almost all empty: his Gothic library filled with uncut books, his imitation Hôtel de Ville with its “spanking new” tower “under a thin beard of raw ivy” (5; ch. 1), his photo of himself at Oxford, are all surfaces without interiors. Finally, Gatsby’s accumulation of empty signs—itself an abstraction—is performed in the service of another abstraction: the acquisition of
Daisy as a means of canceling his identity, annihilating his past, in order to become "his Platonic conception of himself" (99; ch. 6), that is, in order to become an abstraction himself.

Although Gatsby believes that his ultimate goal is the possession of Daisy—a belief Nick, Jordan, Tom, and Daisy seem to share—Daisy is merely the key to his goal rather than the goal itself. It is not "the absolute good" that Daisy embodies for the protagonist (Gallo 38), or even "beauty and innocence" (Chase 300), but the sign of her social class. What Gatsby really wants is to acquire the sign that he belongs to the same bright, spotless, airy, carefree world of the very rich that Daisy embodied for him when they first met. For Gatsby, her presence gave the house in which she lived a feeling of "breathless intensity,"

a hint of bedrooms upstairs more beautiful and cool than other bedrooms, of gay and radiant activities taking place through its corridors, and of romances that were not musty and laid away already in lavender, but fresh and breathing and redolent of this year's shining motor-cars and of dances whose flowers were scarcely withered. (148; ch. 8).

That the rhetoric of this passage reveals the stereotypical, romance-magazine quality of Gatsby's desire for Daisy (Way 95) doesn't undercut the force of his desire. On the contrary, romance-magazine life—that is, life as a fiction in which the commodity sign is the avatar of happiness—is clearly what Gatsby seeks. Thus, in accumulating material goods in order to win Daisy, he is accumulating one kind of sign in order to acquire another.

What is there in Gatsby's background that makes Daisy such a powerful sign for him? The answer to this question can be found in Gatsby's boyhood with his parents and with Dan Cody. "James—that was really, or at least legally, his name. . . . His parents were shiftless and unsuccessful farm people—his imagination had never really accepted them as his parents at all. . . . So he invented just the sort of Jay Gatsby that a seventeen-year-old boy would be likely to invent" (98–99; ch. 6). What sort of a Jay Gatsby is that? In addition to the model we have of Gatsby as an adult—for he stayed faithful to his original conception "to the end" (99; ch. 6)—we have the clue his father gives us when he shows Nick "Jimmy's" boyhood "schedule," in which the young man divided his day, in the self-improvement tradition of Benjamin Franklin, among physical exercise, the study of electricity, work, sports, the practice of elocution and poise, and the study of needed inventions. This schedule
suggests that he hoped—indeed planned—to live the "rags-to-riches" life associated with self-made millionaires like John D. Rockefeller and Andrew Carnegie. And he received his first exposure to wealth, and his first opportunity to better himself, when he went to work for Dan Cody, a rags-to-riches man himself. But Gatsby's conception of a life of wealth and leisure was, at this time, rather flat, uninspired, a product of the conceptual domain rather than of direct personal experience. For until he met Daisy, there had always been "indiscernible barbed wire" (148; ch. 8) between him and the wealthy people he'd met through Dan Cody.

Thus, Gatsby had set his sights on the attainment of wealth and social status long before he knew Daisy, but these achievements revealed their ultimate psychological payoff only upon meeting her. His contact with her let him imagine what it would feel like to be a member of her world, to be, as he felt Daisy was, "gleaming like silver, safe and proud above the hot struggles of the poor" (150; ch. 8), the struggle that he, himself, had endured and hated. This feeling—the feeling of being insulated from his own past and from the existential inwardness his awareness of that past engenders—is what she came to represent for him, and this is what he wants in wanting Daisy. He therefore insists that Daisy admit she never loved Tom and that they be married from her parents' home in Louisville—so that they can, as Gatsby says, "repeat the past" and "fix everything just the way it was before" and so that Gatsby can, as Nick observes, "recover something, some idea of himself perhaps, that had gone into loving Daisy" (111; ch. 6).

