***The Great Gatsby*: from printed page to silver screen**

*“Gatsby?” demanded Daisy. “What Gatsby?”*

Widely considered to be a literary classic and acclaimed by generations of readers, *The Great Gatsby* is consistently ranked among the greatest works of American literature and a contender for the title ‘Great American Novel’. The story of the fabulously wealthy Jay Gatsby and his quixotic love for the beautiful Daisy Buchanan, of lavish parties on Long Island at a time when *The New York Times* noted “gin was the national drink and sex the national obsession”[[1]](#footnote-1), F. Scott Fitzgerald’s novel is a consummate summary of the ‘roaring twenties’ and a devastating exposé of the Jazz Age.

Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald was born in 1896 and raised in St. Paul, Minnesota. He enrolled at Princeton in 1913 but never graduated, and enlisted in the army in 1917, as World War I neared its end. With the publication of his first novel *This Side of Paradise* in 1920, Fitzgerald became a literary sensation and began to lead an extravagant, reckless life-style of parties and decadence. Despite being an avid participant in the stereotypical roaring twenties lifestyle, Fitzgerald was also an astute critic of his time period, and *The Great Gatsby* certainly serves more to detail society’s failure to fulfil its potential than it does to glamorise the Jazz Age.

Written in 1925, the novel serves as a bridge between World War I and the Great Depression of the early 1930s. The chaos and violence of the war had proved morally devastating for America, and the generation that fought in the war took advantage of the economic prosperity of the period and turned to wild and excessive living to compensate. In the prohibition, which banned the sale and consumption of alcohol, Fitzgerald found the perfect metaphor for American hypocrisy and debauchery. It was a period in which the American economy soared and the nation prospered. Unrestrained materialism set the tone of society, and the conservatism and tired values of the previous decade were discarded as money, opulence, and exuberance became the order of the day.

Since the novel’s publication, five film adaptations of *The Great Gatsby* have been produced, across a period of eighty-seven years. In 1926, a silent film of a stage adaptation of the novel was directed by Irish director Herbert Brenon, but unfortunately there are no surviving copies known to exist today. Twenty-three years later, in 1949, another film was produced, based on the 1926 play by Owen Davis. Possibly the most famous *Gatsby* film is the 1974 adaptation from a screenplay by Francis Ford Coppola, directed by Jack Clayton and starring Robert Redford, Mia Farrow and Sam Waterston. The novel was adapted for television in 2000, the fourth time that *The Great Gatsby* had been filmed. The most recent adaptation was released in 3D in 2013, co-written and directed by Baz Luhrmann, with Leonardo DiCaprio, Tobey Maguire and Carey Mulligan. Of this host of cinematographic picks, the 1974 and 2013 adaptations stand out to most critics as best interpreting the plot and portraying the lavishly decadent flavour of Fitzgerald’s novel.

Nick Carraway is *The Great Gatsby*’s narrator, and it is through his personal – and arguably unreliable, given the alcoholic haze he appears to be in for most of the novel – memoir of the summer of 1922 that the story is told. A young man from Minnesota in the Midwest, Nick graduated from Yale in 1915, before participating in “that delayed Teutonic migration known as the Great War”[[2]](#footnote-2). Returning home with a restlessness that changed his favourable perception of the region where he grew up, he moves to New York in the spring of 1922 to learn more about the bond business and escape the gossip surrounding his supposed engagement to a girl out West. He lives in a modest cottage among the newly rich in the West Egg district of Long Island, next door to Gatsby’s colossal mansion and across the bay from the more fashionable East Egg, with its old money and long-established leisure class. Nick is Daisy Buchanan’s cousin, and as a result of his relationship to these two characters, he is able to observe and assist the resurgent love affair between Daisy and Gatsby.

