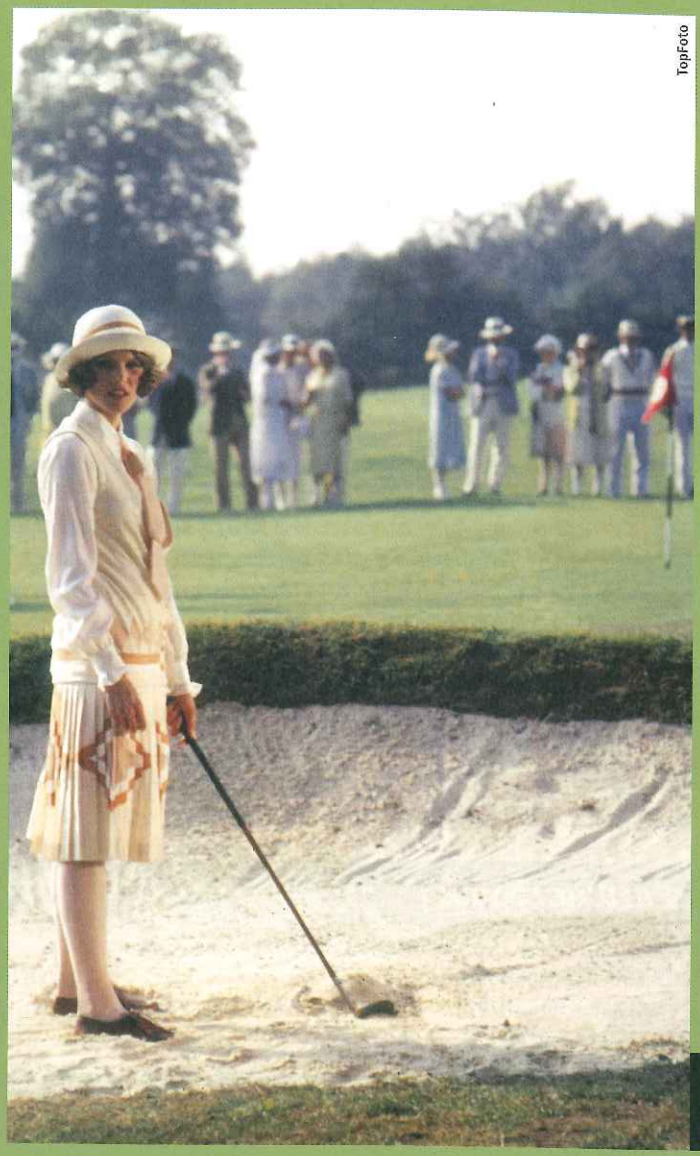
'What happened

and other questions in *The Great Gatsby*

Mike Haldenby considers some unasked, and often unanswered, questions in F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel


TopFoto

Lois Chiles as Jordan Baker in *The Great Gatsby* (1974)

As we read *The Great Gatsby*, we eventually suspect that Fitzgerald's word-puzzle is, ultimately, best explained by acknowledging the pervasive energies of modernism, with all its inherent ambiguities. We delight in the unravelling, not the solution itself. We are presented with a multilayered, complex, Russian doll of a novel. Yet as the layers are peeled away, the central characters and the world in which they live are exposed, and displayed as superficial and empty.

There are so many tantalising questions that lie unanswered. Some must remain so — for example, would Tom *ever* have sold Wilson a car? Who was Owl-eyes? Whose teeth are on Wolfshiem's cuffs? What *was* that 'fragment of lost words' that Nick can't quite recall? And what did happen to that dog? But many others can be tackled with relish.

First, what was Gatsby really like? Nick's gloss, presenting him as a 'gorgeous' dreamer in a pink suit, stretches the imagination a bit too much. Tom Buchanan's barbed moniker, 'Mr Nobody from Nowhere', is paradoxically both over-simple and a little too existential to be taken seriously. Nick finds him 'sinister', and the fact that Gatsby takes his Montenegro medal and Oxford photo on the trip to New York, just to convince Nick to trust him, hints that he might have deeper, darker intentions. Perhaps the simple idea of an earnestly parvenu 'roughneck' with a winning smile, a potential gentile patsy for Wolfshiem, is more fitting — somehow, luckily, keeping a step or two ahead of the law. Maybe he simply doesn't know his geography. But at the denouement, we're disappointed with his death and unmasking; what's 'Great' about *The Great Gatsby* is the puzzle, not the solution. Just like his childish dream of reliving the past, when it arrives — when it's re-solved — it's a let-down.