The "idea of himself" he wants to recover is that of the young man who believed his own fantasy about his upper-class origins, who belonged to Daisy's world because she believed that he belonged, "that he was a person from much the same stratum as herself" (149; ch. 8). Possessing Daisy again five years later would, in Gatsby's eyes, "launder" his "new money" and make it "old," would make his "spanking new" imitation Hôtel de Ville an ancestral seat. In this way, Gatsby's possession of Daisy would undo history and cancel his identity, allowing him to deny there had ever been a time when he didn't have money and position—to believe his lie to Nick that he was from a wealthy family and had gone to Oxford and toured Europe—and to believe that he had never lost this world because he had never lost Daisy to Tom. If he could cancel his identity, replace his historical past with a fictional past, then he could eliminate the existential pain that accompanies an awareness of lack, loss, or limitation. He could be insulated, as he believes
Daisy is insulated, in that magical world of fresh romances and shining motorcars and flowers that never wither, that fictional world Gatsby created five years ago and “store[d] up in his ghostly heart” (97; ch. 5).

Like Tom, Gatsby aggressively pursues what he desires, and the cold-blooded nature of his pursuit is, also like Tom’s, a function of commodity psychology. The signs of luxury, carefree pleasure, and sensual beauty among which Gatsby circulates do not exist in a vacuum. They are supported by a very dark and sinister world of corruption, crime, and death. Certainly Gatsby’s wealth, as Nick and Tom learn, is derived from underworld activities, specifically bootlegging and fraudulent bonds. This is not “the no-man’s land between business and criminality” Gatsby may think it is (Way 89); it is the underworld of Meyer Wolfsheim, who has such unlimited criminal connections that he was able to “fix” the 1919 World Series. And this is the man who takes credit for giving Gatsby his start.

We get a glimpse of this world in the “villainous”-looking servants Wolfsheim sends to work for Gatsby and in the phone calls Gatsby receives (and which, after Gatsby’s death, Nick receives by accident) from obvious criminal sources. This is a world of predators and prey in which illegal—and thus often imperfect—liquor is sold over the counter to anyone with the money to pay for it, and in which fake bonds are passed in small towns to unsuspecting investors. Some of the people who buy the liquor may become ill from it; some may die. All of the small investors who buy the fraudulent bonds will lose money that they probably can’t afford to lose. And when the inevitable mistakes are made and the law steps in, someone will have to be sacrificed, as Gatsby sacrifices Walter Chase.

Even the protagonist’s desire for Daisy—which many readers use to support their romantic view of him—is informed by an underworld weltanschauung: when Gatsby first courted Daisy at her parents’ home in Louisville, “he took what he could get, ravenously and unscrupulously—eventually he took Daisy” (149; ch. 8). Gatsby did not make love to Daisy; he “took” her “ravenously and unscrupulously.” This language resonates strongly with his dubious association with Dan Cody before meeting Daisy and with his criminal activities subsequent to their initial affair.

Gatsby, like Tom, treats people as commodities. The people who buy his liquor and fraudulent bonds, or who, like Walter Chase, get caught doing his dirty work, are merely pawns, stepping-stones, objects to be
exchanged for what he wants: in Gatsby’s case, the money to support his quest to acquire the sign that will cancel history and thereby relieve him of the existential burden of his own existence. However, although Gatsby is the subject in his subject-object dealings with his criminal connections and in his commodification of Daisy, he is also an object in his relationship with her, a point that Judith Fetterly misses in her interesting analysis of Daisy and Jordan as the novel’s scapegoats. Gatsby commodifies himself—he adopts an image and a life-style in order to “sell” himself—in order to be accepted as a member of Daisy’s social stratum. Furthermore, his desire for Daisy mirrors her desire for Tom. As we have seen, Daisy’s obsession with Tom began only after she became aware of his involvement with other women, and Gatsby’s desire for Daisy was enhanced by his knowledge that she had been loved by other men. Significantly, it wasn’t until he had had sexual relations with her and she remained unmoved—“betray[ing]” him by “vanish[ing] into her rich house, into her rich, full life”—that Gatsby began to pursue Daisy as if he had “committed himself to the following of a grail” (149; ch. 8).