Nick has had significant advantages in life, but this upbringing appears not to have instilled in him the same sense of prestige and entitlement that many of the characters in *The Great Gatsby* display. Throughout the novel, Nick proves to be quiet, reserved and above all highly perceptive when it comes to the events which unfold around him, with a tendency “to reserve all judgements”[[3]](#footnote-3). These characteristics mean he is greatly suited to his role as narrator, which he fills as well as assuming a secondary role in the sequence of events, preferring to describe and comment on events rather than dominate the action. Prone to the use of sophisticated and occasionally exaggerated language, he also functions as Fitzgerald’s voice, for example in his extended meditation on time and the American dream in the last chapter of the novel.

In the 2013 adaptation, Nick quotes directly from the novel when he says “I was within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life.”[[4]](#footnote-4) This is significant because it emphasises the dual aspects of Nick’s character, both in the novel and the films. He is at once participant and observer, drawn into life as he experiences it, but always keeping a certain distance from the frivolities and debasement of morals he bears witness to, remaining on the side-lines a great deal of the time despite being in the centre of events in as much as he is the narrator. In the scene where Tom takes him and Myrtle to the apartment in New York, Nick is undoubtedly “within and without”, participating in a drunken party among strangers whose values are clearly not his own, while simultaneously stepping outside the environment to view it from an objective perspective.

Nick’s romantic affair with Jordan Baker symbolises the inner conflict he feels towards life on the East Coast. On the one hand, he is attracted to Jordan’s vivacity and her sophistication, along with the fast-paced, reckless lifestyle of New York. However, he is repelled by her dishonesty and her lack of consideration for other people, and finds the lifestyle she represents distorted and damaging. By the end of the novel, Nick realises that this fast life of revelry is a cover for the moral emptiness of the upper classes symbolised by the valley of ashes between West Egg and New York City. He then returns to his hometown in Minnesota in search of a life structured by more traditional moral values, with “no more riotous excursions with privileged glimpses into the human heart”[[5]](#footnote-5).

Both interpretations portray Nick as reserved, polite, and even detached, as he spends a great deal of time alone. However, Sam Waterston brings a certain silent bashfulness to the role, rarely engaging in conversation during the film, whereas Tobey Maguire displays more vitality and emotional depth, particularly in the scene where he confronts Gatsby about his role in Myrtle’s death. Luhrmann’s Nick is not afraid to expose his emotions and come of out his shell upon occasion, revealing an unexpected impassioned and vigorous side to his personality not present in the 1974 version.

The most significant difference between the 1974 and 2013 versions of the film involves Nick’s situation during his narration of the events. The 2013 adaptation opens with him talking to a doctor at a sanatorium: the implication is that he has had a breakdown of sorts and is spending time recovering. The doctor presses him for details about his apparent ordeal and encourages him to write it all down, which Nick eventually does. This take on Nick’s rehabilitation is representative of a modern North America, in which the mentality towards mental illness has become almost commercialised in the industry of psychopathy.

Uncertain at first, Nick’s narrative is punctuated by flash-backs to the sanatorium towards the beginning of the film, before he settles into his role. This take on Nick’s situation turns the main events of the novel into an extended flashback, and the story progresses with him voicing-over the events as he writes. This is a fairly dramatic departure from the novel in that Fitzgerald does not specify much information about Nick’s state of mind after Gatsby’s funeral, and so the notion that Nick has been traumatised by his experiences and Gatsby’s death to the point where he requires psychological help provokes a great deal of thought as to the nature of his character – perhaps he is more emotionally delicate than we imagined. This technique mean that the film’s focus is necessarily on Nick, as we constantly hear his voice and on some occasions he is in shot as he narrates. While effective in neatly opening and closing the story by use of the scenes in the sanatorium, as well as allowing Nick to use his manuscript to give Gatsby his titular description of ‘great’, Luhrmann’s interpretation is a major variation on the traditional narrator and distracts slightly from the central plot. The 1974 version also uses a voice-over to comment on the events, but here it seems that Nick is merely telling the story of his own accord at a later date.

