An obsessive concern with ethnic differences has always been a part of American culture, but in some periods this concern has been more intense and explicit than in others. The 1920's, the time of the reborn Ku Klux Klan, immigration restriction legislation, and the pseudo-scientific racism of Madison Grant and Lothrop Stoddard was one of the periods when concern about ethnicity was most evident on the surface of national life. Though this intensified prejudice of the 1920's is not as well remembered by the general public of today as the flappers and the bootleggers, it was of equal importance in setting the actual tone of the decade.

The writer who is usually considered to have created the most penetrating literary accounts of the American 1920's is F. Scott Fitzgerald. If this estimate is correct, the characters of his fiction should manifest some concern about ethnic distinctions. The purpose of this essay is to demonstrate that in Fitzgerald's masterpiece of the 1920's, *The Great Gatsby*, a heightened awareness of ethnic differences does constitute a significant element in the book. This aspect of *The Great Gatsby* has been previously commented upon, but the tendency has primarily been to deal with the material of the book as evidence for charges that Fitzgerald possessed racist and anti-Semitic attitudes, or as evidence against such charges, rather than to explore the function in the novel of the consciousness of ethnicity.¹ By looking at the book in this way, a reading is engendered which differs from the conventional ones, and which helps to relate *The Great Gatsby* to the 1920's.
The bluntest proclamations in the novel of ethnic affiliation and ethnic rivalry are put forth by Tom Buchanan. Early in the story, Nick Carraway, visiting the Buchanans, is surprised to hear Tom suddenly spout off about the polarization of the world between super-ethnic groups, the superior white race and the inferior colored races. Tom, a man devoid of originality, has taken this rhetoric from a “fine book” he has recently read, Goddard’s "The Rise of the Colored Empires" (p. 16), a pseudonym for Lothrop Stoddard and his The Rising Tide of Color Against World White Supremacy. At this juncture, Tom’s use of invidious ethnicity is mainly speculative, a part of his haphazard search for something to fill the gap that results when at the age of thirty his sense of personal worth can no longer be sustained on the basis of his physical prowess (at Gatsby’s party, Tom objects to being introduced as “the polo player,” but can offer no alternative, only “oblivion,” p. 127). Later, during the climactic confrontation with Gatsby at the Plaza Hotel, Tom attempts to use invidious ethnicity as a weapon, a device to demean his rival. He begins the key exchange by attacking Gatsby on the basis of social class (“Mr. Nobody from Nowhere”), but it is not sufficient to express the depths of his distaste, and Tom quickly converts his assault into a racial one by associating Gatsby with miscegenation. “Nowadays people begin by sneering at family life and family institutions, and next thing they’ll throw everything overboard and have intermarriage between black and white.” This attempt to lower Gatsby in Daisy’s estimation by playing upon the venerable American fear of miscegenation is so patently misguided and irrelevant, though a good indicator of the panic in Tom’s mind, that even the aloof Jordan Baker feels compelled to demur, “We’re all white here” (pp. 155-56).

The attack on Gatsby is not the first time that Tom has given vent to far-fetched ethnic insults without having any great effect on his audience. In a dinner table discussion during Nick’s initial visit to the Buchanans, Tom rapidly identifies himself, Nick, and Jordan as Nordics, the superior branch of the white race, including his wife only “after an infinitesimal hesitation.” For Tom Buchanan, this is a rather subtle ploy, but Daisy is neither surprised nor hurt for she has learned to expect (and accept) such treatment. Her response is the same as it is to Tom’s illicit liaisons—mockery—in this case, a wink at Nick. A few moments earlier, she had countered Tom’s heated proclamations of world ethnic struggle with a satirical whisper and similar winking (p. 16). Nor does Nick approve of Tom’s indulgence in blatant chauvinism and prejudice. He refers to notions of an ethnic Armageddon as “stale ideas” and considers Tom’s miscegenation rhetoric to be “impassioned gibberish” (pp. 25, 156).

