Fitzgerald’s Lost City:
The Representation of New York City During the 1920s in *The Great Gatsby* and Its Film Adaptations

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“I love New York on summer afternoons when everyone’s away.

There’s something very sensuous about it — overripe,
as if all sorts of funny fruits were going to fall in your hands.”

F. SCOTT FITZGERALD, THE GREAT GATSBY
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1. Introduction

*The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald’s third, and perhaps most famous novel, is considered one of America’s most finest novels. It is the quintessential novel to represent the Jazz Age, as Fitzgerald himself named the period, and it contains national symbols and preoccupations such as the expression of the American dream and the Prohibition period. Furthermore, it also beautifully portrays New York City as the American city *par excellence*, a dazzling and growing metropolis that could offer its inhabitants all the entertainment they needed during the 1920s. It is the setting of *The Great Gatsby* — the summer of 1922 in New York — and the particular role of New York City that I would like to analyze in this thesis.

In the first part of this thesis I will discuss this particular period between World War I and the Great Depression, known as the Roaring Twenties or the Jazz Age. This period in American history is known for, on the one hand, its unbounded optimism and prosperity, and its disillusions and recklessness on the other. Furthermore, I will explore the changing images of New York City, through focusing on the architecture and the accompanying views of the city. To elucidate some of the feelings towards this American city, and to illustrate how the developing urbanization inspired both authors and artists to write about the city, I will discuss two literary representations: Walt Whitman’s poem “Mannahatta,” and Fitzgerald’s essay “My Lost City.” The former portrays New York City as a beautiful and dynamic city, resulting in Whitman’s strong emotions of pride and joy. The latter portrays Fitzgerald’s personal history with the city in the first place; how he first arrived there, and how his dreams about becoming a famous novelist became fulfilled. Second, Fitzgerald’s essay presents to us his thoughts and opinions about the particular changes in the city as a consequence of the Jazz Age.
In the second part of this thesis, I will examine how those aspects of the Jazz Age are illustrated in *The Great Gatsby*. First, I would like to argue that *The Great Gatsby* truly is “a picture of New York life,” as Fitzgerald himself labeled his story in *Life in Letters* (106). Given that the novel is situated on Long Island, New York, it is interesting to see how Fitzgerald used those geographical settings to convey a deeper and more symbolic message. For instance, West Egg and East Egg symbolize the social differences in American society: East Egg houses the families who have accumulated wealth in the past generations and who were born rich. West Egg represents the *nouveaux riches*; people who did not inherited their money but achieved their wealth in the course of the years. Considering this information, it does not surprise us that Fitzgerald lets Gatsby reside in West Egg, and the sophisticated, though careless Daisy in East Egg. New York City likewise plays a part in the novel, given that the novel’s narrator, Nick Carraway, occasionally shares with us his personal feelings towards the city.

It is also important to bear in mind Fitzgerald’s role in relation to the Jazz Age, and how his work *The Great Gatsby* is one of the most representative novels of that age. Moreover, by investigating those two aspects, we likewise obtain a good impression of the setting of New York City during the 1920s. Most critics tend to agree with the general perception of Fitzgerald as being the best American novelist to symbolize the period. For instance, John S. Whitley, argues that Fitzgerald gave the most enduring name to the 1920s in America and captured more vividly than any of his contemporary writers the mood and mores of these confused and confusing years (7). I would like to argue that Fitzgerald indeed truly understood the period, because he was an observer as well as a participant of the Jazz Age. He loved to attend the various parties, but he also criticized them as being too exuberant; often resembling “a children’s party taken over by the elders” (“Echoes” 258).
Fitzgerald discussed this matter in his essay “Echoes of the Jazz Age,” which will be discussed more in detail in this thesis.

Concerning *The Great Gatsby*, two particular aspects will be explained in relation to the Jazz Age: Gatsby’s parties and Gatsby’s dreams. His lavish parties arouse the atmosphere of the 1920s by being excessive and exuberant. In addition, they reveal Gatsby’s criminal activities as being a bootlegger, given that he provides his guests with illegal alcohol. Next, there is the expression of the American dream. The character that best represents the values of the American dream is Jay Gatsby himself, a self-made man who decisively followed the myth of upward mobility that brought him from rags to riches. His dream consists in repeating his past, and thus conquer the heart of his beloved Daisy. He organizes his famous parties only to impress her; to show that he now has enough money to do so. In other words, Gatsby is blinded by Daisy’s wealth and only wants to achieve the same status. Unfortunately, Gatsby will not be able to achieve his American dream — symbolized in the character of Daisy herself and the green light — and I will argue that the American dream became corrupted during the 1920s. The original ideals of freedom, equality and happiness will be replaced by new ideals of material gain and money.

In the third and final part of this thesis, I would like to compare and contrast three film adaptations of *The Great Gatsby*, the versions released in respectively 1974, 2000 and 2013. It is interesting to see how the directors handled Fitzgerald’s novel, and how this new medium adds more possibilities to the showing of the novel. I will briefly define the process of adaptations in general by concentrating on some of its basic features: adaptations have a repetitive character and always evoke a certain change towards the original work. In addition, there exist various forms of adaptations, but I will only focus on film adaptations.
It will be interesting to see how the directors managed to represent Fitzgerald’s novel; considering the time span between the three adaptations of almost forty years.
2. THE ROARING TWENTIES: A NEW ERA

2.1. Historical Overview

“It was an age of miracles, it was an age of art, it was an age of excess, and it was an age of satire”
— F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

Before I start analyzing the images of New York City and the overall setting in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, it is useful to provide a general historical overview of the social and cultural situation during the 1920s in the United States. This will be necessary in order to understand and situate the novel. However, it will obviously not be possible to give a full and detailed historical overview in this thesis; therefore I will limit myself only to those elements that I find of great importance for an understanding and interpretation of the novel: the Jazz Age, the American Dream, Prohibition and the Great Depression.

2.1.1. The Jazz Age

Between World War I and the Great Depression, the United States went through a prosperous time often called the Roaring Twenties, the Golden Twenties or the Jazz Age, the latter invented by F. Scott Fitzgerald himself. According to Justin Beach,

the 1920s were a time of great optimism [...] and great economic prosperity that went a long way in shaping American culture. Among other things, the [1920s] saw women get the vote, the rise of baseball, Hollywood, gangsters, the personal automobile, and jazz, and the rapid growth of America’s large cities (“Highlights of the Roaring Twenties”).

In other words, it was a time defined by great optimism and novelties. In those days Americans were also characterized as being rebellious and eager to change the mores.

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Especially certain young women, who were named “Flappers,” set themselves apart and challenged women’s traditional roles. They “shocked the older generation with their new hair style (a short bob) and the clothes that they wore were often much shorter than had been seen and tended to expose their legs and knees” (Trueman, “The Jazz Age”). According to Sarah Kirchheimer, “the Jazz Age created the flapper venue” (“The History of Flappers”). Men and women sought new ways to express themselves in a new era full of optimism and confidence. Movies, sports and mass media enabled everyone to become who they wanted to be.

The Jazz Age has been extremely important for the musical scene, “for during the ’twenties, jazz developed from an infrequent ‘hokum’ music in a few vaudeville acts to a household commodity” (Stearns 153). If we want to get to its roots, “jazz music can trace its origins as far back as the 1700s, when slaves sang ‘call-and-response’ songs while working in fields and ‘Negro spirituals’ in church” (Chiedozie, “History of Jazz”). It thus evolved “from African and African American folk music” (Norton et al., 641), and fused with every kind of European music in the city of New Orleans, which was known as the “musical melting pot par excellence” (Stearns 43).

Nevertheless, during the 1920s jazz music began to spread to other cities, generating “four distinct peaks of jazz intensity — New Orleans, Chicago, New York and Kansas City” (Stearns 154). Anjus Chiedozie explains that this happened due to migration: “[b]lack Americans were migrating to big Northern cities such as Chicago and New York for a better life, bringing their music along with them” (“History of Jazz”). In those Northern cities, jazz became extremely popular and the new music genre spread in many directions. According to Marshall W. Stearns in The Story of Jazz,
the channels through which jazz, near-jazz and non-jazz-called-jazz reached the public multiplied rapidly. The phonograph, the radio, and talking pictures came into their own. A world war, Prohibition, and the boom before the bust of the Depression shaped and hastened the process (153).

Jazz was everywhere, and it gave “African Americans a place in commercial culture” (Norton et al. 641). It was a way of expressing one’s feelings and desires; it was a way of communicating with one another.

Alongside the creation of jazz music, the 1920s also led to a boost of the movie and theatre industry. “With more free time and disposable income than Americans ever had before, the demand for leisure activities and entertainment boomed” (Beach, “Highlights of the Roaring Twenties”). Theatres on Broadway became more popular than they were ever before, “even with increased competition from Hollywood” (ibid.). As Mary Beth Norton et al. state in A People and a Nation,

[in total capital investment, motion pictures became one of the nation’s leading industries. In 1922, movies attracted 40 million viewers weekly; by 1929, nearly 100 million — at a time when the nation’s population was 120 million and total weekly church attendance was 60 million (638).

Various film studios, such as Warner Bros., Paramount and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, came into existence during this era and Americans embraced movie stars like Charlie Chaplin and Rudolph Valentino, “one of the decade’s most adored movie personalities whose image exploited the era’s sexual liberalism” (ibid. 639). All those movie stars could impersonate the desires and longings of the American people.

Clearly all those cultural shifts also gave rise to a new period in the history of American literature: American Modernism, represented by “authors like Robert Frost, T.S. Eliot, Ernest Hemingway and Wallace Stevens, the so-called ‘Lost Generation’ of American writers living in Paris during the twenties, or, on American soil, represented by William
Faulkner” (Sicker 2012). According to Norton et al., they left the US because they “felt disillusioned with the materialism they witnessed [...] during this age” (647). F. Scott Fitzgerald, who invented the term Jazz Age, also went to Paris to join this group of American writers who wanted to forget their disillusions by means of a certain idealism, alcohol, and sexual relationships. Fitzgerald was a literary celebrity, an icon and a symbol of America given that “he was a pleasure-seeker, who, however, additionally represented a deeper darkness and a sense of disillusion. Because behind the veil of every party there was an undercurrent of recklessness and despair” (Sicker 2012) — which is mirrored in his novel The Great Gatsby.

2.1.2. The American Dream: The Ideal

The idea of the American dream is something quintessential to American culture. Throughout history, the ideal went through a variety of names such as “the ‘American Creed,’ the ‘American Way of Life,’ or, simply, the ‘American Way’” (Cullen 55). For the US it became some sort of a national ethos that could take on diverse forms since everyone can have another interpretation of it. According to Jim Cullen,

> the term ‘American Dream’ has become a cliché most commonly invoked by real-estate agents and Hollywood screen-writers. The former use it in a tireless effort to sell home ownership, the most concrete version of the Dream. The latter use it to sell a vision of wealth, fame, and power all the more alluring for its seeming effortlessness (54).

This can be considered as one possible, modernized interpretation of the creed. Nonetheless, the very essence of the ideal can be seen as “a common underlying faith that is rarely articulated explicitly, and has never been formally codified, but it can be summed up in the following assertion: anything is possible if you want it badly enough” (Cullen 55, italics
added). Put differently, if you work hard and if you keep on believing in something, you can achieve it.

Probably one of the earliest formulations of the American dream goes back to John Winthrop, the puritan governor who led the first wave of English migrants from England. “He wrote and preached his ‘A Modell of Christian Charity’ on board the Arabella, the flagship of the great Puritan emigration to Massachusetts in 1630” (Lemay 13). In his speech, Winthrop declared his desire that America would become a certain “model” for other people, and even for the world: “For wee must Consider that wee shall be as a Citty upon a Hill” (Winthrop 23). Winthrop considered his dream to be a religious one, for “New England Puritans would be the model for other colonists and other Puritans. The New England Puritans would establish a religious way of life and lead the world into the millennium” (Lemay 13).

In time, the American dream evolved from having a religious character to a more political character, or to having a highly personal character. Because even up until today, the American dream still lives on in the hearts of the American people. For thousands of foreign immigrants who arrived at the New York Harbor during the 1880s, it meant that they shared the dream of building up a new and better life in comfort. For them, the appearance of the Statue of Liberty was the symbol of a new and better future, of a country that would provide new opportunities. According to Parisa Changizi and Parvin Ghasemi, it was no coincidence that inscribed on the tabula ansata of the Statue of Liberty is the date of Declaration of Independence, another basic ideology of America which gave way to the birth of the American dream (62). In this Declaration, Thomas Jefferson declared that all men are created equal, in other words, freedom, equality and opportunity for all are the characteristics which best summarize what America and the American dream have long
been considered to stand for (*ibid. 62*). In short, everyone can achieve something, no matter which ethnic or religious background you have, if you only work hard.

For ordinary American citizens, it is the hope to obtain a better economic situation. During the Jazz Age this was mostly the case, because “the decade’s freewheeling consumerism enabled ordinary Americans to emulate wealthier people purchasing more and engaging in stock market speculation” (*Norton et al. 645*). The Jazz Age allowed people to pursue their own happiness, even though it often became a pursuit of money. Put differently, the Jazz Age gave the American dream again another character. For the wealthier Americans it stands for gaining even more power and success. In general, every person who pursues this dream has one thing in common: they all want to improve their current situation by means of hard work and determination, believing that all men are equal and everyone deserves to have the opportunity to realize their dreams.

2.1.3. Prohibition: *The Long Thirst*

During the Jazz Age Americans took advantage of having more free time, and consumer culture flourished. *Norton et al.* comment that “[a]lthough poverty beset small farmers, workers in declining industries, and non-whites in inner cities, most other people enjoyed a high standard of living relative to previous generations” (620). Nevertheless, “[i]n 1919, the United States embarked on the country’s boldest attempt at moral and social reform: Prohibition” (*Lerner, no pag.*). According to *Norton et al.*, “the Eighteenth Amendment (1919) and subsequent federal law (the Volstead Act of 1920) prohibited the manufacture, sale, and transportation of alcoholic beverages” (640):

*Section 1* After one year from the ratification of this article the manufacture, sale, or transportation of intoxicating liquors within, the importation thereof into, or the
exportation thereof from the United States and all the territory subject to the jurisdiction thereof, for beverage purposes, is hereby prohibited (Ibid. A-13).