A young man around thirty years old, Gatsby is Nick Carraway’s neighbour in West Egg. The subject of a whirlwind of gossip throughout New York and already a celebrity, Gatsby’s reputation precedes him, as Fitzgerald delays revealing anything significant about him until fairly late in the novel. The eponymous character is shrouded in mystery, and is not given a speaking role until chapter three, when he is presented as the aloof, enigmatic host of the impossibly opulent parties thrown every week at his mansion. The reader’s first impressions of Gatsby strike quite a different note from that of the lovesick young man who emerges during the latter part of the novel. This delayed character revelation emphasises the theatrical quality of Gatsby’s approach to life: he has created his own character, even changing his name from James Gatz to Jay Gatsby as part of his reinvention of himself.

By the end of the novel, we learn that Gatsby despised poverty from his early youth and longed for wealth and sophistication. He rose from an impoverished childhood in rural North Dakota to become fantastically rich through organised crime and illegal alcohol distribution. However, his main motivation in amassing his fortune was his love for Daisy Buchanan, a beautiful girl he met as a young military officer in Louisville before leaving to fight in the war. Gatsby was overwhelmed by Daisy’s aura of luxury, grace, and charm, and lied to her about his own background in order to convince her that he was good enough for her. Returning from the war to find Daisy married to Tom Buchanan, Gatsby dedicated his life and money to winning Daisy back, acquiring his considerable fortune and buying a mansion on West Egg in order to throw lavish parties each week in the hope that Daisy will attend – it is this that Nick is referring to when he tells us that Gatsby had “an extraordinary gift for hope”[[6]](#footnote-6).

The heightened language of the novel elevates Gatsby’s triumphs and tragedies to epic quality, as a character whose inherent flaw and unwise decisions ultimately lead to his downfall. Although instead of being a person of high birth Gatsby comes from a poor background, he is nevertheless doomed by his romanticisation of Daisy, and his refusal to accept that he was not born to belong to the leisure classes which he so fervently idealises. The irony of the labelling of Gatsby as ‘great’ is that the adjective indicates the tawdry and exaggerated aspects of his life, such as the extravagant parties his throws in his desperate attempts to win Daisy back. Gatsby is obsessed with controlling time, and wants more than anything to erase the past five years in order to “repeat the past”[[7]](#footnote-7), believing the key to a bright future is a perfect restoration of a beautiful past.

For years Robert Redford represented in many people’s eyes the epitome of Gatsby, and for some he doubtless remains so to this day. With an aura of refined elegance that is hard to match, he is Gatsby at his most mysterious and difficult to read: cool and calm in the face of heartache, he keeps his secrets to himself and gives little away. His delivery of the novel’s most famous line, “Can’t repeat the past? Why of course you can!”[[8]](#footnote-8) retains a higher degree of authenticity compared to 2013 version, in which the camera cuts to Nick between the two sentences, taking the focus off Gatsby. DiCaprio’s interpretation is generally more outgoing and open with his emotions, has a certain dashing charm and a recklessness which is in keeping with the overall mood of the film. An example of this is in the scene where Gatsby takes Nick out in his car and tells him about himself: while in the 1974 version the two men drive sedately down Gatsby’s driveway, the 2013 adaptation involves much swerving, beeping of horns and even a minor car accident as a result of Gatsby’s careless driving.