While subject-object relations are necessarily a dominant value in a culture in which money—and the power over others it produces—is the *sine qua non* of happiness, commodity psychology is even more closely related to the novel’s emergent value: object-object relations, the most abstract form of human relations and the one that is dramatized in Gatsby’s relationship with Daisy. If subject-subject relations can be said to exist at all in the novel, they exist as a residual value, a function of nostalgia and fantasy, as when Gatsby reminisces about his initial encounters with Daisy or imagines their future together.

If subject-object relations produce the distance from others that facilitates cold-blooded manipulation and exploitation, object-object relations produce distance from oneself. As we have seen, in constituting oneself as an object for the other, one knows oneself primarily through the eyes of the other, that is, primarily as a surface rather than an interior. One is thus liberated from the burden of existential self-reflection. It is not surprising, in this context, that Fitzgerald was unable to provide us with the inner history of Gatsby and Daisy’s Long Island affair. As the author himself notes, in a letter to Edmund Wilson, he “had no feeling about or knowledge of . . . the emotional relations between Gatsby and Daisy from the time of their reunion to the catastrophe” (*Letters* 341–42). Clearly, Fitzgerald could not represent the inwardness
of the couple’s relationship because there is none. There is only the interaction of two surfaces. Appropriately, the only interchanges described between the pair occur in relation to, and are mediated by, Gatsby’s commodity signs: his reunion with Daisy in Nick’s cottage, in a setting painstakingly prepared for that purpose; Daisy’s grand tour of his mansion; and the couple’s mutual display over his collection of expensive shirts. It is as a surface without an interior that James Gatz’s creation lives his dream of happiness with Daisy, and it is as a surface without an interior that “‘Jay Gatsby’ [breaks] up like glass against Tom’s hard malice” (148; ch. 8).

One of the central paradoxes of the American dream, then, is that while it claims to open history to everyone, to allow each individual the opportunity to become a part of American history, in reality it closes off history: it allows each individual the opportunity to escape from history into the commodity. Thus, for Gatsby, the commodity—not just his material possessions but Daisy as well—becomes the site of displacement, the sign he needs to acquire if he is to feel in control, protected, insulated from the existential inwardness that accompanies his psychological connection to his own past. That is, the commodity becomes, as Lily Bart’s aestheticized body is for her and Lawrence Selden, a religious relic, the site of mystification, of magical thinking. It is interesting to note in this context that readers who romanticize Gatsby, as Gatsby himself does, share the character’s desire to sever himself from his own history. Richard Chase, for example, sees Gatsby as part of “an earlier pastoral ideal,” in that he shares, with Natty Bumppo, Huck Finn, and Ishmael, an “ideal of innocence, escape, and the purely personal code of conduct” (301). Gatsby may indeed “stand for America itself” (L. Trilling 240) as the “projected wish fulfillment” of the “consciousness of a race” (Troy 21), but it is an America that is willing to exploit the underdog to advance its own interests and a consciousness that relates to others as commodities. Clearly, the desire to sever Gatsby from his exploitative history is accompanied by the desire to sever America from its.

Operating against The Great Gatsby’s powerful critique of commodity psychology is the novel’s subtle reinforcement of the commodity’s seductive appeal. This countermovement operates on two levels. First, because Nick is seduced by the dream Gatsby represents for him, his narrative seduces many readers into collusion with Gatsby’s desire. Second, the language used to describe the physical setting of this world
of wealth makes it attractive despite people like the Buchanans who populate it. Nick may like to think he disapproves of Jay Gatsby—because he knows he should disapprove of him for the same reasons he disapproves of the Buchanans—but it is clear from the beginning that the narrator is charmed by him. As Nick tells us, “There was something gorgeous about him, some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life. . . . it was an extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness such as I have never found in any other person and which it is not likely I shall ever find again” (2; ch. 1).