This will work well at first and it will not be until December 5, 1933 that it will be repealed with the Twenty-first Amendment. This made Prohibition the first and only amendment to the US Constitution ever annulled. During the first years of the amendment, “per capita consumption of liquor dropped, as did arrests for drunkenness” (Ibid. 640). The guiding principle for Prohibition implied that “the prohibition of alcohol and the elimination of the saloon would morally uplift the people of the United States, ultimately creating a healthier citizenry, safer cities and workplaces, and a more efficient society” (Lerner 2). However, this turned out to be nothing more than a hopeful illusion.

It was true that in 1928 President Herbert Hoover stated that Prohibition was “a great social and economic experiment, noble in motive and far reaching in purpose,” which led him to use “the noble experiment” as a nickname for Prohibition (Lerner 2). Still, Prohibition failed in most of the cities. As Michael A. Lerner states in Dry Manhattan: Prohibition in New York City,

[t]he Eighteenth Amendment had committed the United States to a seemingly impossible mission. Never before had the federal government attempted to regulate the private lives of adults to the degree that Prohibition did, and never before had the Constitution been used to limit, rather than protect, the personal liberties of individuals (2).

Consequently, it was no wonder that the American people wanted to resist the Eighteenth Amendment. In fact, anyone who wanted to drink alcohol, simply drank alcohol. Lerner confirms this: “[w]hether in the form of buying bootleg liquor, drinking in nightclubs, or supporting political efforts to undermine the reach of the dry law, Americans in many parts of the United States vigorously resisted Prohibition, their rebellion against the Eighteenth Amendment growing more pronounced as the years went by” (2). During Prohibition, illegal
bars, often called “speakeasies,” became extremely popular, as this was the place to be if you wanted to consume alcoholic beverages. Those speakeasies were provided with alcohol due to a circuit of so-called bootleggers, who manufactured illegal alcohol and made it ready to be transported over the country. “Moreover, drinking was a business with willing customers, and criminal organizations capitalized on public demand” (Norton et al. 640). Many people also distilled their own brandy, or made their own gin and wine. This contributed to a change of drinking patterns: bourbon and gin became more popular than ever, whereas beer lost a lot of its popularity.

As stated before, the resistance against the Prohibition amendment ran high especially in larger cities such as New York City, Detroit, Chicago and New Orleans. As the government considered Prohibition a “moral reform,” it is safe to say that “in no city was the failure of moral reform more evident than in Chicago” (Teaford 44). In this city, alcohol or prostitution did not disappear; “[i]nstead, gangster chieftains built illicit empires that supplied forbidden pleasures and earned Chicago a notorious reputation” (ibid. 44). One of Chicago’s most notorious gangsters was Alphonse Gabriel Capone, commonly known as Al Capone. Born in Brooklyn, New York, as son to Italian immigrants he moved to Chicago in his early twenties. Once there, he quickly became Johnny Torrio’s henchman, who “succeeded Big Jim Colosimo […] and created a multimillion dollar network of bootlegging, prostitution, and gambling” (ibid. 45). Al Capone himself became famous for gaining an unseen amount of power and wealth. He “seized control of illegal liquor and vice in Chicago, maintaining power over politicians and the vice business through intimidation, bribery, and violence” (Norton et al. 640). After supplying thousands of Americans with liquor, he died on January 25, 1947 of cardiac arrest. He became one of America’s most famous gangsters.
As Chicago had Al Capone, New York City had Arnold ‘the Brain’ Rothstein. Being a Jewish-American racketeer, gambler and businessman, he had the “control over the city’s liquor trade, the largest market for alcohol in the nation” (Lerner 261). The Eighteenth Amendment likewise failed terribly in New York: “New Yorkers were still swearing, liquor-dispensing nightclubs continued to enliven the Manhattan scene, and visitors and residents alike had no difficulty finding their way to resorts of commercial vice” (Teaford 48). Just like Al Capone, Rothstein dominated the illegal liquor business and had an eye for all the opportunities Prohibition could bring him. In addition, Lerner argues that New Yorkers “had come to accept purchasing liquor on a daily basis as a routine practice, hardly discernible from buying flowers or groceries” (262). Rothstein became the Moses of Jewish gangsters, knew how to dress and how to make a fortune. As one of many bootleggers and gangsters, he knew that the moral reform could not be successful.

Despite the fact that Prohibition failed as a moral reform and social policy, it did turn out to be successful in popular culture. It “fascinated Americans for generations,” and its atmosphere inspired many artists (Lerner 2). “Speakeasies, and gangsters of the era have been depicted exuberantly” in movies, television series and novels (Ibid. 2). For instance Boardwalk Empire, the HBO series where fictional versions of Al Capone, Arnold Rothstein and Lucky Luciano set the scene. Furthermore there is of course Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby, with Meyer Wolfshiem being based on Rothstein and Jay Gatsby, who may be a bootlegger himself.

2.1.4. The Great Depression: How it All Ended

During the Jazz Age consumerism dominated the cultural spheres and mass consumption together with new technological inventions made their entry. Therefore, it should not
surprise us that Americans became “blind to rising debt and uneven prosperity” that was waiting for them around the corner (Norton et al. 621). Likewise, no one could imagine that “[a] devastating depression would bring the era to a brutal close” (Ibid. 621). Nevertheless, on October 29, 1929, also known as Black Tuesday, the stock market crashed and the Great Depression began.

However, in reality, the foundations of the upcoming recession were laid many years earlier. Norton et al. state some of the early signs: the “so-called prosperity had never reached farmers; agriculture had lagged for decades. Mining, textiles, and other industries did not maintain profitable the entire decade, and even the automobile industry was stagnant after 1926” (647). The demands were decreasing, “and at the same time, businesses were overloaded with debt. Together, this made for a perfect economic storm when the market crashed in 1929,” leaving millions of Americans unemployed (Ibid. 647). In general, during the twenties most American people had the illusion of being wealthy. The exuberant life style led to a situation of seeming welfare, and Americans wanted to do something with their money. As most of them invested in the Stock Exchange, they lost everything due to the crash. In 1929, there were approximately four million unemployed, and in 1932 this number increased to up to thirteen million – nearly one quarter of the working Americans at the time. Chaos, desperation and disbelief took over the hearts of the people as President Herbert C. Hoover could not find any “direct relief for the unemployed” (Ibid. 676). In 1933, President Franklin D. Roosevelt wanted to save the US from despair and a continuing crisis. He developed the New Deal, through which he wanted to “revive the flagging economy through two types of federal initiatives: national economic planning and relief programs” (Ibid. 676). With his optimism and charisma, president Roosevelt brought back confidence to the US. His policies were considered to be the foundations for a new, modern welfare state.
3. NEW YORK CITY DURING THE TWENTIES

3.1. The American City

“America was born in the country but has moved to the city”
— RICHARD HOFSTADTER²

Already in 1630, John Winthrop declared that the United States would become “a city upon a hill” and thus a model for the entire world. Nowadays, his declaration remains a basis for the way the American city has been interpreted. According to Graham Clarke in his multivolume work The American City (1997), it seems that “the United States has increasingly developed as one of the major urban cultures of the twentieth century whilst continuing to measure its urban present against an assumed (and imagined) ideal rural past” (1:3). Yet before 1880, the US already knew some significant urban areas. Colonial powers such as “Great Britain, France and Spain, all established trading settlements as both areas of potential influence as well as focal points of commercial power” (Ibid. 1:3). In many instances these settlements were built after their European models. For example Charles Town in South Carolina was established in the 1670s in honor of king Charles II of England.

In the nineteenth century the city was expanding enormously. According to Jon C. Teaford, the city streets were reaching out miles from the metropolitan centers, and acre after acre of farmland was succumbing to urban development (1). In other words, the population in the cities continued to grow: New York City increases from 1,1 million in 1850 to 3,4 million inhabitants in 1900, and Chicago evolved from being a small village of 4000 inhabitants in 1840 to a major city of 1,7 million inhabitants in 1900.

Broadly speaking, there were three main reasons for this growth. First, there was the development of new transport possibilities. In 1869 the Transcontinental Railroad was able to connect the West and East coasts. At the junction points between those railroads, cities were created. Second, there was the expanding industrialization. Farmers were not able to compete with the new and fast developments in the cities, and so they were forced to move to the cities. Since urbanization became more and more important, industries moved from “serving the needs of an agricultural community to those of an urban population inevitably based on consumer needs and desires” (Clarke 1:5). Third, “immigrations in the period approached new and unprecedented proportions” (Ibid. 1:5). Throughout the nineteenth century cities continued to grow because of internal migration and natural increase, but in the second half of the century a crucial development will alter fundamentally both the nature of American cities and the basis of American culture: foreign immigration (Ibid. 1:6). As a result, the United States knew two large immigration waves: the first during the second half of the nineteenth century until 1880 and the second starting from 1871 until the 1920s.

The first wave of foreign immigrants included mostly people from North-West Europe. These ‘Old Immigrants’ came from Scandinavia, Germany, England and Ireland. The second wave, the ‘New Immigrants,’ primarily came from Italy, Russia, Poland, Greece and Austria-Hungary. All these people had one thing in common: they arrived at Ellis Island, just off New York City, hoping to find a better future and dreaming of better living conditions. Living their own American dream, foreign immigrants wanted to escape from their mother country for economic or political reasons. Once arrived in the US, immigrants settled in the ghettos of their city. Little Italy and Chinatown are two of the most famous ghettos of New York City. Immigrants with the same ethnic background lived together and still spoke their mother tongue, remaining faithful to their own religion and culture. Many of the immigrants were unskilled and became “obvious targets of exploitation for cheap labour”
(Ibid. 1:7). Furthermore, sometimes living conditions were very poor, and the big political bosses of the era often made an attempt to improve those situations — in exchange for votes. Journalist Jacob Riis, a Danish immigrant himself, published in 1880 his work *How the Other Half Lives*, by which he wanted to denounce the terrible living conditions of the immigrants in New York City. He published pictures of the slums en ghettos, which, as some argue, would change the image of the city forever.

In general, during the nineteenth century the United States became an urban society. Consequently, by 1910 nearly forty-six percent of the population saw its society as being urban, and another ten years later there were already 68 cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants. However, America still declared itself as being both urban and industrial. As Graham Clarke states, the rapid development, during the Roaring Twenties, of industries based on consumer goods, on the automobile, and of course on the rapid expansion of the film industries of Broadway and Hollywood, underscored the importance of an urban population for the new industries (1:5). Nonetheless, it needs to be noted that there is no such thing as one single history of the American city: the United States has its own complex history of immigration, and every single person helped to create the American city. Clarke concludes that “American cities have their own identities; at once political, historical, social, ethnic and cultural” (1:8). All these different identities then form together the American urban tradition.
The city that never sleeps and always changes, New York City, has often been regarded as one of the most distinctive American cities, remaining a dominant urban center and symbol of the metropolitan experience — both in its positive as in its negative aspects. Founded as New Amsterdam in 1609, the city “has served as the gateway to the New World and, as such, has been the impetus behind the American Dream” (Smith 3). Most of the foreign immigrants were allowed to stay in this new and attractive city, and it became a conduit to other parts of the country or a permanent home. Others were torn away from their families and had to return to their mother country. Immigrants resided in most cases in Lower Manhattan, the Upper and Lower East side in particular, one of the “six different geographic sectors” of which the “heterogeneous city” is composed (O’Meara 9). It inspired many authors and journalists to write about it, such as Stephen Crane, Theodore Dreiser, or Jacob Riis. Graham Clarke explains that this is due to the fact that the nineteenth century remained a pivotal period in the urbanization of the American continent, and in literature there was a consistent sense of the city as being able to reflect American culture (1:12).

In the following chapter, the changing images of the city will be elucidated by focusing on its architecture and the accompanying views of the city. Furthermore, two significant literary representations of New York City will be discussed in order to illustrate the changing views on the city: Walt Whitman’s poem “Mannahatta” (1860) and F. Scott Fitzgerald’s essay “My Lost City” (1936). “My Lost City” will be explained in the broader

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context of Fitzgerald’s experiences and ideas of New York, for this will be important for the remainder of this thesis.

3.2.1. Images of the “Unfinished City”

In his book *The Unfinished City: New York and the Metropolitan Idea*, Thomas Bender investigates the history of New York from its early regional beginnings to its glittery present status. According to him, this “unfinished metropolis” “[...] has not yet completed its progress to full metropolitan status,” which distinguishes it from other metropolitan centers like “Paris or Vienna or Budapest or Mexico City or Buenos Aires” (xi). Nevertheless, this is not a negative thing but rather something that is “sui generis:” “[i]ts very essence is to be continually in the making, to never be completely resolved” (*Ibid.* xi). Moreover, New York City is not what we call a perfect metropolis — according to the Oxford Dictionary4 “the capital or chief city of a country or region” — but a “paradoxical modern metropolis” (Bender xi). Hence, the city quickly sought to give another expression to its roles as a metropolis. It does not represent the nation as a metropolis should, but has its own metropolitan culture and economy instead (*Ibid.* xi). Bender further clarifies this aspect:

> [e]ven in charting its course toward metropolitan standing, New York went its own way. [...] Whether in its physical development or in its social organization, New York refuses a single logic, and it declines any notion of completeness. The city is characterized by a relatively open — or one wishes more open — contest over its public definition, always understanding each resolution as temporary, subject to further change (xi-xii).

This quote urges us to personify the city, characterizing it as a being in search of itself, headstrong and obstinate in what it has to represent. This attitude also affects the “changing ways in which the city is perceived as it becomes more modern” (*Ibid.* xiii).

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Bender argues that New York City embodies a mixture of “the old and the new, the low and the high, the mixed and the pure, the plethora of small enterprises and the large corporate culture that gives special meaning to New York, the oldest large city in the United States” (xv). As mentioned, New York rebelled against the modernist vision, by “offering a richer and more complicated experience” (Ibid. xv): think of for example its Downtown Financial District with its overwhelming skyscrapers, set against the boroughs of Tribeca or Greenwich Village, or the green heart of the city, Central Park.

In addition, a city’s architecture has always been significant for the way in which its inhabitants or visitors look at the city. As Clarke remarks, “[m]uch of the response to the American city in the nineteenth and twentieth century has been in terms of its visual impact” (1:14). Put differently, the form of the city is indicative of “larger values and processes which underlie the essential values on which the city is based” (Ibid. 1:14). As stated before, American cities were often built after European models. This was also the case for eighteenth-century New York City, as novelist James Fenimore Cooper pointed out: “New York [...] was fundamentally English in both its conception and outlook” (qtd. in Clarke 1:14). Nevertheless, New York City evolved into a modern city with a complexity of its own. According to Lauraleigh O’Meara,

New York did set the standard for American cultural life in the first quarter of the twentieth century: it was regional, national, international. Issues, trends, and events originated in the city, and were then disseminated to the rest of the country — no matter whether it borrowed its style or not (2).