The way in which Gatsby is introduced remains much the same in both films to begin with: we hear the same stories and rumours, Nick glimpses him but can make out little more than an obscure figure from his observations, and Nick and Myrtle’s sister Catherine have the same conversation word-for-word. However, Nick’s first meeting with the man himself comes about in very different ways. In the 1974 adaptation, Nick is sent for by Gatsby who wants to get to know his new neighbour, the message being brought by one of his butlers. This gives Gatsby an air of authority before we even meet him, although our expectations of a striking, imposing man are mildly disappointed as the silences between the two men stretch on and the encounter ends on a feeble note. Gatsby is given a far more genial introduction in the 2013 version, as Nick comically engages him in conversation with him before he realises his identity, and is suitably embarrassed when he becomes aware that he has been conversing with his host. This is done using a sequence of shots which do not show DiCaprio’s face, meaning that the audience are similarly kept in the dark until the last moment, to great effect. The theatrical build-up is echoed in the shots that follow, as fireworks are set off behind Gatsby while Nick stares on in astonishment. This approach is almost identical to the novel, one of the only occasions when the more recent version is closer to the original text than Clayton’s adaptation.

A distinctly unlikeable character, Nick’s cousin Daisy Buchanan is extremely beautiful and extremely rich. A product of a much older American system, Daisy fell in love with Gatsby when she was a young debutante in Louisville, before he left to fight in the war. She promised to wait for him but in 1919 chose instead to marry Tom Buchanan, a respectable young man from an aristocratic family who could promise her a wealthy lifestyle and a secure future.

Daisy is Gatsby’s objective correlative and forms the object of his American Dream – she represents the charm, wealth, sophistication, and aristocracy that he longed for in his youth and that first attracted him to her. In reality, however, Daisy falls far short of Gatsby’s ideals: she is beautiful and charming, but also shallow and fickle, and dissolves into tears at the sight of his “beautiful shirts”[[9]](#footnote-9) when Gatsby invites her and Nick to his house. Furthermore, when Myrtle Wilson dies as a result of Daisy’s irresponsible driving, she allows Gatsby to take the blame, before moving away without attending his funeral.

In Fitzgerald’s conception of America in the 1920s, Daisy represents the amoral values of the fantastically rich. It is her sense of entitlement, her limited empathy and her inability to make difficult choices which render her unsympathetic to the reader, primarily because it is these very traits which make us unlikeable: in this way Daisy is a reflection of most of humanity. She is capable of affection, as we see from her relationships with both Tom and Gatsby and her cousinly fondness for Nick, but not of loyalty or true care. She breaks her promise to wait for Gatsby for purely selfish reasons, and betrays her marriage when she starts up an affair with him after their reunion. She is indifferent even to her own daughter, treating her as an afterthought when she is introduced in chapter seven of the novel.

The two adaptations portray two very different sides to Daisy. Clayton’s Daisy is girlish, vague and giggly, emphasising the fickleness and flighty temperament of her character. She is dazzled by the celebrities at Gatsby’s party, and often overly concerned with outward beauty and clothes, lamenting the “hundred pairs of golden and silver slippers”[[10]](#footnote-10) she wore out during her season as a debutante in Louisville and wanting to show off her daughter to her entourage. In the 2013 version, Carey Mulligan retains an aura of impossible sophistication and grace, highlighted by flawless beauty. She carries at once a suggestion of innocence, but also of a melancholy worldliness acquired through life’s trials and disappointments. Luhrmann’s interpretation of Daisy goes above and beyond the authenticity which characterises her character in the 1974 adaptation, and hints at a more complex character beneath. The question is whether or not this is necessary for the rather idealised role she plays in Gatsby’s American Dream, and whether Luhrmann is taking character development to another level by attributing inessential meaning. Despite a somewhat dubious American accent, Mulligan triumphs in her delivery of one of the novel’s most famous lines: “Gatsby? What Gatsby?”[[11]](#footnote-11)

Hailing from an old affluent family, Tom Buchanan is Daisy’s immensely wealthy husband, whom Nick knows from college. Tom is an arrogant, hypocritical bully who wreaks continual havoc by abusing – physically or emotionally – Daisy, Myrtle, George Wilson, and Gatsby throughout the novel. His social attitudes are charged with racism and sexism, and he does not live up to the moral standards he demands from those around him: he has no qualms about his own extramarital affair with Myrtle, but becomes outraged when he begins to suspect Gatsby of being in love with Daisy. With little purpose in the novel except to provide Daisy with a moral duty in her romantic dilemma, Tom remains a rather two-dimensional character.