This romantic vision of Gatsby is foregrounded in Nick’s narrative through his focus on Gatsby’s romantic images: the rebellious boy, the ambitious young roughneck, the idealistic dreamer, the devoted lover, the brave soldier, the lavish host. Gatsby’s criminal connections are acknowledged, but because of Nick’s response to them, they don’t influence his opinion of the man. For example, Nick’s manner of discussing Gatsby’s criminal life tends to deflect attention away from the moral implications of Gatsby’s underworld activities, as when Nick reports the following conversation he overheard at one of Gatsby’s parties: “‘He’s a bootlegger,’ said the young ladies, moving somewhere between his cocktails and his flowers” (61; ch. 4). The rhetoric of this phrase is typical of Nick’s defense of Gatsby against his detractors, even when those detractors are right: his statement focuses on Gatsby’s generosity and on the willingness to abuse it of those who gossip about him, thereby sidestepping the fact that “his cocktails and his flowers” weren’t rightfully his at all: they were purchased with funds obtained from the sale of bootlegged liquor and fraudulent bonds.

Similarly, Nick influences reader reaction to Gatsby by his own emotional investment in those events that show Gatsby in a good light. For example, when Gatsby, confronted by Tom, admits in front of everyone that his Oxford experience was provided by a government arrangement for American soldiers who remained in Europe after World War I, Nick “wanted to get up and slap him on the back” (130; ch. 7). This small concession to reality on Gatsby’s part elicits in Nick a renewal “of complete faith in him” (130; ch. 7). Despite what Nick knows about the underworld sources of Gatsby’s wealth, despite the “unaffected scorn” Nick says he has for Gatsby’s world, Gatsby himself is “exempt” from Nick’s disapprobation: “Gatsby turned out all right at the end; it is what preyed on Gatsby, what foul dust floated in the wake of his dreams” (2;
that elicits Nick’s disaffection—and that of many readers. It is easy to be influenced by the warmth of Nick’s feelings because these feelings so strongly inform the portrait he paints. Like Nick, many of us would like to bask in Gatsby’s smile, “one of those rare smiles with a quality of eternal reassurance in it . . . with an irresistible prejudice in your favor” (48; ch. 3).

Why should Nick deceive himself, and us, about Gatsby? Why should he foreground all the positive, likable qualities in Gatsby’s personality and shift responsibility for the unpleasant ones onto others’ shoulders? Certainly, it is not simply, as A. E. Dyson claims, Nick’s “humanity” that “forces him to understand and pity Gatsby” (115). Rather, I think it is because the narrator is, himself, seduced by Gatsby’s dream. At the age of thirty, and still being financed by his father while he tries to figure out what he should do with himself, it is not surprising that Nick wants to believe life still holds promise because he is afraid that it doesn’t. He fears that all he has to look forward to is, as he puts it, “a thinning list of single men to know, a thinning briefcase of enthusiasm, thinning hair” (136; ch. 7). With one failed romance back home and one in New York, Nick wants to believe that the possibility of romance still exists. With his summer in New York—his latest in a series of adventures—having ended in disaster, he wants to believe in the possibility of hope. Nick believes in Gatsby because he wants to believe that Gatsby’s dream can come true for himself: that a young man at loose ends can make the kind of outrageous financial success of himself that Gatsby has made . . . and seem to fall so completely in love with a woman . . . and be so optimistic about the future.

Clearly, in terms of the psychology of the narrator’s desire, Dyson is very mistaken in his assertion that Carraway’s “emotions and destiny are not centrally involved” in his narration (115). Nick’s emotions and destiny are indeed centrally involved: he doesn’t want to be reminded that Gatsby’s glittering world rests on corruption because he wants that world for himself. He is in collusion with Gatsby’s desire and leads readers into collusion with that desire as well. Following Nick’s lead, for example, Tom Burnam says that Gatsby “survives sound and whole in character, uncorrupted by the corruption which surrounded him” (105). In a similar fashion, Rose Adrienne Gallo believes that Gatsby “maintained his innocence” to the end (43). Perhaps, like Nick, such readers want to believe that the protagonist’s dream is inviolate be-
cause they want to believe that a dream like his can still come true. Nick’s portrait of Gatsby is thus one reason why he is considered, as we have seen, such an appealing figure.