Concerning its architecture, New York City refused to follow any other urban style. With the famous “Commissioners’ Plan of 1811,” the city was ambitiously platted from roughly Houston Street in the south to 155 Street at the northern end of the island, resulting in the ever famous grid plan of Manhattan (Bender 3). In addition, O’Meara points out that
wealthy and prominent New Yorkers loved to spend their money freely on architecture (3). This new elite would form the base for a new architectural period from 1885 to 1915, called the “Age of Elegance” (Ibid. 4). H.G. Dwight reflects upon this new style as he wrote for *Scribner’s Magazine* in November 1905:

> The place represents a mingling of traditions so complex as to constitute in itself an absence of tradition, as to make its builders the creators of tradition. And it forces the observer to see in modernity — poor noisy, untoned, inchoate, incoherent modernity — its own value as the factory of the future and the past in embryo (5).

Clearly not everybody appreciated the city’s new style. Just as Dwight names it “inchoate” and “incoherent,” compared to the continuity of other cities like Paris and London, Lewis Mumford could not grasp why the creative and financial forces behind it chose to assemble New York’s identity from what he called “the misappropriated fragments of antiquity” (O’Meara 5). Nevertheless, we may not forget that every architectural style can have its pros and cons. Some intellects thought such architecture was unacceptable, while others admired its unique character. Fitzgerald, for example, truly loved the city. He never complained about those incongruities, but he simply accepted the city as it was.

As near the end of the nineteenth century domestic life was changing, and new technology and ways of urban transportation emerged, these changes influenced both the organization and structure of cities (Clarke 1:15). Brooklyn Bridge, opened in 1883, connected Manhattan with Brooklyn and “its magnificent span symbolizes extension and horizontal expansion,” together with its great towers that “point toward the vertical qualities of the skyscraper city that New York had become by the turn of the century” (Bender 24). And just as the movement of the bridge is horizontal and vertical, so was the dynamism and energy that symbolized Manhattan (ibid. 24). Its skyline had inevitably changed and skyscrapers such as the Empire State Building (1931) and Rockefeller Center...
(1930-40) emerged in the city. Then again, this often led to a range of negative reactions and images, given that there always has been a certain resistance in American development to urban experience (Clarke 1:28).

Even though Lucia and Morton White state that for American intellectuals the American city can be “too noisy, too big, too dirty, too artificial, and too full of mobiles” (qtd. in Clarke 1:28), despite all this, Peter L. Berger argues in his essay “New York City 1976: A Signal of Transcendence” in favor of New York City:

New York City continues to be a magnet and even of love, sometimes fierce love. New York is no longer the world’s largest city, but it is still the world’s most potent symbol of urbanism and urbanity. It is not only a vast and vastly important city, but the city par excellence, the prototypical cosmopolis of our age (1:30).

It is clear, in other words, that New York City received as much negative reactions as positive ones. For some people the city has always been a magnet, a symbol of urbanism and the American city par excellence. Justin Ferate, one of New York City’s preeminent tour guides, explains in “New York Cicerone” on YouTube that New York City — and especially its architecture — makes us feel special, it makes us feel like we belong there. That is to say, “if it ain’t about you, it ain’t architecture.”

3.2.2. Literary Representations of NYC: Whitman and Fitzgerald

With the developing urbanization on the American continent during the nineteenth century, the urge to write about the city emerged. Many writers of the moment were drawn to those new developments and to the modernism of the cities. Therefore, New York City inspired both authors (Henry James, Herman Melville, Walt Whitman, etc.) and painters

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5 I had the pleasure to participate on one of his walking tours of Grand Central Terminal on February 22, 2013 in New York City. This was one of his favorite tag lines, for he thought this was the power of architecture: making people feel special, creating this relationship with you as if it were “a marriage.”
(Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, etc.). In this section, two artists and their work on New York City will be briefly examined: Whitman’s poem “Mannahatta” and Fitzgerald’s essay “My Lost City.” Their responses to the city’s transformations during the end of the nineteenth century give its readers a good sense both of that moment and of contrasting perceptual and cultural models available for the next century (Brooker 30). Furthermore, both the poem and the essay present us a different, but personal view on New York City, and it is particularly interesting to investigate how Fitzgerald himself thought about the city he used as the setting of his novel The Great Gatsby.

The 19th century poet Walt Whitman, born in West Hills, New York, remains one of the greatest American poets. As a national poet he was largely self-educated. By his early twenties he lived in Manhattan, attending lectures of Emerson and being fond of promenading through the streets of the city — especially the Broadway area. He published Leaves of Grass (1855) containing poems such as “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” and “Mannahatta” in several editions starting from 1855 until his death. Whitman “made New York a central icon of his radical vision” (Clarke 3:48): his unrhymed free verse and wild extravagance were considered a reflection of his own feelings and sexual freedom. Other than that, it was also “a response to the rhythms of a new urban experience” (Ibid. 3:48). In his poem “Mannahatta,” Whitman brilliantly describes Manhattan as “an island sixteen miles long, solid-founded,” with “high growths of iron, splendidly uprising toward clear skies” (Whitman 53, italics added). He portrays his city with a certain dynamism and fluidity, continually growing and changing — possessing a vertical growth that characterized the island’s skyline. We receive his reaction to “his city,” a reaction that is obviously positive. He clearly loves his city and he is proud of it: “numberless crowded streets, tides swift and ample, well-loved by me, the summer air, the bright sun shining” (Ibid. 53). The dynamism he describes in his poem also gets reflected through his use of punctuation, which results in
a climax at the end of the poem: “City of hurried and sparkling waters! city of spires and masts! City nested in bays! my city!” (Ibid. 53). Broadly speaking, in “Mannahatta,” Whitman shares with us the love for his city, Manhattan. He states the things he sees, ranging from the ferry boats to the houses of business. New York City is seen as dynamic and beautiful — causing a lot of emotions with the writer. In my opinion, this will also be the case in The Great Gatsby, when Nick sees New York City for the first time when crossing the Queensboro Bridge.

The second literary representation of New York City is “My Lost City” by Fitzgerald. He established himself as a writer central to the Jazz Age and especially in relationship to New York City (Clarke 3:133). According to O’Meara, New York really mattered to Fitzgerald; he even called the city his “home” (xiii). Apart from his essays, he also wrote about the city in his New York stories “May Day” and “The Rich Boy,” and in three New York novels, This Side of Paradise (1920), The Beautiful and the Damned (1922) and The Great Gatsby (1925). Since New York is present in so many of his novels and essays, it is interesting to examine one of these essays in order to know how he felt about the city. For O’Meara, his view of the city matters to us because he brought a formidable aesthetic sensibility to his work on New York and to his own New York life (xiii). Fitzgerald starts his essay by giving us his first two symbols of New York: the ferry boat and the girl. “The ferry boat stood for triumph, the girl stood for romance” (“My Lost City” 133). Later we will get his third symbol of New York, the bachelor apartment. He describes his time in New York, from the time he was “still and undergraduate at Princeton” until he became a writer himself (MLC 134):

I was a failure—mediocre at advertising work and unable to get started as a writer. Hating the city, I got roaring, weeping drunk on my last penny and went home. ... ... Incalculable city. What ensued was only one of a thousand success stories of those gaudy days, but it plays a part in my own movie of New York (MLC 135).

Future citations taken from Fitzgerald’s essay “My Lost City” will be abbreviated to “MLC.”
Fitzgerald compares his life with “his own movie of New York,” because the city gave him the opportunity to become the famous writer he then was. He was “adopted by the city, [...] as the archetype of what New York City wanted” (MLC 135). He then goes on stating that during the 1920s, an elder generation took over the scene and invented the cocktail party; a hint towards the various Prohibition parties of the Roaring Twenties, something he describes in “Echoes of the Jazz Age.” Moreover, he continues with admitting that this “is not an account of the city’s changes but of the changes in this writer’s feeling for the city” (MLC 136). Put differently, what truly matters are his subjective and complex feelings towards the city. Alan Trachtenberg comments on this by stating that literary works can provide us “a usable knowledge of the city,” because the literary artist is “conceiving and placing the city in a relation to itself” (292). Hence, Fitzgerald reflects in his essay on the city that he once knew, sharing with us his personal relationship with it. According to him,

> [t]he tempo of the city had changed sharply. The uncertainties of 1920 were drowned in a steady golden roar and many of our friends had grown wealthy. But restlessness of New York in 1927 approached hysteria. The parties were bigger [...]; the shows were broader, the buildings were higher, the morals were looser and the liquor was cheaper (MLC 138).

Fitzgerald thus shows “New York’s social and economic inequalities” and how the city was transformed into something new (O’Meara 8-9). He is fascinated by the fact that the city is able to change, which may also cause a change in the writer’s feelings towards the city. It has a certain dynamic potential which we also find in Whitman’s “Mannahatta.” Examples of his feelings towards the city are the following: “For us [Zelda and me] the city was inevitably linked up with Bacchic diversions, mild or fantastic. [...] I felt that, for the moment, the city and I had little to offer each other” (MLC 137). Hence, he almost personalizes the city, and he links it with his own feelings.
In short, both literary representations offer us a personal view on New York City. In Whitman’s poem, the writer looks at the city with a certain amazement; he is proud of his city. He gives us a list of everything he acknowledges — culminating in his final two lines. The city is seen as dynamic and eager to change. Fitzgerald also loves this dynamic aspect; he appreciates the city, yet he points out that “New York was a city after all, and not a universe” (MLC 139). Even though this city could help you becoming the person you wanted to be, like this was the case with Fitzgerald himself, one may not forget that the city can also “lose its splendid mirage” (MLC 140). Put differently, it cannot always the beautiful and unbound city of Whitman; sometimes it has its downsides too. This is in fact mirrored in *The Great Gatsby*, given that Fitzgerald takes every aspect of the city into account in his novels: on the one hand, New York City is a place of laughter and amusement, a city that astonishes. On the other hand, it is also a place where secrets will be revealed, or a place that can bring you into trouble because of all its negative temptations. *The Great Gatsby* is a good example of Fitzgerald’s fascination with the city and his assumption that the city forms a part of our daily lives.
4. **THE GREAT GATSBY: “A PICTURE OF NEW YORK LIFE”**

4.1. The Setting of *The Great Gatsby*

“I lived at West Egg, the — well, the less fashionable of the two, though this is a most superficial tag to express the bizarre and not a little sinister contrast between them.”

— F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

*The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald’s third and perhaps most famous novel, is considered to be an urtext of the Jazz Age or Roaring Twenties. Published on April 12, 1925, *The Great Gatsby* narrates the story of the tragic James Gatz who becomes the fabulous Jay Gatsby; who is extremely popular because of the exuberant parties he organizes at his home in West Egg. Everything he does is in order to “recover intact his first, fresh love for Daisy [Buchanan]” (Lockridge “Intro” 12), and thus to “repeat the past” (TGG\(^8\) 106). Daisy lives at East Egg, on the other side of the bay. The story is told by Nick Carraway, who came from the Mid-West and moved to New York City for his job as a bond salesman. He lives in a small, modest house right next to Gatsby’s mansion — “a factual imitation of some Hôtel de Ville in Normandy” (TGG 11) — and witnesses everything that happens there: large parties with illegal alcohol, with people who do not even know who Gatsby is or what he looks like: “people were not invited — they went there. They got into automobiles which bore them out to Long Island, and somehow they ended up at Gatsby’s door” (TGG 43). The story excellently embodies the essence of the Jazz Age and of the romance and corruption that money brings. In addition, it also deals with the ideal of the American dream: Gatsby desperately longs for Daisy, his own dream, thinking that he has achieved his wealthy status and hence will be able to win her heart.

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\(^8\) Future citations taken from Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* will be abbreviated to “TGG.”
Fitzgerald himself achieved a nearly mythological status in America; he was a literary icon and often compared to the Icarus figure. He wanted *The Great Gatsby* to be successful, but “with sales of just over 20,000 copies, Fitzgerald would profit only enough to repay his publisher” (O’Meara 49). He and his wife Zelda rented a modest house in Great Neck, “on a peninsula at the foot of Manhasset Bay,” which would become the setting for *The Great Gatsby* (Tanner ix). However, he had to cope with many difficulties in his personal life too: the appealing New York City was too accessible, and “by 1923-1924, alcohol was no longer simply a diversion for Fitzgerald” (Bruccoli 185). Due to the fact that he had to deal with those difficulties, Fitzgerald’s works often reflected the post-war American disillusion and the spiritual *malaise* of the century.

Although according to O’Meara *The Great Gatsby* is capable of presenting its readers commentary on a range of subjects such as social and economic class, democracy and aristocracy, consumerism, entertainment, architecture, urban development, advertising, the media and popular culture (50), it is safe to say that it still remains “a picture of New York life,” as Fitzgerald himself named his story in *Life in Letters* (106). In the following chapters, I will indicate this focus on New York by discussing the different settings of the story — how Fitzgerald describes and portrays them and what they represent — by travelling across Long Island over “the Valley of Ashes” to Manhattan in New York City.

### 4.1.1. West Egg and East Egg

The first areas that are to be discussed are West Egg and East Egg, the most prominent settings in the novel. West Egg and East Egg are located on Long Island, 20 miles away from New York City. Long Island belongs to the state of New York and it has four counties: two boroughs of New York City, Brooklyn and Queens, and two suburban areas, Nassau and

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9 According to Bruccoli, sales from the first printing barely covered his $6,000 debt to Scribner’s (220-221).
Suffolk. West Egg and East Egg are fictional names — in real life they correspond to Great Neck (West Egg) and Port Washington (East Egg) peninsulas in the county of Nassau.