While Bruce Dern certainly captures Tom’s upper-class prestige and rapport with a wealthy sector of society in the 1974 adaptation, Joel Edgerton brings a certain base vitality to the role, which fits with his aggressive attitude and Daisy’s constant remarks that she has married “a brute of a man”[[12]](#footnote-12). However, the excessive ruthlessness and immorality with which Edgerton portrays Tom makes him almost verge on a pantomime villain, rendering him less real and believable as a character.

Jordan Baker is a friend of Daisy’s, with whom Nick becomes romantically involved during the course of the novel. A competitive sportswoman, Jordan represents one of the ‘new women’ of the 1920s with her brazen cynicism and self-centred outlook. Like Daisy, Jordan is beautiful, but she is equally unprincipled, as she cheated in order to win her first golf tournament and maintains an aura of deception throughout the novel. Nick eventually ends his liaison with Jordan after he becomes disillusioned as to the moral emptiness of her social class.

Bold, brazen and alluring, Luhrmann’s Jordan embodies the typical flapper figure of the twenties who danced provocatively, smoked and openly drank alcohol – a defiant act during the American Prohibition. Nick is intrigued by her vivacity and they apparently strike up an affair. However, there are very few romantic scenes between them, and Jordan remains more of a metaphor for life on the East coast than a real character, shown in Nick’s abrupt claim that he has “had enough”[[13]](#footnote-13) of all of them, along with the lifestyle Jordan represents. In the 1974 version, however, she is far more involved in the plot, and is introduced as Daisy’s second cousin once removed rather than her friend. Although her dry cynicism remains much the same as the later adaptation, she is milder and more demure, lacking the seductiveness that draws Nick to her in the first place.

One of *The Great Gatsby*’s singularities is the inherent antipathy the reader feels towards most of the characters in the novel. Nick is passive and naïve; Daisy is aggressively vapid and indecisive; Tom is unfaithful to Daisy with a violent streak; Jordan is immoral and “incurably dishonest”[[14]](#footnote-14); and Gatsby himself is deluded by his desire to recreate the golden days of his youth.

*The Great Gatsby* examines and critiques Gatsby’s particular vision of the 1920’s American Dream, and by extension the myth of the Dream as a whole. The term essentially refers to the belief that the USA represents an ideal society where everyone down to the poorest class has the potential to succeed through hard work and ultimately live a happy and successful life. Gatsby manages to achieve this dream, by inventing a whole new persona for himself and succeeding both financially and societally in his rise from a poverty-stricken farm boy to a wealthy millionaire. Although his undeserved murder at the hands of a despondent George Wilson evokes sympathy, the true tragedy lies in the destruction of an idealist and firm believer in the American Dream.

In spite of his success career-wise, Gatsby’s primary ideological flaw becomes evident as he makes Daisy Buchanan the sole focus of his belief in “the orgastic future”[[15]](#footnote-15). His previously varied aspirations – which we see in the notebook Gatsby’s father shows Nick detailing his son’s resolutions to improve himself – are sacrificed for Gatsby’s single-minded obsession with the green light at the end of Daisy’s dock. For the first time in his successful career, Gatsby aspires to obtain that which is unattainable, and as the novel progresses he seems to realise that he has created an unrealistic ideal for Daisy to live up to, and that his idea and pursuit of her is more rewarding than the actual attainment.

*The Great Gatsby* is a highly symbolic meditation on 1920s America as a whole, in particular the disintegration of the American Dream in an era of prosperity. Fitzgerald portrays the 1920s as an era of decayed social and moral values, steeped in reckless jubilance and resulting ultimately in the corruption of the American Dream.