It is interesting to note that the question of Nick’s reliability problematizes the question of narrator reliability in general: even if Nick were reliable (in that his views concerning the characters and events of the story represented Fitzgerald’s views), we would still be left with the question of whether or not Fitzgerald understood all the implications of his own text. That is, the question of a narrator’s reliability sidesteps the issue of how the author’s unconscious is involved in producing the text. Even if Fitzgerald intended Nick as a reliable narrator who accurately portrays the Gatsby the author wanted us to see—even if Fitzgerald wanted us to believe, with Nick, that “Gatsby turned out all right at the end” and to save our disapprobation, as Nick does, for “what preyed on Gatsby, what foul dust floated in the wake of his dreams” (2; ch. 1)—we would still bear the burden of evaluating Gatsby’s behavior beyond the limits of Nick’s viewpoint because Fitzgerald’s representation of both narrator and protagonist may have exceeded his intention. As we saw earlier, in Fitzgerald’s letter to Edmund Wilson—and as we’ll see later, in Arthur Miller’s comments on Death of a Salesman—authorial intention, which is the locus and limit of the reliable narrator’s function, is but a part of artistic creation. A good deal more of the text is produced by what the author doesn’t (consciously) know. Thus, one might speculate that Fitzgerald’s conflicted attitude toward the wealthy, or Miller’s conflicted attitude toward his father, could have produced characterizations much less positive than either author (consciously) intended.

The reader appeal of Gatsby’s desire to belong to the magic world in which Daisy is so at home—“Gatsby has possessed what the reader must also desire: the orgiastic present” (Dillon 61)—is also a testimonial to the power of the commodity. Gatsby may not make the best use of his mansion, his hydroplane, his swimming pool, and his library, but many of us might feel that we certainly would. In a novel in which the only alternative to the life-style of the wealthy is the valley of ashes (Nick’s Midwest hardly qualifies as an alternative because the description of it is brief, sketchy, and focused on his nostalgia for a symbolic return to an innocent past that may no longer be possible for him), the commodity is rendered especially attractive by contrast. Furthermore, the commodity’s appeal is powerfully reinforced for the reader by the language used to describe this world of leisure and luxury. Consumer goods are
invested with magic— with the capacity to transform reality—which suggests that the material world is itself transcendent. Even the refreshments at Gatsby’s parties, for example, seem enchanted: a “tray of cocktails floated at us through the twilight” (43; ch. 3), and on “buffet tables garnished with glistening hors-d’oeuvre, spiced baked hams crowded against salads of harlequin designs and pastry pigs and turkeys bewitched to a dark gold” (39–40; ch. 3). As John S. Whitley notes, in comparing the work of Fitzgerald and Keats, the description of Gatsby’s buffet table

creates an effect greater than that of mere opulence. The transmutation of base reality has already begun; nothing is quite what it seems. The pigs are made of pastry, the turkeys are a colour rather from the world of aesthetics than the world of cuisine and the salads are of “harlequin” designs, a word suggesting not merely a variety of colours but also masks and jokes. (24)

The commodity is especially compelling in the following description of the Buchanans’ home on East Egg:

Their house was . . . a cheerful red-and-white Georgian Colonial mansion, overlooking the bay. . . . The front was broken by a line of French windows, glowing now with reflected gold and wide open to the warm windy afternoon. . . . the front vista . . . [included] in its sweep a sunken Italian garden, a half acre of deep, pungent roses, and a snub-nosed motor-boat that bumped the tide offshore. . . .

We walked through a high hallway into a bright rosy-colored space, fragiley bound into the house by French windows at either end. . . . A breeze blew through the room, blew curtains in at one end and out the other like pale flags, twisting them up toward the frosted wedding-cake of the ceiling, and then rippled over the wine-colored rug, making a shadow on it as wind does on the sea. (6–8; ch. 1)

This passage is a delicious appeal to every one of the five senses. The language is so sensual that the house seems to breathe with a life of its own, capable even of conquering nature, which it subdues and uses to enhance itself: “The lawn started at the beach and ran toward the front door for a quarter of a mile, jumping over sun-dials and brick walks and burning gardens—finally when it reached the house drifting up the side in bright vines as though from the momentum of its run” (6–7; ch. 1).