Nick Carraway, originally from the Mid-West, moves to West Egg because he has to sell bonds in New York City. Already from the very beginning of the novel, Nick depicts what he sees in West Egg, which is where he will be living from then onwards. He explains to us right away the social difference between the two “eggs:”

It was on that slender riotous island which extends itself due east of New York — and where there are, among other natural curiosities, two unusual formations of land. (TGG 10)

I lived at West Egg, the — well, the least fashionable of the two, though this is a most superficial tag to express the bizarre and not a little sinister contrast between them. My house was at the very tip of the egg, only fifty yards from the Sound, and squeezed between two huge places that rented for twelve or fifteen thousand a season. (TGG 10-11)

Nick and Gatsby’s West Egg thus stands out against the more “fashionable East Egg” of Daisy and Tom Buchanan (TGG 11). The difference between the two areas is primarily one of social standard — which will be a barrier for almost every character in the novel. The people who live in East Egg are the ones who have accumulated wealth in the past generations, the ones who are refined and sophisticated. West Egg represents the nouveaux riches: people who did not inherit their money but achieved wealth in the course of the years, obtaining better living conditions than at the time they were born. Tony Tanner explains in his introduction to The Great Gatsby in more detail that East Egg represents and embodies the sort of devouring, self-pleasing and hypocritical materialism, whereas West Egg holds out for the possibility, the necessity, of that something else, something more, which materialism can never satisfy (x). The fact that West Egg and East Egg are separated, and that the seemingly wealthy Jay Gatsby resides on West Egg, represents the separation in
American society between, on the one hand, the wealthier group of people, and, on the other hand, the group of people who want to rise up on the social ladder. Gatsby may organize lavish parties, but he still has not been able to achieve the elite status of the East Eggers — and unfortunately he never will. This aspect is also enforced by his enduring love for Daisy, who lives at East Egg. The green light at the end of the Buchanan’s dock symbolizes this; the green color that stands for hope and, in contrast, also colors a dollar bill. According to James E. Miller Jr., Nick Carraway sees the green light when he first catches a brief glimpse of his neighbor; he sees Gatsby standing on his lawn, stretching his arms towards the dark water that separates East Egg from West Egg — or Daisy from Gatsby (34). At the end of the novel, West Egg results to be more than just Gatsby’s place of residence: it will also be a place of shattered hopes and dreams, and ultimately death.

Second, West Egg and East Egg also stand for the differences and the moral conflict between East and West in the United States. Miller explains that it can be interpreted as the ancient and corrupt East versus the raw but virtuous West (30). Nick Carraway is descended from a decent, Mid-Western family: “[m]y family have been prominent, well-to-do people in this Middle Western city for three generations” (TGG 8). They worked for generations and tried to achieve their goals. This is also the case for Nick: his goal is to go East and make a new start in his new neighborhood, West Egg. As the story proceeds, Nick will gradually become more mature and ultimately his experience in the East will shatter his illusions, resulting in his return to the West (Miller 31):

I see now that this has been a story about the West, after all — Tom and Gatsby, Daisy and Jordan and I, were all Westerners, and perhaps we possessed some deficiency in common which made us subtly unadaptable to Eastern life (TGG 167).

After Gatsby’s death the East was haunted for me like that [a night scene by El Greco], distorted beyond my eyes’ power of correction. So when the blue smoke of
brittle leaves was in the air and the wind blew the wet laundry stiff on the line I decided to come back home (TGG 167).

Nick decides to go back home, in other words, to go back to his origins or what Miller calls the place “were the fundamental decencies are observed and virtue is honored” (31). He had the opportunity to taste the Eastern life, where “money is old and family well-established,” giving way to the pleasures of partying and decadence (O’Meara 55). East Eggers also tend to visit Gatsby’s parties on West Egg, but only to ridicule those of the West. For those East Eggers, being wealthy is something that you inherit — attaining it at a later stadium in life does not make any sense. “Tom and Daisy Buchanan represent the world of sophistication” (Miller 31), but at the end of the story Nick admits and concludes the following:

[t]hey 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 (TGG 170).

Tom and Daisy symbolize the callousness of the Easterners: they do not care about anything, and simply run away from their problems. Miller argues that Tom and Daisy are really more adapted to the Eastern life, and that is why it is significant that Tom and Daisy live in East Egg, whereas Tom and Gatsby live in West Egg (31). As Fitzgerald was in fact a Westerner himself, he may have thought about Edmund Wilson’s thoughts in “The Literary Spotlight” when he was dramatizing the conflict between East and West:

[the West] is perhaps the only milieu that he [Fitzgerald] thoroughly understands; when he approaches the [E]ast, he brings to it the standards of the wealthy [W]est — the preoccupation with display, [...] the vigorous social atmosphere of amiable flappers and youths comparatively untainted as yet by the snobbery of the east (22).

Wilson was convinced that Fitzgerald’s background as a Westerner had an influence on his works — alongside the fact that Fitzgerald was partly Irish and “brings both to life and to
fiction certain qualities that are not Anglo-Saxon” (22). Consequently, Wilson thought it was a great pity that Fitzgerald had not written more about the West (Miller 31). So even though Fitzgerald defines *The Great Gatsby* as “a picture of New York life,” we still have to bear in mind that it should be considered as a story of the East written by a Westerner.

4.1.2. The Valley of Ashes

In the opening lines of the second chapter of *The Great Gatsby*, Nick offers us the following description of the Valley of Ashes:

> [a]bout half way between West Egg and New York the motor road hastily joins the railroad and runs beside it for a quarter of a mile, so as to shrink away from a certain desolate area of land. This is a valley of ashes — 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 and, finally, with a transcendent effort, of men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air (TGG 26).

In short, this is a desolate area, a “waste land” that stands as an undeniably important symbol and image of *The Great Gatsby* (TGG 27). Geographically speaking, it is the “narrow channel through which the railroad traveler had to pass on his way between New York City and the resort villages of East and West Egg on the North Shore of Long Island” (Starr “Valley of Ashes”). Above it all and strangely overlooking the Valley of Ashes from a big, blue billboard, are the eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg. Fitzgerald describes his eyes as “blue and gigantic — their irises are one yard high. They look out of no face, but, instead, from a pair of enormous yellow spectacles which pass over a nonexistent nose” (TGG 26).

The Valley of Ashes has intrigued many critics and authors, and ever since *The Great Gatsby* was published its function has been discussed. A first and obvious interpretation of the Valley is that it represents the miserable living conditions of the Wilsons. Miller asserts this by saying that it indeed represents “the gray, dismal environment of the Wilsons,” and
he adds to it “the life of the class to which they belong” as opposed to the wealth and status of Tom and Daisy (Miller 35). Myrtle and George Wilson own a garage in the Valley, and when Nick accompanies Tom Buchanan on their way to Manhattan, we discover that Tom has an affair with Myrtle. The garage is an unclean and dusty place, according to Nick: “the interior was unprosperous and bare; the only car visible was the dust-covered wreck of a Ford which was crouched in a dim corner” (TGG 27). Harold E. Stearns comments that Wilson is without a working automobile at a time when a new Ford Model T could be had for under three hundred dollars and a used one for much less (143). The black Ford Model T’s were extremely popular during the Roaring Twenties, but George does not have any reparable car in his garage. The only vehicle present is broken and seems irreparable — in other words, the Model T is “beyond Wilson’s mechanical abilities” and George’s garage is not a flourishing business at all (O’Meara 55). George wants to buy Tom’s car in order to travel Westwards, because he — and maybe even more Myrtle — desperately wants to escape from the Valley. As O’Meara points out, they could have ridden West on the train, but instead he insists on buying Tom and Daisy’s blue coupé (54). Having a car means being independent, not being bound to train schedules and railroads. Furthermore, for George it stands for becoming “the new man,” being able to go further than the established routes, and acquiring the love and respect he wants from his wife who lives and breathes the “advertisements in Town Tattle and the small scandal magazines of Broadway” (Ibid. 54-55). In short, it is George Wilson’s version of the American dream: going Westwards, away from the Valley, hoping to achieve a better future together with his wife who wants to escape from her dreadful life — and her husband.

Unfortunately, their dream will never come true. Consequently, one can argue that the Valley of Ashes stands for a certain hopelessness — for the defeat of the American dream, almost impossible to achieve for some people. It is a place the Wilsons will never be
able to escape. According to Miller, the desolate area begins to take on an even greater significance: it becomes the primary backdrop against which the tragedy is played out (35). For Fitzgerald, it was a “waste land” (TGG 27) and hence inhabited by people who tend to have lost their vitality. George Wilson is described as “a blond, spiritless man, anaemic, and faintly handsome” (TGG 27-28, italics added). As stated before, George is not able to repair the Model T, the only vehicle present in his garage. This is due to his mechanical inabilities in the first place. In the second place, O’Meara believes that George also lacks the initiative to do it: “Wilson has neither the desire to fix the car nor to get rid of it” (56). Nevertheless, we may not forget that George only longs to buy Tom’s car in order to escape from the Valley — so I would not immediately assume that this is due to a lack of initiative, but rather because of the fact the George wants to flee from his present workplace and thus ceases to care about his job. This is symbolized in the dust that lies on the vehicle and on George. He is the only person we know to be covered in ashes, for his wife Myrtle is “dust-free” and full of vitality, and the young Greek Michaelis “appears unaffected by it as well” (Ibid. 56). This suggests that his surroundings have less to do with George’s own pessimistic life, and that he is the only person stuck in both the literal and the figurative ashes of the Valley.

With East Egg representing “old-money” and West Egg representing “new-money,” the Valley of Ashes stands for “no-money” (Tanner x). Respectively Tom, Gatsby and George — and also Nick — are the three persons who embody these categories. As the Valley is also a passage which everybody needs to cross in order to arrive in New York City, they all have to face the Valley’s image of hopelessness and the social difference between them and the Wilsons. Considering the origins of the Valley of Ashes, many critics may have misjudged the location — seeing it as an industrial waste land created by modern technology (O’Meara 56). Leo Marx and Kenneth Knodt are two critics who see a relationship between the Valley
and technology. The latter states that “the waste land of the valley of ashes is continually seen in terms of distorted pastoral — it is the nineteenth century picture of rural America inverted by the technology which has destroyed this land...” (133). The former argues that “this hideous, man-made wilderness is a product of the technological power that also makes possible Gatsby’s wealth, his parties, his car” (358). Both critics see it as a rather foul and hideous place created by technology; Knodt even calls it a “distorted pastoral,” which reminds us at Nick’s pastoral West, now devastated by technology and industry. Marx seems to support Knodt’s view on the Valley, and even adds that the technology which destroyed the land brought into being Gatsby’s wealth and status. Put differently, through this link with Gatsby Marx criticizes the wealthy and exuberant status of the Jazz Age.

By contrast, Matthew J. Bruccoli indicates in his appendix to The Great Gatsby that modern technology had little to do with making this particular mess (211, italics added). To him, “Fitzgerald based the valley of ashes on the Corona dumps, which was a large swamp located between Great Neck and Manhattan. In his day, the swamp was being loaded with pollutants that predate industrial society” (Ibid. 211). In other words, he still considers the Valley to be a “mess” and a miserable place, but this is not the result of the industrial age, because it simply did not have manufacturing or industry. Fitzgerald thus based this somber neighborhood on a swamp rather than on an area which was affected by technological issues. In short, the Valley of Ashes is not only literally in ashes, but also figuratively: it represents a place of death, connecting the cynical world of New York City with Long Island; where the eternal ashes cover up the people (Sicker 2012).
4.1.2. New York City: Manhattan

The third and last setting I will investigate is New York City, especially Manhattan. In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald not only drives us over the Queensboro Bridge up to the fashionable Fifth Avenue, Central Park, and the luxurious Plaza Hotel; he also takes us to “the colorful scene on Broadway and to Myrtle Wilson’s bourgeois love nest on the Upper West Side” (O’Meara 51). As he himself called this particular novel “A Picture of New York Life” in *A Life in Letters*, it is safe to say that this city was of great importance for the novel. As stated before, New York city really mattered for Fitzgerald, even though he was not a native New Yorker and left the city more than he stayed there. Fitzgerald was known for his many excursions to Europe, his most famous trip being the one to Paris during the 1920s to join the so-called Lost Generation of American writers. In 1925, it will also be in Paris that he finishes *The Great Gatsby* after almost two years of hard work.

In his essay “*The Great Gatsby* and the Twenties,” Ronald Berman argues that H. L. Mencken, in 1924 the most influential American critic, identifies the life of post-war New York City as one of the new subjects of *The Great Gatsby* (81). *The Great Gatsby* depicts and recollects the events that took place in the New York scene during the summer of 1922, and Berman describes New York City life in those days as being on the one hand, “monied, vulgar, chaotic, and immoral,” but likewise “more interesting than anything that could be served up by the literature of gentility” on the other (Ibid. 81). During the 1920s, Manhattan was indeed a place offering an “open pursuit of sex, money and booze” (Ibid. 81), as numerous speakeasies provided their customers with the well-needed alcoholic beverages, then considered illegal due to the Prohibition Amendment. It became an attractive place, and it should not surprise us that the city provided many authors with the material for a pleasant and interesting literature. Fitzgerald was one of those authors who took advantage of this, and he came up with a novel that was full of references to Manhattan and other
parts of New York City. Nevertheless, one has to note that *The Great Gatsby* is not essentially an urban novel. It still remains the story of the dreams and illusions of Jay Gatsby, projected against the urban and social background of the Jazz Age. New York City, the Valley of Ashes and the two Eggs on Long Island form the primary background of the story and they create the appropriate sphere for the narrative.

Even though Fitzgerald’s narrator has a job in New York City, he will visit Manhattan only three times\(^\text{10}\) in the novel. First, together with Tom and his mistress Myrtle in order to attend a small party in Myrtle’s “bourgeois love nest” (O’Meara 51). Second, he will go and have a lunch with Gatsby and Meyer Wolfshiem, Gatsby’s Jewish business partner. Third, Nick will accompany Daisy, Gatsby, Jordan and Tom to the famous and luxurious Plaza Hotel, on the corner of Central Park. Given that all these locations are experienced from Nick’s Mid-Western point of view, Clarke argues that this creates a contrast between, on the one hand, the narrator’s own assured (Mid-Western) rural past, and the raucous and material present he confronts on the East Coast and in New York (and Manhattan) on the other (1:10). This opposition will be obviously present in the novel. Since Fitzgerald was a Westerner himself he perfectly understood the differences between the two areas, and he embodied those feelings in the character of Nick Carraway.