So is that it? The notion that, inherent in all dreaming lies ultimate disappointment? Is this the conundrum that it's so much fun to grapple with?

to the dog?'

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I suggest not. The real joy comes in engaging with all those *other* little issues that shout out to be clarified.

Golf cheat?

For a start, did Jordan cheat at golf? We like to think so. She's far less appealing as an honest woman. In fact, she's incorrigible; she won't even tell her best friend what everyone else knows. Leaving the roof open on the car in the rain was bad enough, but pretending to like Nick to keep in with the Buchanans is beyond the pale — she too, remember, is a dangerous driver. And then, after the fatal crash, she wants to stay over at East Egg. Why? To be nosy. Nick rightly refuses the invitation to join her, not from any sense of propriety, but because, admiring Gatsby in his pink suit, he realises, in a rare moment of self-awareness, he doesn't belong — being both 'within and without', he's mostly 'without'.

Baseball cheat?

Was Gatsby involved in fixing the 1919 World Series? It's likely; Fitzgerald has been uncannily precise with the timings of his return from Europe, and Gatsby's hiring by Wolfshiem is a little too coincidental. His Oxford stint would have taken him to the late spring of 1919; the baseball scam was in September. It's fraud on a huge scale, a curtain raiser for the criminal excesses of prohibition and Wall Street, and a perfect modernist setting for Gatsby's relentless rise.

Tom's record

Another unanswered riddle is Tom's war record, or lack of it. Nick and Gatsby swell with an understated and quietly shared pride when discussing grey little French villages, but Tom is strangely silent; the only cavalry charges he takes part in are on the polo field. Clearly he chickened out of the war, sneakily stealing Daisy in the process. This hulking brute is therefore a shrinking violet. But why doesn't Fitzgerald explore this fruitful area a bit more? Maybe in some earlier version he did.

Racism

And what of Tom's racism, or 'Nordicism', as it may have been known at the time? Does this indicate some dubious attitudes towards ethnicity on Fitzgerald's part? Daisy mocks her husband's enthusiasm for a racist text, and Nick's use of the adjective 'pathetic' when describing him suggests that Fitzgerald, in giving such views to an unsympathetic character, could not be racist. When Tom attacks interracial marriage, Nick describes his views as 'impassioned gibberish'. Tom exploits everyone, including minorities; racism is clearly the voice of a fool.

Volume One of 'The Stoddard Lectures' (an oblique reference to the real author of Tom's 'Nordic' text), found by Owl-eyes in Gatsby's library, is 'real ' enough. Yet it lies ignored and unread, only of value when it's stuck away on the shelf, gathering dust, the spine alone exposed. The library, like the façade that Gatsby's image represents, might collapse if the contents are examined too closely.

Furthermore, does the mention of the three chauffeured 'modish negroes' on Blackwell's Island represent a positive acknowledgement that northern, urban social mores are on the move in 1922, or does Nick's sense of 'haughty rivalry' suggest future racial tension? Does the juxtaposition of these African-Americans, the 'south-eastern Europeans' and the 'dead man' in the hearse represent Fitzgerald's view of the future? 'Anything can happen…' Even for the times, his stereotype of Wolfshiem is particularly anti-Semitic. Part werewolf, part cartoon character, his existence in the novel serves to exacerbate our unease with the author's intentions.