Although the estate is on the edge of the sea, one of the most powerful natural forces on earth, nature, in this passage, is utterly domesti-
cated. The wild grasses that normally border the ocean have been replaced by a lawn, which jumps over objects like a trained dog, while vines decorate the house like jewelry. The commodity is so powerful that it can disenfranchise nature: nature becomes a commodity; the natural object becomes a human artifact valued for the money and prestige it represents. This setting thus has an existence independent of the characters who inhabit it: the estate doesn’t need Tom and Daisy in order to be gorgeous; it was gorgeous before Tom bought it and it will be gorgeous after the Buchanans are gone. In fact, we could easily, and happily, imagine this place without its occupants. That is, the setting is bigger than the Buchanans—it contains and exceeds them. They neither use it up nor exhaust its possibilities. And it is impervious to their corruption: we are not led to associate the place with the events that occur there. Therefore, it exerts a magnetic appeal on many readers.⁶

This double movement—the text’s simultaneous criticism of and fascination with the commodity—is largely responsible for the problematic nature of the novel’s oft-quoted closing passage:

... I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors’ eyes—a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby’s house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder. (182; ch. 9)

Although Nick reminds us that the “fresh, green breast of the new world,” that setting “commensurate to [our] capacity for wonder,” “vanished” to make “way for Gatsby’s home”—that is, was obliterated by the commodity—he also associates this “enchanted” dream of the Dutch sailors with Gatsby’s commodified dream: “And as I sat there brooding on the old, unknown world, I thought of Gatsby’s wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of Daisy’s dock” (182; ch. 9). The romantic sublime of the sailors’ vision is thus tied to the commodity, in the form of Gatsby, in a way that makes the two—affectively if not logically—almost impossible to untangle. And, of course, the word *pandered* is associated with selling, carrying with it the promise to satisfy corrupt ambitions. Even the Dutch sailors’ dream contains the power of and desire for the commodity embedded in it. As we know
from history, these men came to the new world in search of goods and markets for prosperous Dutch merchants. Their purpose was material, not spiritual. While the sailors were awestruck by what they found, theirs was not an experience of romantic union with a sympathetic Nature such as their descendants would know in the nineteenth century. Rather, the sailors were “compelled into an aesthetic contemplation [they] neither understood nor desired” (182; ch. 9, my emphasis). This is the language, not of a postindustrial nostalgia for country life, but of a response to the wilderness as totally Other. Their success in subduing the vast otherness that was this continent bespeaks the power of the commodity to transform all otherness into the familiar, the domesticated, the safe. There is nothing so great or so wonderful that it can’t be subdued by, and put into the service of, the commodity.

What happens once the commodity has domesticated nature, as it has in *The Great Gatsby*? Must the commodity itself take the place of nature as some kind of Other, just as the green light at the end of the Buchanans’ dock substitutes for the green breast of the new world? The answer, I think, is both yes and no. Certainly, there is in our culture the desire to have the commodity perform this function. For if the commodity becomes Other, then we can at once “have” otherness and domesticate it. That is, we can at once have the Other as the sign of that which is not us/ours—investing it with all the desire and longing that keep us looking toward an imagined future fulfillment—and we can disempower that Other so that it is not threatening. In both cases, the commodity as Other is a means of avoiding existential inwardness: the desire and longing that keep us looking toward an imagined future fulfillment help distract us from the existential contingency of the present; a disempowered, nonthreatening Other means that even the unknown can’t frighten us. Desire is thus submitted to its history: just as the commodity domesticates nature, so it domesticates desire. That is, not only is otherness domesticated by the commodity, but so is our desire for otherness. As I will argue in chapter 5, Joseph Heller shows us that an existential understanding of desire cannot survive a history dominated by the commodity. However, Fitzgerald, as we have seen, both submits desire to its history and refuses to submit it—and he doesn’t seem to see the contradiction. For as much as he is the critic of the commodity, Fitzgerald is also the poet of the commodity. And his poetry attracts many readers to the very thing that, on a more overt level, the novel condemns. Thus, while *The Great Gatsby* offers a significant critique of
the American dream's commodified ideology, it also repackages and markets that dream anew. This double movement of the text gives the closing line a special irony: if we do "beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past," there is in this novel that which strengthens the backflow, bearing us ceaselessly back into the commodity. For although Gatsby fails to realize the dream, many readers continue to invest in it.