First of all, his first trip to Manhattan together with Tom and Myrtle takes him up Fifth Avenue “over the Park up to the West Hundreds,” to arrive at Myrtle’s apartment at 158\(^{\text{th}}\) Street — described as a “white cake” (TGG 31). Concerning Fifth Avenue, Nick states the following: “[w]e drove over to Fifth Avenue, warm and soft, almost *pastoral*” (TGG 30, italics added). By stating “pastoral,” this view of the avenue corresponds to Nick’s supposed imagined rural and pastoral past. However, Fifth Avenue is far from pastoral since it already

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\(^{10}\) In *TGG*, Nick is shown to visit New York City/Manhattan three times. As the narrative unfolds, Fitzgerald also implicitly states that Nick has visited the city probably more than those three times, but I will not take those visits into account.
had various shops and apartments, being in fact “an engineered and manufactured thing” (O’Meara 57). In addition, Central Park is likewise nothing more than a large designed and developed garden in the midst of Manhattan. Before Frederick Law Olmstead and Calvert Vaux made plans for this garden in 1857, Central Park was even considered a place as unpleasant as the Valley of Ashes (ibid. 57). Nick calls Fifth Avenue “warm,” “soft” and “pastoral,” and Oliver E. Allen informs us that by the 1920s, Fifth Avenue below Fifty-ninth street was actually devoted to some of the most exclusive shops and elegant department stores, and on upper Fifth Avenue, the great mansions were being replaced by large luxury apartment buildings (266). In short, one can argue that — despite his formulation of a “soft and pastoral” Avenue — Nick is attracted to the new and urban cityscape of Manhattan. With his Mid-Western background, he acknowledges the avenue and evaluates it positively, notwithstanding its modern and engineered buildings.

After attending Myrtle’s small party and one of Gatsby’s exuberant parties, Nick reflects back upon his experiences in his new neighborhood: “[r]eading over what I have written so far, I see I have given the impression that the events of three nights several weeks apart were all that absorbed me” (TGG 56). Because after all, we may not forget that Nick is rewriting these events in the East and his experiences with Gatsby when he has already returned home. Furthermore, he confesses his feelings towards the city to the reader:

I began to like New York, the racy, adventurous feel of it at night, and the satisfaction that the constant flicker of men and women and machines gives to the restless eye. I liked to walk up Fifth Avenue and pick out romantic women from the crowd and imagine that in a few minutes I was going to enter into their lives, and no one would even know or disapprove. Sometimes, in my mind, I followed them to their apartments on the corners of hidden streets, and they turned and smiled back at me before they faded through a door into warm darkness (TGG 57).
In this passage, Nick admits that the city attracts him. As pointed out before, as a Mid-Westerner, Nick comes from a rural environment. Now he gets to know the new metropolis, and just like Fitzgerald he likes what he sees. Here, he talks about the “satisfaction” he gets from seeing the “constant flicker of men and women and machines.” This might refer to the new technologies and modernity of the city, and the fact that Fitzgerald connects both “men and women” with “machines” suggests that all three are in harmony with each other. Moreover, from the passage we can also assume that Nick likes to observe people: he looks at people — women, in this particular case — and he starts imagining about romance and the possibilities he has. It is interesting to note that in “My Lost City,” Fitzgerald comments that he and Zelda also enjoyed walking through the city; observing everything. Contrary to what Nick does, Fitzgerald states in his essay: “[w]e had run through a lot, though we had retained an almost theatrical innocence by preferring the role of the observed to that of the observer” (MLC 137, italics added). Fitzgerald and Zelda want to be seen and swallow up the atmosphere of the city, while Nick profiles himself as an anonymous observer in the city. The latter uses the city as a threshold to romance, to escape from his daily business into a world of imagination.

Another view from Nick on New York City is shown when he joins Gatsby for a lunch in Manhattan and meets with Meyer Wolfshiem. They drive together in Gatsby’s gorgeous car, “a rich cream colour, bright with nickel,” towards the city (TGG 63). When driving across the Queensboro Bridge, Nick states the following:

[O]ver the great bridge, with the sunlight through the girders making a constant flicker upon the moving cars, with the city rising up across the river in white heaps and sugar lumps all built with a wish out of nonolfactory money. The city seen from the Queensboro bridge is always the city seen for the first time, in its first wild promise of all the mystery and the beauty in the world (TGG 67, italics added).
Although Nick already visited New York City he describes it as “seeing the city for the first time,” and he experiences the city as a spectacle — a tourist’s eye-view of a seemingly definitive skyline (Clarke 1:10). During the 1920s, Manhattan was developing a skyline that became one of the most distinctive aspects of New York City. Hence, it should not surprise us that Nick mentions it as he describes one of his first views — though implicitly: “with the city rising up across the river in white heaps and sugar lumps” (TGG 67, italics added). The buildings rise up on the other side of the bridge, as if they were giants — it does remind us at Whitman’s dynamic and praising view of Manhattan. Another interesting point are the “white heaps and sugar lumps all built with a wish out of nonolfactory money” (Ibid. 67). As mentioned in chapter three, architecture was very important for the way in which its visitors and inhabitants look at the city. Nick perceives New York City as a white city, just like he called Myrtle’s apartment a “white cake of apartment-house” (TGG 31), and Fitzgerald called New York “the tall white city of today” (MLC 135) — conform to the architectural styles of the moment. In addition, Nick also immediately states that money is indispensable for the creation of a modern metropolis.

Even though Fitzgerald depicted his city as powerful and wealthy because of “nonolfactory money,” one might not forget that he also found his city to be full of promises and mystery: “seen for the first time, in its first wild promise of all the mystery and the beauty in the world” (TGG 67). In his essay “My Lost City,” Fitzgerald remarkably uses a similar expression: “[t]here again was my lost city, wrapped cool in its mystery and promise” (MLC 138). Both “promise” and “mystery” suggest that the city is able to offer more; to surprise its inhabitants. And already even the simple crossing of the Queensboro Bridge surprises Nick as he sees “[a] dead man” passing them, “heaped with blooms, followed by two carriages with drawn blinds, and by more cheerful carriages for friends,” and “a limousine [...] driven by a white chauffeur, in which sat three modish negroes, two
bucks and a girl” (TGG 67). In *New York Fictions*, Peter Brooker argues that at that particular moment, the enchanted, sweet-smelling and sweet-tasting city re-presents the full wonder of the new continent (173). This is a possible and interesting interpretation of Nick’s feelings; it remind one of the ideal of the American dream: the new American continent which symbolized the hope for a better future for millions of immigrants. Given that Nick also comes from abroad, New York City might likewise offer him the hopes and dreams he desires: “‘[a]nything can happen now that we’ve slid over this bridge,’ I thought; ‘anything at all...’” (TGG 67).

The third and last visit Fitzgerald’s narrator makes to New York City is when they all decide to go to town. Jordan, Tom and Nick get into Gatsby’s car, and Daisy and Gatsby drive together in Tom’s blue coupé. After arguing about what they would like to do in the city in the middle of the Queensboro Bridge while driving their cars, they all “took the less explicable step of engaging the parlour of a suite in the Plaza Hotel” (TGG 120). Before they arrive there, Jordan states the following: “I love New York on summer afternoons when everyone’s away. There’s something very sensuous about it — overripe, as if all sorts of funny fruits were going to fall in your hands” (TGG 119). This is another statement of someone’s feelings towards the city, this time described as “sensuous,” which will have a disquieting effect on Tom because has the uneasy feeling that he is losing both his wife Daisy and his mistress Myrtle. Moreover, when they are in the Plaza Hotel, Tom ultimately reveals that he knows about the hidden romance between his wife and Gatsby. There is a conflict between primarily Tom, Gatsby — and to a lesser extent, Daisy — until they simply decide to go home: “[s]o we drove on toward death through the cooling night” (TGG 129). By stating “toward death,” Nick in fact anticipates Myrtle’s death in the Valley of Ashes. Because in the Valley, situated between New York’s glittering world of promises and East Egg’s so-called world of sophistication, Gatsby’s car hits Myrtle Wilson who pops up out of
the gathering darkness — instantly killing her. Fitzgerald then poignantly describes her as follows: “[t]he mouth was wide open and ripped a little at the corners, as though she has choked a little in giving up the tremendous vitality she had stored so long” (TGG 131). In other words, she has lost her vitality and is now somehow united with her husband George, who never shared her vitality and was always covered in dust, just like the Valley.

In short, it is safe to say that *The Great Gatsby* is “a picture of New York life,” given that it offers its readers various images of the city. First, there is West Egg and East Egg, with the latter representing the old-money of Tom and Daisy, the “more fashionable of the two” with inhabitants who are sophisticated and refined. The former represents the new-money of Gatsby, the *nouveaux riches*. Second, there is the Valley of Ashes, the miserable place that connects Long Island with Manhattan. It represents the no-money from the Wilsons, who will never be able to escape from this dreadful place. Last, there is Manhattan in New York City. Nick not only visits Manhattan to attend Myrtle’s party and to meet Meyer Wolfshiem, but also to visit the Plaza Hotel. This will be a place where all characters will be confronted with the truth about Gatsby, Daisy and Tom. Moreover, Nick will share with us his feelings towards the city, especially when he crosses Queensboro Bridge and sees the city for the first time: he gets swallowed up by the tempo and the beauty of the city. He describes it as a “white city,” with buildings that rise up towards clear skies.
5. THE GREAT GATSBY AND THE JAZZ AGE

5.1. Fitzgerald as a Representative of the Twenties

“Part of The Great Gatsby’s lasting significance derives from the extent to which Fitzgerald recognizes and grapples with some basic problems of the twentieth century”
— ERNEST LOCKRIDGE

In the following sections I will investigate Fitzgerald’s important link to the Jazz Age. First, I will investigate how he came to be the most emblematic writer of that age, by focusing on how other people looked at Fitzgerald, and what Fitzgerald himself thought about the Jazz Age. I will focus on his essay “Echoes Of The Jazz Age” in particular, which excellently captures the atmosphere of the Roaring Twenties. Second, I will investigate how The Great Gatsby contributes to its status of the representative novel of the twenties by means of Gatsby’s lavish parties, dreams and illusions. Except for the time he spent in Paris, Fitzgerald’s experiences of the Jazz Age were situated in New York, especially Manhattan. During the Jazz Age, New York City was considered to be one of the most representative cities for the atmosphere of the decade. Consequently, by investigating Fitzgerald’s relation to the Jazz Age, we also get a good impression of the setting of New York City during the 1920s.

5.1.1. Fitzgerald: Symbol of the Jazz Age

Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald was born September 24, 1896, in St. Paul, Minnesota. As mentioned earlier, he came from the Upper Mid-West of the United States; like the major characters of The Great Gatsby. He attended Princeton University, New Jersey, where he

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formed friendships with Edmund Wilson and John Peale Bishop (Lockridge “Intro” 1), and dedicated himself to becoming a writer. His college experience was incomplete, since he left Princeton University after two years to join the US Army. However, the war ended before Fitzgerald could really experience it as a soldier. During his time in the US Army, he fell in love with Zelda Sayre, “a quintessential southern belle from Montgomery, Alabama” (Wagner-Martin 19). At first she rejected him, and Fitzgerald wanted to do anything to make her fall in love with him: he thought he could win her heart by gaining a fortune in order to impress her — just as Jay Gatsby did for Daisy Buchanan. They eventually get married in New York City in the significant year 1920. Fitzgerald’s first novel, This Side of Paradise, appeared a few weeks before their marriage (Ibid. 20). Together, they would become what most critics called “one of the Twenties’ most notorious couples” (Lockridge “Intro” 1). However, this literary couple would not have received this status if it hadn’t been for Fitzgerald’s embodiment of the Jazz Age, a term he invented himself.

Once in New York City, Fitzgerald and Zelda moved to Long Island, Great Neck. His first novel, This Side of Paradise, sold well and became a bestseller, which gave Fitzgerald the earnings he was likely to spend on party-going, drinking and pleasure-seeking. As pointed out earlier, the Jazz Age or Roaring Twenties began during the 1910s and ended with the Great Depression in 1929. According to Brian Way, the Jazz Age aroused images in Fitzgerald of youth, romance, success, degeneracy, callousness, violence, madness and disaster; it provided situations of a social and moral complexity and centrality which the Middle West and Princeton had lacked (9). Indeed, the Jazz Age is considered to be a prosperous age, with alcohol (illegal at the time), dancing, flappers, etc. It was a time of inspiration, and thus very favorable for the creation of any kind of art.
Most literary critics consider Fitzgerald the American writer of the Jazz Age par excellence, assuming that the links between the era and the writer are inseparable. But how valid is this assessment of Fitzgerald, and, even more important, how did he receive this kind of exemplary status? First, it is interesting to investigate how other people thought about Fitzgerald. During the 1920s Fitzgerald was in his mid-twenties, an age often considered to be a time when you stand on the verge of, on the one hand, leaving behind your youthful, playful life, and, on the other hand, starting to take your responsibilities and be an adult. In a way, Fitzgerald never really left that particular first stage of enjoying life. Milton Hindus perfectly describes this by stating that Fitzgerald himself may have recognized that he sometimes wrote more wisely than he lived — Fitzgerald even confessed that he occasionally went over his own books in search of advice as to how to handle his own problems (5-6). Hence, it is safe to say that Fitzgerald enjoyed every part of his life, together with his wife Zelda. Both of them made a reckless and extravagant attempt to savor the possibilities that were so typical of the Jazz Age: wealth, pleasure and freedom (Way 10). Their married life was extravagant and sensual, and even though Fitzgerald earned quite a lot of money with his literary works, the famous couple had the habit of spending more money than their bank account could ever afford.

Consequently, the couple had to cope with serious debts. Furthermore, living with Zelda became rather difficult and their marriage ceased to be as perfect as it once was. As the Great Depression was approaching, Zelda suffered a nervous breakdown and had to spend her time in mental institutions, growing further away from her husband, both of them becoming more and more estranged. In addition, Fitzgerald tried to deal with his debts by re-establishing his writing career; the last novel he finished was Tender is the Night (1934). The Love of the Last Tycoon was never finished and was published posthumously. In 1937, he also moved to Hollywood to work as a screenwriter. Even though this change of
venue seemed to improve his life and career, he could not pursue this new career because he died of a heart attack. This coincides with one of Fitzgerald’s famous claims that “there are no such things as second chances or rises in America” (Sicker 2012): he died before he could “rise up again” in Hollywood.