Wilson's poverty

And then, it seems amazing that Wilson is so poor. He's surrounded by rich folk with cars and, apparently, has cornered the market with his garage. While Nick suggests that there are other 'wayside garages' with 'red petrol-pumps', Wilson has the prime location at the junction of the Eggs, by which all the mobile rich must pass, and, seemingly, by which all must park if they catch the train to town. But this virtual monopoly offers such a poor return that Wilson seems almost bankrupt. His emotional destitution is strangely echoed by his more tangible financial hardship. Yet it seems unnecessary, almost too obvious, for Wilson to be an unshaven, 'anaemic', grubby loser, 'wiping his hands on a piece of waste'. Today he'd join forces with Michaelis to open a franchise of some sort to maximise the passing trade, and make a fortune.

Advertising hoarding

The much-aired debate over the meaning of the T. J. Eckleburg hoarding is strange, in that only Wilson takes much

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notice of it, and only then when he's crazy with grief. In this godless world, no one any longer worships this idol. No one other than Wilson, who's told he 'ought to have a church', is interested in the shabby sign, or what it represents. But this surely is the greatest metaphor of all — that advertising has very little effect, except upon the deranged. Nick's constant awareness of it as our narrator, then, seems to be the most forced of all Fitzgerald's first-person contrivances.

Accidents

Isn't it an unbelievable coincidence that Daisy should run down Myrtle? Why would Myrtle dash headlong into the path of Tom's car? She rushed outside, seemingly in a temper, a moment after telling her husband he was a 'dirty little coward'; she would have had to run across the forecourt and past the petrol pumps before she reached the road, yet still, implausibly, failed to notice the approaching yellow car, on a road with hardly any traffic or noise.

J. S. Westbrook argues in favour of 'ocular confusion', that 'Myrtle thinks that the yellow car is Tom's and runs out to stop it', but he is surely mistaken. It is impossible that she could have known what was on the road. Victor Doyno is more plausible when he calls the incident 'highly improbable plot manipulation'. Indeed, the whole episode, involving the two-car drive to New York with subsequent vehicle/driver switching, seems to be a major plot contrivance so that this 'accident' can happen. As Doyno explains, we've long been prepared for this crash. Jordan and Nick have discussed bad driving in depth, while Tom's earlier wheel-losing crash and Daisy's button-flicking episode created the dramatic irony. Myrtle's killing finally signifies the death of Gatsby's dream, but the relationship was dead way before the fateful crash.

Hair

Does Daisy have blonde or dark hair? Repeated white and gold imagery points to the former — as she states, she shares the 'yellowy' hair of her daughter. The 'dash of blue paint across her cheek' suggests otherwise, however, and her 'dark shining hair' is a prominent feature when she finally kisses Gatsby in Louisville. Blonde hair might signify 'purity and innocence', according to Joan Korenman, but for a feminist reader to ignore the silent screen iconography suggested by the blonde starlets who had to fight their way through Hollywood casting seems somewhat naïve and disingenuous. After all, Anita Loos's novel *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* was first published in 1925. The changing colour of Daisy's hair seems to be another ambiguous modernist device to draw us into Fitzgerald's web.

Homoeroticism

Then, what of Nick's homoerotic encounters with the photographer McKee? After a brief attraction to the 'young cadet' Jordan, and having spent his college days dealing with the 'intimate revelations' of many young men, he ends up in McKee's bedroom. How on earth did he get there? Why on earth is he there? He certainly wasn't forced. After the bizarre lever-touching lift episode, we are whisked into a boudoir where McKee sits with his 'great portfolio' in his hands. Does he need to be in bed, half naked, to show tipsy Nick his pride and joy? What has gone on? Nick's attraction to the 'mustache' of sweat on his mid-west girlfriend's top lip, and to Jordan's 'erect carriage', suggests that his hero-worship of the Gatsby myth at the end of the novel is more complex than it appears.

What about the dog?

After all these conundrums, the whereabouts of the dog, with its questionable lineage, seem not to matter. Gatsby himself is the greatest enigma of them all. Hating his poverty and shabbiness, he gladly reinvents himself as a cabin boy-cum-beneficiary, an Oxford-educated war hero and, finally, as a millionaire aristocrat, his self-loathing growing with his fortune. Daisy is not his dream; doesn't he simply want to go back to a time, epitomised by Daisy, when he was truly a 'Platonic version of himself', in control, with all the world before him, to 'recover something, some idea of himself, perhaps'? In any case, it was just personal.

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