A refusal to indulge in Tom’s paranoid-like rantings does not mean that Daisy and Nick are unconcerned about ethnic differences. An awareness of these differences is especially evident in the case of Nick through whose eyes the action
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unfolds. As narrator, he tends to point out the ethnic affiliation of the individuals with whom he comes in contact whenever their ethnicity is not of an Old American type as is his own. In part, this persistent consciousness of ethnic identity functions as an adjunct of Nick's keen sense of socio-economic status. From his vantage point in the upper middle class, he is aware of the substantial gulf that separates him from the lower class and the lower middle class, and is doubly aware because the members of these classes that he encounters are often of a different ethnic descent. There is his Finnish servant who mutters to herself in her strange language, and whose home he seeks on one occasion amidst the "soggy, whitewashed alleys" of West Egg village (pp. 4, 101). In the dismal wastes of the Valley of the Ashes, Nick observes "a gray, scrawny Italian child" (p. 31). He introduces the owner of the coffee joint by the ash heaps as "the young Greek, Michaelis" (p. 163). Examining his memories, Nick finds that "the lost Swede towns" are a part of the Middle West with which he does not identify (p. 212).

Although the members of what Nick terms "the lower orders" are so frequently identifiable as being of an ethnicity different from that of Old Americans like himself, he sees too many exceptions to be able to consider them an exclusive caste. George B. Wilson, the proprietor of the garage in the Valley of the Ashes, is unsuccessful economically, a struggling lower middle class man, though blonde and blue eyed, and so thoroughly old stock that his very name brings to mind the previous president (a reference symbolizing in 1925 futility and defeat). At the other end of the spectrum, the few Negroes that appear in The Great Gatsby enjoy at least a surface affluence. A black trio is visible for an instant in the middle of the story when Gatsby's gaudy cream-colored car is passed on the Queensboro Bridge by a limousine with a white man as chauffeur and "three modish negroes" as passengers. The rareness of such a sight is not lost on Nick who reflects, "Anything can happen now that we've slid over this bridge, anything at all" (p. 83). Nevertheless, the only other Negro in the book, a man who offers some information at the scene of Myrtle Wilson's death, is not a penniless migrant from the South or a down-at-the-heels ghetto figure, but "a pale well-dressed negro" (p. 168, the favorable impression made on Nick by the fine haberdashery is undoubtedly enhanced in his white American mind by the lightness of skin color).

Ultimately, Nick's awareness of ethnicity is based not on associations with socio-economic status, but on a heightened consciousness of physical distinctions and mannerisms, overlaid by an unstated belief in the superiority of his own type. During the few hours of the drive into New York City with Gatsby and their noonday lunch at the Metropole, Nick applies common anatomical stereotypes to a group of Southeastern Europeans riding in a funeral procession ("tragic eyes and short upper lips"), finds the countenances of the parvenu black
“bucks” and their woman to be ludicrous (“I laughed aloud as the yolks of their eyeballs rolled toward us in haughty rivalry”), and scrutinizes the somatology and physiognomy of the Jewish Meyer Wolfsheim to whom he has just been introduced with magnifying glass detail: “small, flat-nosed . . . large head . . . two fine growths of hair which luxuriated in either nostril” (pp. 82-83). The discernment of the nasal hair is a remarkable feat since the restaurant is so dimly lit that Nick even has trouble in locating Wolfsheim's eyes. This fine nasal hair which could hardly have been observed in situ by Nick must have been projected onto Wolfsheim from some stereotype of Jewish physiognomy in the mind of the narrator (and, perhaps, the author).

As conveyed by Nick, the image of Meyer Wolfsheim is the most complex development of ethnicity in *The Great Gatsby*. Although another observer could conceivably fashion a picture of the man somewhat different from Nick’s by choosing to emphasize other characteristics, the Wolfsheim that Nick sees has a suggestion both of the exotic and of the sinister. The exotic aura emerges from Wolfsheim in a half dozen little ways which have been selected by Nick from a multitude of traits to form a description: the “tragic” and quivering nose, the accent (“gonnegtion”), the cuff-links made of the “finest specimens of human molars,” and the “Swastika Holding Company” with its “lovely Jewess” (pp. 85-88, 204). To the present day reader, the Jew’s cuff-links of tooth and his swastika trademark seem prophetic in a weird, inverted way and are more sinister in aura than exotic, a sensation the reader of 1925 would not have had. However, the latter would have grasped the sinisterness of Wolfsheim from his tale of the gangland assassination of his friend (and *landsman*) Rosy Rosenthal, and his rigging of the 1919 World Series, an accomplishment so menacing that upon learning of it, Nick is “staggered” (pp. 84-85, 88).