Fitzgerald centres his social insight on privileged young people between the ages of twenty and thirty, providing a vision of the “youth and mystery that wealth imprisons and preserves”[[16]](#footnote-16). Throughout the novel, Nick finds himself surrounded by lavish mansions, fancy cars, and an abundance of money and material possessions which reflect the economic prosperity of the time. A drawback to the seemingly limitless excess, however, is the throwaway mentality extending past material goods which Nick sees in the Buchanans. He explains, “They were careless people, Tom and Daisy – they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made”[[17]](#footnote-17). To live without a care in the world is supposed to be a dream, but Fitzgerald shows us the horror of this care-free life, how Tom and Daisy’s inability to care is in some ways more monstrous than outright cruelty would be. The Buchanans represent the upper classes, and in portraying their artificiality and insouciance Fitzgerald opens a window in the golden lustre of the Jazz Age to reveal the moral emptiness and hypocrisy underneath.

Fitzgerald uses a number of symbols to represent abstract ideas or concepts. Located at the end of the Buchanans’ dock in East Egg, and visible from Gatsby’s mansion in across the bay in West Egg, the green light represents Gatsby’s hopes and dreams for the future. Gatsby associates it with Daisy, and because Gatsby’s quest for Daisy is broadly associated with the American Dream, the green light also symbolises that more generalised ideal. After Daisy and Gatsby’s successful reunion, a mist conceals the green light, symbolising its loss of significance for Gatsby. Nick observes that “it was again a green light on a dock”[[18]](#footnote-18) and remarks that Gatsby’s “count of enchanted objects had diminished by one”[[19]](#footnote-19). This image suggests that he realises he must face the reality of Daisy, rather than the ideal he built up of her during their years apart. Both adaptations use the symbol of the green light in a similar way, and at the corresponding moments to the novel.

A mid-way stopping point between West Egg and New York City, the valley of ashes consists of a long stretch of desolate land created by the dumping of industrial waste. It represents the moral and social decay that results from the pursuit of wealth, as the rich live extravagant, indulging lives with regard for little but their own pleasure. The valley of ashes also symbolizes the plight of the poor, like George Wilson, who live among the dirty ashes. Nick describes the area as “a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens; where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke”[[20]](#footnote-20). It is in the valley of the ashes where Tom’s mistress lives, where Daisy kills Myrtle with Gatsby's car, and where George Wilson decides to murder Gatsby.

Another noteworthy symbol in *The Great Gatsby*, the eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg are a pair of fading eyes painted on an old advertising billboard over the valley of ashes, described in the novel as “blue and gigantic – their retinas one yard high”[[21]](#footnote-21) and wearing a pair of “enormous yellow spectacles”[[22]](#footnote-22). In his narrative, Nick refers to them at points in the story when the characters are acting amorally, and correspondingly both films frequently cut to shots of the eyes looming over the valley of ashes. The implication is that they represent God staring down upon and judging American society as a moral wasteland, although the novel never makes this point explicitly. Throughout the novel, Fitzgerald suggests that symbols only have meaning because characters instil them with this meaning. Just as the connection between the eyes of T. J. Eckleburg and God exists only in George Wilson’s grief-stricken mind when he assures Nick that “God sees everything”[[23]](#footnote-23) while staring into the eyes after Myrtle’s death, the green light is only significant when Gatsby associates it with Daisy and all he has to gain. With this lack of concrete significance, the eyes of T. J. Eckleburg also come to represent the hollowness of the world and the unpredictability of the mental process by which people invest objects with meaning.