Because Fitzgerald really embodies those distinctive aspects of the Jazz Age such as the consumption of illegal alcohol (he even became dangerously addicted to it), pleasure-seeking, displaying wealth and enjoying freedom, I can agree with the general perception of Fitzgerald as a representative of the Jazz Age. Way formulates it as follows: “he was the most striking manifestation of the Boom years,” linking his career to the history of the time and linking his life and fiction (10-11). This aspect is very much present in The Great Gatsby, for it is hard to separate Fitzgerald’s life from this novel and the figure of Gatsby in particular. Moreover, Jay Gatsby shares with Fitzgerald a particular aspect of the former’s dreams about Daisy, something which also reflects the disillusions of the Jazz Age. That is to say, both men desperately love a woman, respectively Daisy Buchanan and Zelda Sayre. They are rejected by them, but they do not give up. Since both women belong to a higher social class, Gatsby and Fitzgerald try to impress them with their newly achieved wealth and popular status. In Gatsby’s case this is even more explicitly visible through the exuberant parties he organizes — only to impress his beloved Daisy. Nevertheless, in both situations it is clear that “the possession of what one most desires proves to be poisonous” (Sicker 2012). Gatsby will never fully possess Daisy for she will not be able to admit that she never loved Tom, and Daisy herself will indirectly lead to Gatsby’s own death. George Wilson murders Gatsby, assuming that Gatsby was the one driving the car that killed his wife. Ironically, it was Daisy who was at the steering wheel. Broadly speaking, Gatsby is a man who always wants too much; nothing it is ever enough for him.
Fitzgerald, in turn, had the dream of possessing Zelda, which ultimately came true because he indeed married her. But their marriage entailed several problems, and Zelda was by many people considered mad. In his introduction to *Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Great Gatsby*, Lockridge quotes a passage from Fitzgerald’s *Letters to his Daughter*, where Fitzgerald contemplates about his early life and his marriage to Zelda:

> When I was your age I lived with a great dream. The dream grew and I learned how to speak of it and make people listen. Then the dream divided one day when I decided to marry your mother after all, even though I knew she was spoiled and meant no good to me. I was sorry immediately I had married her but, being patient in those days, made the best of it and got to love her in another way. You came along and for a long time we made quite a lot of happiness out of our lives. But I was a man divided — she wanted me to work too much for *her* and not enough for my dream. She realized too late that work was dignity, and the only dignity, and tried to atone for it by working herself, but it was too late and she broke and is broken forever (2).

In this quote Fitzgerald also literally speaks about “his dream,” and, in my opinion, his dream might be interpreted in two ways. First, there is the obvious link to gaining money and becoming a great and successful novelist. This would explain why he says that after their marriage, Zelda did not support his dream because “she wanted me to work too much for *her*.” Second, I would argue that his dream might also be the pleasure he finds in wanting to possess Zelda, just like Gatsby yearns for his green light, for possessing Daisy. However, when Fitzgerald marries Zelda he can, from that moment onwards, call her his wife, and the eagerness, the longing to possess her is gone forever. This is also the case with Gatsby: the colossal green light loses its power and significance when he confesses the meaning of it to Daisy.

In short, Fitzgerald’s life did share many of the characteristics of the so-called Roaring Twenties. Many critics and historians linked him to the Jazz Age, and he indeed embodied, on the one hand, the hopes and desires of the generation, and the recklessness
and disillusions on the other. He enjoyed life, but also experienced how life, and by extension the whole atmosphere of the Jazz Age, could shatter his dreams. Just like Gatsby, he desperately wanted something more, spending more money than he actually could afford: for both men, it was never enough.

5.1.2. Echoes of the Jazz Age

In what follows I will analyze how Fitzgerald himself looked at the Jazz Age, and how he expresses his feelings towards his coming of age in his essay “Echoes of the Jazz Age.” Fitzgerald actually knew very little about jazz music himself, despite his invention of the term “Jazz Age.” However, “Fitzgerald was one of the first among white American writers to include perceptive reactions to jazz performance in his literary work” (Denner 2). As Peter Brooker argues in New York Fictions, “[f]or Fitzgerald, the ‘Jazz Age’ meant young (white) people petting and smoking and offending their elders, a whole race going hedonistic, deciding on pleasure” (185-6). Brooker in fact already cites Fitzgerald’s “Echoes of the Jazz Age” to explain how the latter saw the Jazz Age. As pointed out, Fitzgerald was a pleasure-seeker, eager to spend his money on alcohol and wanting to enjoy life as much as he could.

His editor, Maxwell Perkins, hence “challenged him to prove [that he had named the twenties ‘the Jazz Age’] by writing a memoir of the period” (Lane et al. 256), resulting in his essay “Echoes of the Jazz Age”. In this essay, Fitzgerald attempts to capture the atmosphere and characteristics of that particular age, he criticized it and offered his vision of the promises and failures of the age (Ibid. 256). In general, he wants to verify if the reality ever matched the illusions and promises of the decade. He starts with stating that in reality, “it was too soon to speak about the Jazz Age with perspective” (“Echoes” 257), which is eventually true because he wrote his essay in November 1931 — only two years after the
Stock Market Crash. Nonetheless, Fitzgerald continues analyzing the decade, describing himself in the third person:

[t]he present writer already looks back to it with nostalgia. It bore him up, flattered him and gave him more money than he had dreamed of, simply for telling people that he felt as they did, that something had to be done with all the nervous energy stored up and unexpended in the War (Ibid. 459).

In this quote, Fitzgerald admits that he “felt as they did;” that he appreciates and enjoys the same things like everyone else. He can identify with other people, and he states that “something had to be done with all the nervous energy stored up and unexpended in the War,” as if it is the perfect excuse for his behavior. Fitzgerald acknowledges social changes, such as the fact that “it was characteristic of the Jazz Age that it had no interest in politics at all” (Ibid. 258). He further continues evaluating the decade, almost year by year, which shows us that Fitzgerald arrives at a very sharp definition of that period, given that he determines the boundaries of the Jazz Age as follows: “[t]he ten-year period that, as if reluctant to die outmoded in its bed, leaped to a spectacular death in October, 1929, began about the time of the May Day riots in 1919” (Ibid. 257). Furthermore, Fitzgerald noted that during the booming years of the Jazz Age, it was an older generation that was taking over the scene. It was “the wildest of all generations, the generation which had been adolescent during the confusion of the War, [that] brusquely shouldered my contemporaries out of the way and danced into the limelight” (Ibid. 258). Put differently, the younger generation enjoyed being young whereas it was the older generation that wanted to celebrate being free and boundless through attending various parties. This created the distinctive character of the decade, giving birth to what Way calls a “new social form, the cocktail party, where men and women met to drink, to flirt, to dance to jazz and to gossip” (12). Fitzgerald also mentions the “Flappers,” the women of the generation who joined their men on those parties and who challenged women’s traditional roles (“Echoes” 258). In other words, it was
“[a] whole race going hedonistic,” especially the elder generation, “deciding on pleasure” (Ibid. 258). Nevertheless, Fitzgerald also takes into account the downsides of the age:

[by this time [1927] contemporaries of mine had begun to disappear into the dark maw of violence. A classmate killed his wife and himself on Long Island, another tumbled ‘accidently’ from a skyscraper in Philadelphia, another purposely from a skyscraper in New York. One was killed in a speak-easy in Chicago; another was beaten to death in a speak-easy in New York and crawled home to the Princeton Club to die [...] (Ibid. 261).

In other words, he states that, alongside the parties and pleasures of the age, various incidents arose in the larger cities such as New York, Philadelphia and Chicago — not so coincidentally the cities where the resistance against Prohibition ran high. Violence and murder did not surprise him anymore: “these things happened not during the depression but during the boom” (Ibid. 261).

On the whole, Fitzgerald brilliantly captures the essence of the age, both with his essay as well as his fiction. He describes the decade as being a party; varying between a cocktail party and “a children’s party taken over by the elders” (Ibid. 258); it is “the most expensive orgy in history” (Ibid. 262), and he indeed admits that it was “pleasant to be in one’s twenties in such a certain and unworried time, because moralizing is easy now” (Ibid. 262). No one had to worry about a thing; people enjoyed themselves. In his essay, Fitzgerald depicts himself as both an observer and a participant of the age. He admits that “he felt as they did,” but only at the beginning of the essay. Therefore, he is rather an observer who wants to evoke the atmosphere of the age. He recognizes both the charms and the disadvantages of the age, and that is what makes his views of the Jazz Age so realistic and poignant.
5.2. *The Great Gatsby* as a Representative Novel of the Twenties

“‘Anyhow, he gives large parties,’ said Jordan [...]. ‘And I like large parties. They’re so intimate. At small parties there isn’t any privacy’”.

— F. Scott Fitzgerald

In the following sections I will examine how Fitzgerald’s most famous novel *The Great Gatsby* perfectly portrays the ambience of the Jazz Age. As Way points out, Fitzgerald did not invent entirely new modes of experience, but in his novels and essays, he wrote about current changes in behavior, feeling and moral outlook as if they were accomplished facts (10). These aspects I want to show in *The Great Gatsby* by looking at two aspects of the novel. First, there are Gatsby’s famous Prohibition parties that reflect his fascination with money and his love for Daisy. Second, I will analyze how the novel represents the American dream through various characters such as Gatsby, Myrtle, and George Wilson.

5.2.1. Gatsby’s Parties

*The Great Gatsby* is known for capturing the spirit of the Jazz Age. One of the defining elements that proves this are Gatsby’s famous parties located in his majestic mansion on West Egg. These parties are considered to be the quintessential Twenties parties, with Flappers, illegal alcohol, and Charleston music. In the novel, the narrator and Jay Gatsby’s neighbor, Nick Carraway attends one of Myrtle’s parties in her apartment in Manhattan, and two of Gatsby’s parties. At the beginning of chapter three, Nick witnesses one of Gatsby’s parties for the first time: “[t]here was music from my neighbor’s house through the summer nights. In his blue gardens men and girls came and went like moths among the whisperings and the champagne and the stars” (TGG 41). He gives us an idea of Gatsby’s wealth and the excessive status of his parties:

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[o]n week-ends, his Rolls-Royce became an omnibus, bearing parties to and from the city between nine in the morning and long past midnight. And on Mondays eight servants, including an extra gardener, toiled all day with mops and scrubbing-brushes and hammers and garden-shears, repairing the ravages of the night before. 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 (TGG 41).

Nick attempts to give its readers a good idea of how Gatsby’s parties are organized. Everything is arranged perfectly: there is an abundance of food, people and cocktails, freshly made with oranges and lemons “from a fruitierer in New York” (TGG 41). There is an orchestra, piccolos and servants. People chatter with each other, and most of them do not even know each other’s names. Nick points out that the first time he visits the party, he is “one of the few guests who has actually been invited” by Gatsby himself, because all of the others simple went there without an invitation (TGG 43). He meets Jordan Baker at the party, the only person whom he already knows, and listens to all of the rumors about the mysterious Jay Gatsby — told by two girls dressed in yellow: “[Gatsby] doesn’t want any trouble with anybody.” / “Somebody told me that he killed a man once.” / “It’s more that he was a German spy during the war” (TGG 45). In other words, nobody really knows who Gatsby is — which will only arouse Nick’s eagerness to find out more about him.

It is interesting to compare Nick’s description of his first party at Gatsby’s with Fitzgerald’s description of the Jazz Age in his “Echoes of the Jazz Age.” Fitzgerald depicts the parties during the Jazz Age as “a children’s party taken over by the elders” (“Echoes” 258), and in The Great Gatsby Nick states that the guests “conducted themselves according to the rules of an amusement park” (TGG 43). Given that an amusement park is often linked to children, I would suggest that Gatsby’s party is characteristic of the Jazz Age, for the elders are indeed enjoying themselves as if they were children. Second, it is clear that Gatsby’s party coincides with what Fitzgerald calls “the age of excess” (“Echoes” 258). The guests can
find everything they want at the party, ranging from entertainment to foods and beverages. As pointed out, Nick mentions the extreme luxury at the beginning of chapter three, almost astonished by the profusion of food and alcohol. This is probably due to the fact that Gatsby, in his invitation to Nick, wrote the following: “the honour would be entirely Gatsby’s, it said, if I would attend his ‘little party’ that night” (TGG 43, italics added). Gatsby ironically called his party “little;” maybe because of his modesty, or maybe because he just wanted Nick to have low expectations for the party so that the bewilderment would be even greater.

The second Gatsby party that Nick attends is narrated in chapter six. This time, Daisy herself is present at the party. This reminds us of the fact that Gatsby actually organizes these parties only to impress Daisy, who lives at East Egg. He wants to show her that he has now accumulated wealth and that he can afford such parties. Both parties are extraordinary, and according to Way they display Gatsby’s creative powers — his capacity to mix the beautiful with the vulgar, the magical with the absurd (99). In addition, Gatsby’s parties also reflect his dreams and desires, given that they illustrate the wealth through which he wanted to possess Daisy.

Before Nick attends both of Gatsby’s parties, he visits Myrtle Wilson’s party at her apartment in Manhattan. Nick immediately says that he was drunk that afternoon: “I have been drunk just twice in my life, and the second time was that afternoon; everything that happened had a dim, hazy cast over it, although until after eight o’clock the apartment was full of cheerful sun” (TGG 32). This obviously suggests that the guests are provided with alcohol; in other words, it is a “raucous Prohibition-style party” (Way 99). In that sense, we get an idea of what those Prohibition parties look like. As mentioned in chapter two, in 1919 the Eighteenth Amendment “prohibited the manufacture, sale, and transportation of
alcoholic beverages” (Norton et al. 640). Nonetheless, Prohibition failed miserably in New York City, since numerous speakeasies operated in the city, and hence the elder generation could still enjoy an alcoholic beverage. Gatsby’s parties, as well as Myrtle’s party, show us that the Eighteenth Amendment did not turn out to be so effective as the government wanted. In other words, one can argue that those the parties in The Great Gatsby are some kind of prophecy of the Great Depression. They show the callousness and immorality of the people during the Jazz Age, given that everybody was violating the law. In that sense, Gatsby may be seen as a bootlegger himself, the person who is in charge of providing illegal alcohol. When Tom attends Gatsby’s party he even explicitly mentions his notions about Gatsby: “‘[w]ho is this Gatsby anyhow?’ demanded Tom suddenly. ‘Some big bootlegger?’” (TGG 104). Furthermore, Tom restates his ideas about Gatsby during the scene in the Plaza Hotel: “I found out what your ‘drug-stores’ were. [...] He and this Wolfshiem bought up a lot of side-street drug-stores here and in Chicago and sold grain alcohol over the counter. That’s one of his little stunts. I picked him for a bootlegger the first time I saw him, and I wasn’t far wrong” (TGG 127).