As disquieting as this may be, only as the details of Wolfsheim’s relationship with Jay Gatsby are revealed, does his full sinisterness become evident, as well as Gatsby’s complete story. The ethnicity of Gatsby is somewhat vague, though he is clearly not a *landsman* of Wolfsheim. His true name, Gatz, and the Lutheran faith of his father indicate that he is probably of German descent, with, very likely, at least one immigrant grandparent which would preclude his being considered of Old American lineage. In a curious way, however, Gatsby possesses no ethnicity of any sort, being a product of his own dreams and conceits—“his imagination had never really accepted them as his parents at all. The truth was that Jay Gatsby . . . sprang from the Platonic conception of himself” (p. 118). In contrast to Wolfsheim, the traces, if any, left by his ethnic origins are so insubstantial that Nick on their first meeting “would have accepted without question the information that Gatsby sprang from the swamps of Louisiana or from the Lower East side of New York” (p. 60). No one in the throngs at Gatsby’s parties seems to know the answers to Nick’s pressing questions: “Who is he? . . . Where is he from? . . . And what does he do?” (p. 59).
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Some of the answers to these questions can be discovered in Gatsby’s relationship with Wolfsheim for in his association with the Jew can be found one side of Gatsby’s identity. In the contemptuous words of Tom Buchanan, who has asked rhetorically the perpetual question of the parties, “Who are you, anyhow?”, Gatsby is part of “the bunch that hangs around with Meyer Wolfsheim” (p. 160) — one of the several possible interpretations of Gatsby’s identity, though to Tom the only one. Even such partial accuracy is unusual for Tom, but, surprisingly, he has understated his case. For Gatsby, Wolfsheim is much more than a crony. Wolfsheim is the man behind the Gatsby of the grand house and the expensive shirts. “Did you start him in business,” Nick asks Wolfsheim. “Start him! I made him . . . I raised him up out of nothing” (p. 206). In doing so, Wolfsheim has shrewdly utilized respected American traditions and institutions for his own corrupt devices, an exotic man piloting a semi-protean man through mainstream America in a most sinister fashion.

For a starter, Wolfsheim cashes in on Gatsby’s short stay at Oxford, playing on an old element in American culture which fosters an attitude of excessive deference towards the elite establishments of England. “When he told me he was an Oggsford I knew I could use him good” (p. 206). Indeed, Gatsby is never as adept at the Oxford ploy as his counselor in crime, despite the advantage of not having a Jewish accent; Gatsby “hurried the phrase ‘educated at Oxford,’ ” Nick reports, “or swallowed it, or choked on it, as though it had bothered him before” (p. 78). Wolfsheim supplements the “Oggsford” background by having Gatsby join the American Legion — an institution intensely old stock American in these years — “and he used to stand high there” (p. 206). With the aid of Wolfsheim, Gatsby makes big money circumventing Prohibition by selling grain alcohol at drug stores, which are another peculiarly American institution. And, as Nick wonders, perhaps Gatsby even had a part in Wolfsheim’s rigging of the 1919 World Series, uniquely American (“the national pastime”) despite its name, helping to tamper with the faith of fifty million of his countrymen (pp. 88, 206).

Looking back on the relationship, after Gatsby’s death, Wolfsheim explains to Nick, “We were so thick like that in everything — always together” (p. 206). Once before, Gatsby had maintained a relationship of this sort with a man around fifty. That was Dan Cody (“he used to be my best friend,” Gatsby tells Nick, p. 113), on whose yacht the young Gatsby was employed “in a vague personal capacity” for five years. Both Cody and Wolfsheim were instrumental in Gatsby’s ascent, but there the resemblance ends. Unlike Meyer Wolfsheim with his exotic traits Dan Cody was the very embodiment of Americana. He was “a product of the Nevada silver fields, of the Yukon, of every rush for metal since seventy-five. . . . The pioneer debauchee, who during one phase of American life brought back to the Eastern seaboard the savage violence of the
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frontier brothel and saloon” (pp. 120-121). As would be expected of a man who could lead this type of existence, Cody was “physically robust,” though “on the verge of soft-mindedness” (p. 120). In contrast, Wolfsheim is physically small and soft (he has “bulbous fingers,” p. 206), but of superior quality mentally, “a smart man,” as Gatsby says (p. 89). In 1912, Cody left his prot6ge twenty-five thousand dollars, but Gatsby was cheated out of it; ten years later, Wolfsheim & Gatsby, Inc. do the swindling. The exotic Wolfsheim, not the hyper-American Cody, is the one who ultimately guides Gatsby’s destiny to its rendezvous with fortune, and corruption.