Throughout the novel, the colours gold and yellow recur frequently and are used to develop a number of themes. When Gatsby and Daisy reunite, they are surrounded by gold and yellow objects: Gatsby’s tie is “gold-coloured”[[24]](#footnote-24); the brass buttons on Daisy’s dress gleam in the sunlight; in the 2013 film adaptation the flowers Gatsby has delivered to Nick’s house are yellow; tea consists of twelve lemon cakes; while walking through Gatsby’s gardens, Nick smells “the pale gold odour of kiss-me-at-the-gate”[[25]](#footnote-25); and when Gatsby shows them around his house Nick notices a “toilet set of pure dull gold”[[26]](#footnote-26) on his dresser. Here the colour symbols of yellow and gold are another of Gatsby’s “enchanted objects”[[27]](#footnote-27), representing wealth, success and a certain vulgar manifestation of it. However, yellow is also the colour of death: Myrtle Wilson’s house is made out of yellow brick, the eyes of T. J. Eckleburg – which stare over the novel’s landscape of decay – are ringed in yellow glasses, and Gatsby’s car which Daisy is driving when Myrtle is killed is yellow. Gold and yellow conflate wealth and beauty, but Fitzgerald uses the colours to decouple the ideas of wealth and greatness, instead associating richness with corruption, amorality and finally death.

Being based on the same novel, the two films are largely similar in terms of the story and script, and despite Luhrmann’s various modifications, the 2013 version was criticised for being too similar to Clayton’s 1974 adaptation. However, there are a few major differences in the plot and in the director’s take on the novel which set them decidedly apart.

In the 1974 version, there is a distinct focus on former times. In a departure from the novel, Gatsby’s idealistic desire to “repeat the past”[[28]](#footnote-28) comes to fruition when Daisy expresses a similar wish to go back to the days when they were first in love. He puts on the uniform he was wearing when they first met and they manage to recreate times past. Gatsby does not achieve this in the more recent adaptation, as following his reunion with Daisy the attention turns to their future together, and the necessity of her never having loved Tom.

In the 2013 version, this focus on Gatsby and Daisy means that the other characters suffer from a lack of development and consequence: Nick’s relationship with Jordan remains ambiguous and unexplained, while Wilson’s grief over Myrtle’s death is hardly touched on. Furthermore, Daisy’s daughter has a minimal part in the story, whereas in the 1974 adaptation as well as in the novel she plays a slightly larger role, serving as a physical reminder to Gatsby of Daisy and Tom’s marriage and the years they have spent building a life together. In the novel she appears once towards the end of the story, when her parents, Gatsby, Jordan and Nick are at the Buchanan house on the hottest day of the year. When she comes in with her nanny, Daisy flaunts her and asks if she likes her friends, calling her “absolute little dream”[[29]](#footnote-29). While Pammy does not appear until the end of the film in the 2013 adaptation, in the 1974 version she is in three separate scenes – albeit briefly – and is even given a couple of lines when she complains about the colour of her dress.

On the whole, Luhrmann’s interpretation of *The Great Gatsby* has been severely criticised for sacrificing authenticity and plot details for the sake of visual magnetism and audience appeal, in a classic case of style over substance. Indeed, there is an undeniable focus on the glamour and exuberance of the era, with the lavish parties and apparent lack of morals setting the scene for a portrayal of the decade’s seedier side. In sharp contrast, the earlier adaptation is understated, subtle, and decidedly slower paced. The parties are genteel and civilised, with perhaps a greater concern for authenticity and honouring the original novel, but missing the opulent flair which Fitzgerald relates.

Fitzgerald wrote *The Great Gatsby* unaware of the financial crash that was to come in 1929 and seems bound to the past, often having his characters reference the war and bygone glory days – but his novel nevertheless reads like prophecy. We can read his anticipation the end of this period of excess in Nick’s disillusionment as to the hollowness of the upper class and Gatsby’s frustration that Daisy does not live up to his romantic ideal, both of which symbolise the decline of the American Dream and the overall lavish extravagance of the decade. With the refinement of the 1974 adaptation’s take on the Jazz Age comes an innocence regarding the future, and it is perhaps here where the greatest difference between the two interpretations lies. Clayton portrays the refined glamour and glitz stemming from economic prosperity on the surface, while Luhrmann takes into account the inevitable economic depression to come and presents the decaying society underneath, in a more ominous angle to the ‘roaring twenties’. Though the characters in both adaptations are largely true to the novel, Luhrmann’s characters also show their darker sides, such as Daisy’s cold indifference, Tom’s brutish nature and Jordan’s reckless allure.