5.2.2. Gatsby’s Dreams

Most critics tend to agree that The Great Gatsby may be considered one of the defining works of the twentieth century that embodies the concept of the American dream. More specifically, it criticizes the concept, and it depicts the “degenerated 1920’s vision of it” (Changizi, Ghasemi 62). In their article “The Promise and Failure of the American Dream in Scott Fitzgerald’s Fiction,” Parvin Ghasemi and Mitra Tiur argue that The Great Gatsby is Fitzgerald’s best fictional account of the promise and failure of the American dream because here the congruity of story, style and attitude is closest and most meaningful to the depiction of this theme (118). Put differently, The Great Gatsby displays, on the one hand, the
hopes and dreams of self-made man Gatsby, and, on the other hand, it reveals the
disillusions and breakdown of the dream.

The character that best represents the values of the American dream is Jay Gatsby
himself. Born as James Gatz, he transformed himself into Jay Gatsby because of his love for
Daisy Buchanan. Jordan Baker explains that Gatsby met Daisy five years ago during the war.
They fell in love, and ever since that moment Gatsby wanted nothing more than to regain
her love for him, in other words, “to repeat the past” (TGG 106). In the meantime, however,
Daisy Fay has married the extremely wealthy Tom Buchanan, and they have moved to East
Egg — the place where the sophisticated and wealthy people live. Gatsby lives at the other
side of the bay in West Egg. He organizes lavish parties to impress Daisy, to show off his
wealth. Nick states the following about his neighbor:

Gatsby, who represented everything for which I have an unaffected scorn. If
personality is an unbroken series of successful gestures, then there was something
gorgeous about him, some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life, as if he
were related to those intricate machines that register earthquakes ten thousand
miles away. [...] 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
(TGG 8, italics added).

Nick admires Gatsby, in particular his “extraordinary gift for hope.” He is moved by
Gatsby’s longing for the dream, his dream of conquering Daisy’s heart. The green light at
Daisy’s dock symbolizes Gatsby’s love and desires. Ernest Lockridge notes that Gatsby’s
dream consists of three basic and related parts: the desire to repeat the past, the desire for
money, and the desire for incarnation of ‘unutterable visions’ in the material earth (“Intro”
11). However, I think that those three dreams can be put together into one dream: Daisy.
For Gatsby, the “desire to repeat the past” stands for the moment when Daisy loved him
unquestionably. Furthermore, Daisy also represents Gatsby’s longing for money and
material gain: “[h]er voice is full of money,” says Gatsby; which proves to us his fascination with Daisy, her higher social class and her money. She is, as Way puts it, “the substance of his dreams, she is the incarnation of it” (100).

As mentioned in chapter two, the American dream stands for the hopes and beliefs that you can rise in society, and that you can achieve something as long as you work hard and follow certain principles. Everyone is equal, and everyone has the right to pursue happiness. Nevertheless, the definition of this creed has changed through the years. This was also the case during the Jazz Age. Critics agree that during the Jazz Age, the American dream became corrupted. According to Changizi and Ghasemi, the original ideals of freedom, equality and happiness are replaced by infatuation with material possessions, immorality and bigotry (63). It becomes a pursuit of money rather than a pursuit of happiness. Likewise, Marius Bewley labels the Jazz Age “a corrupt period” for the beliefs in the American dream (38). This is reflected in the character of Gatsby. Although his dream primarily symbolizes his love for Daisy, we may not forget that it also stands for the desire for money and material gain. Gatsby works his way up to reach wealth: he is a self-made man. However, Gatsby achieves this by choosing “the short way of criminal activity and bootlegging, to move his way closer to the realization of his dream” (Changizi, Ghasemi 64). In other words, Gatsby is willing to do anything for the realization of his dream, even if that means he has to indulge in criminal activities such as bootlegging.

Furthermore, also Myrtle and George want to pursue their version of the American dream. Myrtle desperately wants to belong to a higher class, and so she starts an adulterous affair with Tom Buchanan. Even though he breaks her nose at her own party, she accepts it because with Tom she can belong to the higher social class and escape the dreadful place she comes from. George, in turn, wants to move Westwards together with Myrtle. He wants to buy Tom’s blue coupé — he refuses to travel by train — in order to move to a place where
everything will be better. By buying the car George also hopes to win back the love of his wife Myrtle. However, none of these dreams will come true. Myrtle will never escape the Valley of Ashes because she gets killed in a car accident. Consequently, George is also unable to move to the West, because he loses his wife and all of his dreams with it. For Gatsby, there is no happy ending either, since Daisy will never fulfill the high demands of his dream. She is unable to tell Gatsby she never loved Tom, maybe because she was blinded by Tom’s wealth and at the same time also attracted to it. Even though they relived their relationship for a while, Daisy still chooses to stay with Tom — and Tom’s fortune — rather than following her heart and Gatsby. In other words, neither Gatsby, Myrtle or George will be able to live out their dream.

At the end of the novel, Nick arranges a funeral for Gatsby. In a way, he wants to make it as grand as Gatsby’s parties, but nobody wants to come. It seems like nobody cares about him anymore now that his parties are over — and the cornucopia of free beverages and food is gone. Gatsby, with his “extraordinary gift for hope,” and his enduring dream, now stands completely alone (TGG 8). Nick is repulsed by this; by the shallow East in particular. Daisy chooses to be with Tom, and when Nick meets Tom after Gatsby’s funeral, he admits that “they were careless people, Tom and Daisy” (TGG 170). Nick wants to return to his Mid-West, and on the last pages of the novel Nick goes to Gatsby’s “failure of a house once more” (TGG 171). He goes to the private beach and contemplates America’s history and Gatsby’s failed dream:

[a]nd as the moon rose higher the inessential houses began to melt away until gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for the Dutch sailor’s eyes — a fresh, green breast of the new world. [...] 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 (TGG 171).
Put differently, Nick compares how the new continent must have looked like for the Dutch sailors, the early settlers, with how Gatsby must have felt when he first saw the green light. Kimberly Hearne comments on this: “[Gatsby], like the sailors, had come a long way and could not possibly understand fully the elusiveness of dreams and the contradictory quality of the mirage before him — so close, yet so far” (193). Gatsby, like the early settlers, believed in the American dream, represented through his green light, and the possibilities that the new continent could bring them — either an opportunity to have a better future or regaining an old love. For them, America holds a certain promise, but Fitzgerald shows with *The Great Gatsby* that those promises cannot be guaranteed. Nick ends with perhaps the most significant quote of the entire novel: “Gatsby believed in the green light. It eluded us then, but that’s no matter — tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms further... And one fine morning — So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past” (TGG 171-2). Fitzgerald points out that Americans always have high hopes, ambitions and dreams. Even if they elude them, they will still stand strong and “run faster” or “stretch their arms further.” Like “boats against the current” they move forward, but at the same time also backwards towards their past. “We look ahead and back at the same time; we, like Gatsby, can be blinded by our own ambition and miss the truth (the reality) that lies before us” (Hearne 193). In short, *The Great Gatsby* portrays Fitzgerald’s vision of the American dream, that is to say, the corruption of it due to the Jazz Age. Even though that according to the American dream, it is possible to achieve anything, the novel shows us that this is not as easy as it seems: neither Myrtle nor George reach their goals, and Gatsby never gets the love he so badly desired and hoped for.
6.1. Theories of Adaptation

“[C]inema is still playing second fiddle to literature.”
— RABINDRANATH TAGORE

In this final chapter of my thesis I will briefly investigate the defining features of adaptations in general, focusing on film adaptations in particular. Furthermore, I will analyze three film adaptations of Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, the ones released in respectively 1974, 2000, and 2013. I will have a look at the way in which New York City is represented, how Gatsby’s parties are portrayed and how the atmosphere of the Jazz Age is reproduced. Given that all three film adaptations belong to a different time period, it will be interesting to see if this had an influence on the representation of the adaptation itself.

In general, although the word “adaptation” most often evokes a transfer from page to screen, we may not forget that because of all kinds of new material — “not only film, television, radio, and the various electronic media, of course, but also theme parks, historical monuments, and virtual reality experiments” (Hutcheon xi) — new ways of adapting emerge. In other words, adaptations can manifest in various forms. In order to give a more general definition of the concept of adaptations, Linda Hutcheon states the following in *A Theory of Adaptation*:

> [a]daptation is repetition, but repetition without replication. And there are manifestly many different possible intentions behind the act of adaptation: the urge to consume and erase in the memory of the adapted text or to call it into questions as the desire to pay tribute by copying (7, italics added).

13 Parts of this chapter were borrowed from my unpublished Bachelor Paper “Adaptations and Reading Experiences of L. Frank Baum’s *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*” (Houthoofd 2012)

An adaptation thus repeats the same story, but there can — and always will be — some alternations. Further, Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan offer us two other interpretations of adaptations in their book *Adaptations; From Text to Screen, Screen to Text*. First, “Wagner [suggests] three categories of adaptations: ‘transposition,’ in which the literary text is transferred as accurately as possible to film; ‘commentary,’ in which the original is altered, and ‘analogy,’ in which the original text is used as a point of departure” (24). Both “commentary” and especially “transposition” can be seen as faithful adaptations of the original work. By contrast, with “analogy” it may be the case that the audience does not even recognize the adaptation, or forgets that they are dealing with an adaptation. Second, “Dudley Andrew suggests that adaptations be classified as ‘borrowing,’ ‘intersecting,’ and ‘transforming:’ ‘borrowing’ makes no claims to fidelity, ‘intersection’ attempts to recreate the distinctness of the original text and ‘transformation’ reproduces the ‘essential’ text” (*Ibid.* 7).

Needless to say, there still exist a lot more approximations towards adaptations. But broadly speaking, an adaptation undoubtedly deals with the repetition of an earlier work. On the one hand, it may faithfully retell the same story. On the other hand, the original work may be altered. An example of the latter is Baz Luhrmann’s *Romeo+Juliet*: the director took the original story line from Shakespeare’s famous play, but modernized it by mixing classic elements with modern aspects, and hence creating a new version, a work of his own. Hence, an adaptation has to be a work on its own, and according to Hutcheon, the novelty lies in what one *does* with the text (20). It is a process of creating something new that involves both “(re-)interpretation and then (re-)creation” (*Ibid.* 8). Equally important is the intention behind the act of adaptation. Morris Beja points out that the intentions behind it could be financial, perhaps, or derive from the sheer need to come up with material to be filmed (77). Moreover, a particular work may also be adapted due to its popularity (think of,
for instance, *Harry Potter*), or because the adapter wanted to pay tribute to the original work.

In short, Cartmell and Whelehan state that perhaps the most defining principle of any adaptation is intertextuality; the word “adaptation,” after all, crucially informs us that there is more than one text and more than one author (27-28). Furthermore, given that adaptations always involves both “(re-)interpretation and then (re-)creation” (Hutcheon 8), we can assume that adaptations are supported with, on the one hand, the familiarity with the original work, and, on the other hand, the novelty of the adapted work. Moreover, there exist two types of audiences for adaptations: knowing and unknowing audiences. The latter experiences the adaptation as a completely new work, without having any knowledge of the original work. The former audience has a certain foreknowledge of the original work, and thus experiences it as an adaptation as such. Hence, a successful adaptation has to be able to satisfy both audiences.

### 6.1.2. Film Adaptations

In order to have a better understanding of the succeeding discussions on the three film adaptations of *The Great Gatsby*, it is interesting to say something more about the process and characteristics of film adaptations in particular. As pointed out, adaptations can occur in many different forms such as stage adaptations, television adaptations, game adaptations and film adaptations. In this chapter I will focus on film adaptations in particular; that is to say, a novel being adapted for the screen. Film adaptations are probably one of the most popular ways of adapting, given its numerous examples. Beja notes that “for most years, the proportion of American movies based on novels is around 30 percent — sometimes higher, and rarely under 20 percent. Actually, figures would be a good deal higher if we counted
only ‘major’ or ‘prestige’ productions” (78). In addition, Beja also states that, according to his own calculations, more than three-fourths of the Academy Awards for “best picture” have gone to adaptations, since the Academy’s inception in 1927-28 (78). Put differently, it is safe to say that film adaptations play a major role in the American movie industry.

The reason why film producers want to adapt a novel into a movie are quite complex and varied, but there are still some general motives behind the act of adapting. First, there is the urge to adapt a successful or famous novel into a movie because its audience “desires to see, as it were, what the book looks like. In the beginning there is the word, but we wish to see it made flesh” (Beja 79). Linda Hutcheon affirms this: “film adaptations obviously also add bodies, voices, sound, music, props, costumes, architecture, and so on” (37). So although it remains the same story, the film adaptation will always be different from its original, because it adds a whole new dimension to the original story. Besides, “often a film version boosts the sales of the novel, as publishers know” (Hutcheon 90). Nevertheless, film adaptations are often evaluated in negative terms of loss: a novel usually contains a lot more details than the movie, because otherwise the movie would be too long — or simply because the movie has to be different from the original. Beja argues that because of the fact that parts of a particular novel are left out of the movie, its audience sometimes feels “betrayed:”

[t]hey resent it if ‘liberties’ are taken, or if a movie ‘distorts’ or ‘fools around’ with a book of which they are fond. There is no doubt that Hollywood has given us cause to be suspicious: instances in which movies have added love interest, tacked on happy endings, or ‘improved’ things to make them more ‘cinematic’ have caused many living authors to squirm in agony or scream in fury, and many dead ones to turn over in their graves (81).

Put differently, with these “liberties” producers can create a totally new and different work. However, we may not forget that even though the film adaptation may be poorer in terms
of its narrative content, it does make up for this in terms of its visuals: like Hutcheon states, it adds voices, sound, music, props, costumes, architecture, and so on (37). Besides, this new medium offers producers a broad range of possibilities to focus on a certain aspect of the original text, such as, for instance, the green light from *The Great Gatsby*. In the novel we are only able to imagine how the green light will look like, but in the film adaptation we can actually experience it. In short, a movie “can represent anything — even character experiences or thoughts can be showed through the ‘literary device’ of the voice-over” (Hutcheon 58-9).
6.2. Film Adaptations of *The Great Gatsby*

“The make all the decisions. So all those terrible negative reviews?
That’s my fault. I am responsible for everything in it.”
— BAZ LUHRMANN ON *THE GREAT GATSBY*\(^\text{15}\)

*The Great Gatsby* has been the subject of various adaptations. There are book adaptations, theatre adaptations, music adaptations, game adaptations, television adaptations, radio adaptations and film adaptations. There are five film adaptations\(^\text{16}\) of Fitzgerald’s most famous novel, but I will only focus on the last three of them. The first adaptation is a silent film adaptation directed by Herbert Brenon only a year after the novel was published. However, apparently only the trailer of this movie survived and it seems that no other footage of the movie is still available. The second adaptation was released in 1949 and produced by Paramount Pictures. The third adaptation is the one released in 1974, starring Robert Redford as Jay Gatsby and Mia Farrow as Daisy Buchanan. It was followed in 2000 by the fourth adaptation directed by Robert Markowitz, and ultimately with a fifth adaptation: Baz Luhrmann’s most recent adaptation, starring Leonardo DiCaprio as Gatsby and Carey Mulligan as Daisy.