Despite the corruption, Gatsby’s dream remains inviolate, “incorruptible.” Far greater than Daisy, the apparent subject, the dream, according to Nick, can achieve its true consummation by binding itself to the elemental America, a union which in the Twentieth century is found, he has come to believe, only amidst the stable institutions of the Middle West (like Nick’s home city where “dwellings are still called through decades by a family’s name,” p. 212). This is hardly the heritage of James Gatz, a poor farm boy, yet had he been able to keep Cody’s bequest and to win the hand of the young Daisy (a causally connected sequence), Gatsby might have erected a reasonable facsimile of the settled and secure Middle Western existence that constitutes Nick’s past, though whether he could have been happy in such a life is open to doubt. Instead, Gatsby had ended up living in the rootless East and allying with a man of exotic ethnicity who uses indigenous American institutions for illegal purposes. In Nick’s eyes, Gatsby has pursued the American dream in the wrong direction and so has lost it “somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night” (p. 218).

What Gatsby has in actuality left behind, however, is not the American dream, but Nick’s rather limited version of that dream. The last pages of the book reveal at least three different interpretations of the American dream. There is the original version, the one forced upon the Dutch sailors as they gazed in enchanted wonder at the long, virginal island, “fresh, green breast of the new world,” a version now “unknown,” lost forever with the settlement and exploitation of the continent (“Its vanished trees . . . had made way for Gatsby’s house,” pp. 217-18). There is Gatsby’s interpretation of the dream as a romantic fairy tale in which a glamorous hero gains an inexpressible spiritual fulfillment through the winning of golden riches and a golden girl. And there is Nick’s version of the American dream which reduces the universal overtones of the original version (“greatest of all human dreams . . . man must have held his breath,” p. 217), and the individualistic grandeur of Gatsby’s interpretation to a Middle Western kind of community and stability. Recalling his “thrilling” train trips home from prep school and college to a Middle West of bracing cold outside the dwellings and heartening warmth inside, “street lamps and sleigh bells in the frosty dark and the shadows of holly wreaths thrown by lighted windows on the snow,” Nick speaks of how he and his companions were “un-
utterably aware of our identity with this country for one strange hour” (pp. 211-12). Whereas the Dutch version of the American dream was available to any human who happened to come along at that moment in history, and Gatsby's version can be aspired to by anyone with the requisite imaginative potency, Nick's version is exclusive and provincial. It is basically limited to affluent Middle Western Americans who are white Anglo-Saxon Protestant, or willing and able to be acculturated to WASP modes. This is what Jay Gatsby has left behind “in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night.”

Though no proponent of the views of fervent ethnic baiters such as Tom Buchanan, Nick is presenting an ethnocentric interpretation of the American dream, excluding from it a whole section of the nation, the East, as well as those with intense ethnicity of a different sort than his own, such as unreconstructed Swedes and the Jewish Meyer Wolfsheim. For all his superior intellect and sensibility, Nick's point of view is not so very different from that held by the likes of a George F. Babbitt (“New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia . . .,” Babbitt exclaims, “No decent white man, nobody who loves his wife and kiddies and God's good out-o'-doors and likes to shake the hand of his neighbor in greeting, would want to live in them. . . . New York is cursed with unnumbered foreigners”). These biases were shared by millions of Americans in the 1920's, representing another way, in addition to those often noted, in which *The Great Gatsby* is a superb document of that complex decade.

What remains to be considered is the extent to which Fitzgerald knowingly put attitudes about ethnicity into *The Great Gatsby*, and the extent to which he shared these attitudes, though neither question can be answered definitively. Clearly, such elements of the book as Tom Buchanan's blatant racism and Nick's description of the features and mannerisms of Meyer Wolfsheim were deliberately constructed by Fitzgerald. The author, however, may not have been fully aware of how much Nick's description of Wolfsheim tells about the narrator himself, nor of how many ethnocentric implications there are in Nick's version of the American dream.