The era in which each film was made was undoubtedly one of the greatest influences on the director’s interpretation of the novel. The 1974 version is unmistakably a film from another era of cinema, and about another era, and distinctly seventies stylistic influences intermingle with the flavour of the twenties. Despite outwardly evoking the extravagance of the period, there is a modest air to the film, and Gatsby’s parties are far less extravagant in comparison to the 2013 adaptation. Here, Luhrmann portrays the debauchery and intemperance of the time, although perhaps to an exaggerated degree. Nevertheless, this will appeal to modern audiences, who have come to expect a spectacular visual experience through the evolution of modern cinema.

Luhrmann takes full advantage of modern editing and special effects including dramatic camera shots to produce a full-on production. For instance, there are several scenes in which the camera cuts rapidly between two angles, such as in Daisy and Gatsby’s mounting gaiety when he throws expensive shirt after expensive shirt at her while in his bedroom. There are also a number of dramatic, sweeping steadicam shots of Gatsby’s house and the surrounding area, which allow us to visualise the location with respect to Daisy’s house and New York City. The understated nature of the 1974 version is also reflected in the filming techniques, with use of subtle fade ins and outs, lengthy continuous shots before cutting to another angle, and lots of slightly shaky zooms.

There is also – to modern audiences at least – a noticeable lack of background music, in contrast to the 2013 adaptation which was severely criticised for using modern rap and hip-hop music and lacking authenticity. But featuring fitting titles such as “Love Is Blindness”, “Into the Past” and “Kill and Run” – which almost seem to tell the story of *The Great Gatsby* in themselves – the glittering line-up of hype-driven musicians suits the flashy opulence of Gatsby’s ‘nouveau riche’ lifestyle. Furthermore, Lana Del Rey’s song “Young and Beautiful” asks in its refrain a question which pertains very much to Gatsby and Daisy’s relationship: “Will you still love me/When I’m no longer young and beautiful?” As Gatsby idealises Daisy’s beauty and youth, it seems to suggest that this is all that he sees in her, and indeed Gatsby himself begins to doubt his love for her. In addition, Lana Del Rey often refers to the American Dream and “dark side” thereof in her own songs, and for this reason seems to befit Fitzgerald’s critique of the Dream. However, while some songs appeared to fit with the exuberance and brashness of the rest of the film, others fell short of the mark and merely contributed a pop video quality, bringing a modern feel to the film which matched perfectly with Luhrmann’s intended overall atmosphere, although arguably not with the original novel.

Despite the demoralising outlook on the decade which the 2013 adaptation presents, some notes of humour can nevertheless be found, such as in the excessive amount of flowers Gatsby has delivered to Nick’s house before Daisy arrives, and the awkwardness of their subsequent reunion. This begs the question of whether the 1974 version has an overly serious approach to the novel – it is remarkably true to the original text in terms of the script and the storyline, far more so than the 2013 version as it includes all the end scenes which Luhrmann omits. However, despite this diligent approach, the film and its actors have been criticised for delivering the lines with little emotion or feeling, as the concern seems to be all on getting the right lines in the right places.

After a great deal of analysis and examination of both versions of the film, the question remains: objectively, which adaptation is superior? In terms of trueness to the plot and script, it is hard to deny that the 1974 version remains the more authentic of the two, likely to appeal to a generation of traditionalists who consider faithfulness to the original novel to be of paramount importance. Luhrmann, on the other hand, ascribes a higher value to striking cinematography, and provides in his original take on *Gatsby* an unconventional interpretation of the novel. The matter of whether this attention to visual impression ruins the story is debatable, but it must be said that the plot is consistent on the whole, and the film retains the essence of Fitzgerald’s magnum opus.

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