Turning from Fitzgerald the artist to Fitzgerald the man, the problem becomes still more difficult. The attitudes of Nick Carraway as the narrator are, at times, projections of Fitzgerald's own views, but, then again, so are those of Jay Gatsby. Moreover, even though Fitzgerald tended to put a larger part of himself into his books than do many novelists, he always remained a more complex person than the beings he created, and his attitudes cannot simply be reduced to those held by his fictional characters.
Evidence from other sources than *The Great Gatsby* indicates that Fitzgerald possessed at least the usual amount of ethnic prejudice for a white American of his era. Fitzgerald had known something of occasional discrimination and marginality himself ("Half black Irish and half old American stock.... I spent my youth in alternately crawling in front of the kitchen maids and insulting the great"), but the victim of prejudice is not necessarily purged of his own prejudices. Although he claimed that he had very little ethnic bias, Fitzgerald was capable of writing Edmund Wilson, his "intellectual conscience," a letter so strongly biased and chauvinistic that it could have come from Tom Buchanan.

God damn the continent of Europe.... The negroid streak creeps northward to defile the Nordic race. Already the Italians have the souls of blackamoors. Raise the bars of immigration and permit only Scandinavians, Teutons, Anglo-Saxons and Celts to enter.... My reactions were all philistine, anti-Socialistic, provincial and racially snobbish. I believe at last in the white man's burden. We are as far above the modern Frenchman as he is above the Negro.

As for Jews, Fitzgerald admired and befriended some, but could, nevertheless, view them in terms of stereotypes.

That Fitzgerald possessed such notions is not surprising. These attitudes were, after all, the ones held by the majority among the Midwesterners of his boyhood, classmates at pre-war Princeton, and fellow-countrymen in the highly prejudiced 1920's.

Whatever Fitzgerald's motives for making the matter of ethnicity a significant part of *The Great Gatsby*, and whatever his degree of deliberateness in doing so, the book is all the better for it. Tom's rabid racism, Nick's biased eyes and ethnocentric views, and the incidentally glimpsed prejudices of other characters ("I almost married a little kyke," bewails Mrs. McKee, p. 41), make them all the truer portrayals of Americans of 1922. Fitzgerald is a finer author for having created such an effect, although a still greater author might have challenged not only the rabid Tom Buchanan type of ethnic chauvinism and prejudice, but the subtle Nick Carraway type as well, and thereby achieved an even more incisive critique of the pernicious passions of the times.

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2Citations are to the first edition of The Great Gatsby (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925).

3Some critics place Wilson in the lower class, but as a proprietor, even of a modest and struggling enterprise, he should be considered middle class, but lower middle class.

4The name was spelled "Wolfshiem" in the first edition. I am using the corrected spelling of later editions as being more familiar, as well as more likely.

5Fitzgerald's interest in physical stereotypes of Jews, and other ethnic groups, is evident in a passage in his note-books: "Jews lose clarity. They get to look like old melted candles, as if their bodies were preparing to waddle. Irish get slovenly and dirty. Anglo-Saxons get frayed and worn" (The Crack-Up, ed. Edmund Wilson [New York: New Directions Books, 1945], p. 151). A photograph of Arnold Rothstein, the Jewish gambler who was the model for Wolfsheim, and whom Fitzgerald had once met, shows no trace of conspicuous nasal hair (Leo Katcher, The Big Bankroll; The Life and Times of Arnold Rothstein [New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959], opposite p. 16).

6A similar possibility had occurred in Fitzgerald's own life, with a similar afterthought. In 1940, he wrote his daughter, "If I had been promoted when I was an advertising man, given enough money to marry your mother in 1920, my life might have been altogether different. I'm not sure though. People often struggle through to what they are in spite of any detours — and possibly I might have been a writer sooner or later anyhow" (The Letters of F. Scott Fitzgerald, ed. Andrew Turnbull [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963], p. 91).


8I do not mean to imply that Nick cherishes any illusions about being able to recover the thrilling visions of his youth in their entirety when he decides to return to the Midwest at the end of the book. A wider experience has revealed to him the defects of "the bored, sprawling, swollen towns beyond the Ohio, with their interminable inquisitions" (p. 212), so that the Midwest can never again appear to him to be "the warm centre of the world" (p. 3). Nevertheless, Nick hopes to be able to recapture at least a small portion of the Midwest he knew in his youth: "That's my Middle West... I am part of that" (p. 212). In returning to the Midwest, he has not merely fled the East, but has "come back home" (p. 213).

To John O'Hara, July 18, 1933, *Letters*, p. 503.

*The Crack-Up*, p. 73.


To Edmund Wilson, May, 1921, *Letters*, p. 326. This letter has received surprisingly little comment in the abundant critical literature on Fitzgerald.


The spelling was changed to "kike" in later editions.