Given that *The Great Gatsby* is considered the supreme American novel, it should not surprise us that it was rapidly followed by various film adaptations. In the following sections I will analyze the 1974, 2000 and 2013 version of *The Great Gatsby*, and I will focus on the aspects which have been obviously relevant for my thesis: how New York City is represented in the movie, and how the atmosphere of the Jazz Age is portrayed. I will investigate Gatsby’s parties in particular, and how the characters, and in fact the entire movie, pursue the American dream. Given that all three film adaptations were released in three different time periods (respectively 1974, 2000 and 2013), it is interesting to see


\(^{16}\) The American movie *G* (2002) is also loosely based on *The Great Gatsby*, but I will not analyze this adaptation.
whether this has a particular influence on the representation of those mentioned aspects. In addition to that, I will briefly analyze the use of music in the movies. In these particular cases, Jazz music should support the movie — creating the appropriate sphere. Nevertheless, in the latest version of The Great Gatsby we will see that its director, Baz Luhrmann, used modern and contemporary music.

Even though all three movies deal with one and the same story, they are all different. As pointed out, change is inevitable: not a single adaptation can be exactly the same as its original work. Some adaptations are very faithful to the original story, while others change the story line or simply delete parts. Moreover, the director’s view and feelings towards the story are important too. How does he want to represent the Jazz Age, or perhaps even more important, how does he interpret the character of Jay Gatsby? It must have been a challenge for those three directors to find and cast the perfect actor who is willing to play one of America’s most iconic, but also most difficult characters. What is more, Gatsby is the kind of character that fascinates everyone: we, as a reader, are close to him, and we all have our own version of how Gatsby would look like in our minds. These are some of the many obstacles a director has to face when adapting The Great Gatsby in particular.


The first film adaptation that I will analyze is Jack Clayton’s The Great Gatsby (1974), starring Robert Redford in the leading role as Gatsby and Mia Farrow as Daisy. It is the third screen version of The Great Gatsby, and perhaps the most faithful adaptation — although it certainly contains some strange differences compared to the original story. The movie starts with showing images of Gatsby’s interior, his house, and some pictures of Daisy surrounded by
golden objects. Then the movie continues with the voice-over of Nick who quotes literally from the novel so that we get to know Nick’s thoughts and feelings.


>[t]he language is right, even the chunks of exposition that have sometimes been turned into dialogue. The sets and costumes and most of the performances are exceptionally good, but the movie itself is as lifeless as a body that's been too long at the bottom of a swimming pool (“The Great Gatsby (1974")).

In my opinion, Canby is right in stating that the movie did a good job in portraying the Jazz Age, but it forgot about the true essence of the novel. Gatsby’s parties have everything you would expect of a Twenties party: illegal alcohol, a live band playing Charleston music, a lot of people dancing and chatting, Flappers, etc. In short, the movie offers its audience an adequate view on how Gatsby’s parties may have looked like.

The setting of the story — East and West Egg, the Valley of Ashes and New York City — does not seem to be so important for the movie. It is a straightforward way of representing the places Fitzgerald described in his novel. From East and West Egg we only get to see the Buchanans house and Gatsby’s house. The Valley of Ashes is a deserted place, dark and cloudy, with apparently only George Wilson’s garage in front of the advertisement of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg. George looks very shy at first, and Myrtle humiliates him quite often. The various dates she has with Tom Buchanan suggest that she really loves him because he is wealthy, given that she receives all sorts of presents: she can buy a dog and gets a collar with diamonds, she gets a brand new red dress, etc. Next, there is New York City, and the only quote that is used to describe the city is the one from Jordan on their way
to the Plaza Hotel: “I love New York on summer afternoons when everyone’s away” (TGG
119). Apart from this quote and the visits they pay to the Manhattan, the city does not
really mean something for the movie. However, at the end of the movie, after Gatsby’s
death, Gatsby’s father states that he explicitly wants to take Gatsby’s body East, because
“Jimmy always liked it better down East — he rose to his position in the East” (The Great
Gatsby 1974). This suggests Gatsby’s moving towards the East, like all the other characters,
in order to accumulate money and establish his wealthy status.

Jack Clayton’s interpretation of Gatsby, played by Robert Redford, is more focused
on the romantic love between him and Daisy than on the pursuing of his dream. Consequently, Gatsby’s green light does not seem to have the strong, yet mysterious power from the novel. In this particular movie, the green light gets symbolized in a ring with a green stone which Gatsby wants to give as a present to Daisy, but she refuses it and wants him to wear it instead — maybe a hint towards her denial of staying with Gatsby? In my opinion, the movie and its characters remain rather shallow, and Clayton focusses too much on the relationship between Daisy and Gatsby; proven by the capitation on the movie’s advertising poster: “gone is the romance that was so divine.” It represents the atmosphere and the parties of the Jazz Age in a reasonably good and adequate way, but it misses the true soul of the novel: Gatsby’s “extraordinary gift of hope,” the strong determination not to give up his dream, and the disillusions that come together with his dream (TGG 8).

6.2.2. The Great Gatsby (2000)

The second film adaptation is The Great Gatsby (2000) directed by Robert Markowitz. This fourth adaptation of Gatsby starts immediately with a flashback to Gatsby’s murder: we see him lying in his pool on an inflatable mattress, being murdered by George. It is followed
by the voice-over of Nick who first gives us his thoughts about Gatsby, and how “the foul dust poisoned his dreams in the summer of 1922” (The Great Gatsby 2000). Next, he continues with his opinion about his new neighborhood, calling Long Island “one of the strangest communities of Eastern America” (The Great Gatsby 2000). When he is driving towards the house of his cousin Daisy, he comments that on East Egg “millionaires tucked themselves away in their hidden palaces” (The Great Gatsby 2000). In other words, Nick immediately acknowledges the social difference between the two regions. Next, there is the Valley of Ashes, which resembles more an industrial area than the swamp or dumping place Fitzgerald wanted to create. George’s garage is small, and he will not discover Myrtle’s affair with Tom until she dies. Last, similar to the 1974 version of The Great Gatsby, New York City does not play a particular role in the movie. It is the place where Myrtle organizes her little party, and where the characters visit the Plaza Hotel. There are no quotes used to describe the New York City, nor does the audience get to see an accurate image of it.

The movie rather fails in representing the atmosphere of the Jazz Age. The costumes are not as accurate and beautiful as in the 1974 version, nor were Gatsby’s parties that extraordinary as we would expect them to be; they lack the overwhelming character as described in the novel. Daisy does not have the typical 1920s hairstyle, and she even wears a black dress — whereas she normally always wears white as a sign of her innocence. In my opinion, the parties do not give the audience the idea of being in the 1920s. However, compared to the 1974 version, the movie is not that long and boring, and the actors enact their character very well. Markowitz’s Gatsby, played by Toby Stephens, lacks the romantic and dreamy aspects of the previous film adaptation, but he rather embodies Gatsby’s mysterious and sinister side. Unfortunately, the audience gets to know Gatsby’s background very early. After Nick’s visit to the Buchanans, we see Daisy staring across the bay towards Gatsby’s house, remembering the moment when she first met James Gatz, and how she was
not able to remember his name: “what was your name again? Glaxton? Gatsby? — Gatsby’s fine” (The Great Gatsby 2000). In other words, Daisy herself triggered Gatsby to rename himself, contrary to the original novel where Gatsby himself decides to do so. In short, this is a fairly reliable adaptation that remains faithful to the original text. The actors embody their characters very well, but it seems that Markowitz gives away Gatsby’s mysteries too early.

6.2.3. The Great Gatsby (2013)

The last film adaptation, the most recent and much-discussed one, is Baz Luhrmann’s interpretation of Fitzgerald’s novel. The movie premiered on May 10 in Manhattan, New York City, and on May 15 in Belgium. Leonardo DiCaprio received the difficult task to play Jay Gatsby, Carey Mulligan plays Daisy and Tobey Maguire plays Nick Carraway. Luhrmann, an Australian film director, is known for his colorful and extravagant movies, such as Romeo+Juliet (1996) and Moulin Rouge! (2001). This extravagant approach can sometimes scare off future audiences: Luhrmann’s director style is either one you love, or one you simply hate. In addition, Luhrmann’s adaptation is shot in 3D and includes a soundtrack of Jay-Z, and songs of Beyoncé, Florence+The Machine, Goyte, Lana Del Rey, etc. Some people heavily criticized the incorporation of today’s popular music into a movie that portrays the 1920s atmosphere, already before the movie was released. Nevertheless, one could argue that Luhrmann is perhaps one of the only directors who dares to take up the challenge of faithfully adapting Fitzgerald’s story into a modern, vivid, yet poignantly real version of the novel. He managed to create a particular version of the story, how he himself saw New York City and the Jazz Age.
In *A Theory of Adaptation*, Hutcheon states that “if the audience knows that a certain director or actor has made other films of a particular kind, that intertextual knowledge too might well impinge on their interpretation of the adaptation they are watching” (126). This is certainly the case with *The Great Gatsby* (2013): audiences that are familiar with Luhrmann’s *Moulin Rouge!* (2001), will definitely recognize some of the exuberance and hysteria that is so typical of Luhrmann’s style — especially in the first part of *The Great Gatsby* (2013). A further link with Luhrmann’s *Moulin Rouge!* is the use of a frame story. Whereas in *The Great Gatsby* and the other two film adaptations, Nick immediately starts retelling his story to the reader, the movie starts with Nick visiting a sanitarium. He retells his story about Gatsby to a shrink, and when he struggles to find his words the shrink tells him to write them down, resulting in the actual novel. This suggests that Nick is in therapy — probably due to a depression, or a drinking problem in the aftermath of the Jazz Age. Put differently, through introducing the therapy scene it seems as if the retelling of the story forms part of Nick’s healing process, hence we experience his story through the use of flashbacks.

Concerning its setting, I will once more look at the settings that I have discussed earlier in this thesis: West Egg and East Egg, the Valley of Ashes and New York City. First, we get to see West Egg, and how Nick’s little house is squeezed between the majestic palaces of the *nouveaux riches*. When Nick visits Daisy and Tom, the camera simply floats above the water of the bay towards their house — accompanied with an almost fairytale-like background music. The representation of East Egg relies very much on Luhrmann’s style: brightly colored, and slightly humoristic because of Nick’s bewilderment. Daisy’s white curtains fill up the entire room, until ten black servants arrange them in a perfectly simultaneous way. Both the mansion of the Buchanans as the palace of Gatsby are enormously big, maybe too big. They perfectly represent, on the one hand, the wealth and
status of the East Eggers with their old money, and, on the other hand, the eager to have it all and to climb up the social ladder of the West Eggers and their new money. Second, when Tom and Nick want to go to Manhattan in order to attend Myrtle’s party, they travel by train (originally it should be with Tom’s blue coupé). The Valley of Ashes is portrayed as being a foul and dusty place, similar to the previous movies. However, it seems as if it was not that deserted as the other representations. There is a lot of activity, and Nick calls it “New York’s dumping place” (The Great Gatsby 2013). Luhrmann also makes it very clear that the Valley forms the passage between Long Island and New York City: he offers us an oversight image where the Valley clearly is the grey and dark spot located between the two regions. The differences between the characters of Myrtle and George are also quite obvious, since George has an extremely dirty appearance, contrary to Myrtle who looks ravishing in her red dress.

About the third setting, New York City, Baz Luhrmann states the following in an interview with “HUMO”: “I didn’t want to show a nostalgic New York, but a sexy metropolis that truly lives and tumbles and flashes and goes crazy because it’s full of life” (Stockman 136, my translation). Luhrmann explicitly wants the audience “to feel the same excitement of the characters when they are walking through the roaring streets of the city” (Ibid. 136, my translation). Indeed, New York City plays an important role in Luhrmann’s movie. At the beginning, Nick starts by admitting how disgusted he is now about New York, followed by a description of how life in New York City was during the 1920s: he literally quotes Fitzgerald’s “My Lost City” by telling us fragments of the passage where Fitzgerald states that “the tempo of the city had changed sharply [...]” (MLC 138). “We drank too much those days” (The Great Gatsby 2013) is Nick’s conclusion. Luhrmann symbolically adds real

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17 “The tempo of the city had changed sharply. The parties were bigger [...], the buildings were higher, the morals were looser and the liquor was cheaper. The restlessness [...] approached hysteria” (MLC 138). It is interesting to note that in the first trailer of The Great Gatsby (2013), it is the character of Gatsby (DiCaprio) who quotes this.
life images of Wall Street, speakeasies, Times Square, etc., which gives us a very realistic image of New York’s Roaring Twenties. The movie also ends with Nick reflecting on New York City. Whereas in the novel Nick says “the East was haunted for me” (TGG 167), here we have Nick saying that “New York was haunted for me” (The Great Gatsby 2013). In other words, we get the feeling that New York City plays an important role in the movie, and at the end of the movie the audience almost feels as disgusted as Nick about the city. The ever illuminated city has now become a dirty and haunted place, that causes him and other Americans so much trouble.

The reason for so much trouble is of course the atmosphere of the Jazz Age. This is something that Luhrmann brilliantly captures in his movie: the audience itself is invited to attend the lavish parties, bursting into life. The parties are big and noisy, and hundreds of supporting actors are partying as if it was their last party ever. Luhrmann really succeeds in portraying the Jazz Age like Fitzgerald described it in “Echoes of the Jazz Age:” like an children’s party, with the elder generation going crazy. The energy that comes with those images is simply unbelievable. As pointed out before, the choice of modern music at the parties surprises many people: modern Hip Hop and not a single note of Jazz music. Luhrmann’s explanation is simple:

[i]n the novel Fitzgerald refers to a lot of popular Jazz songs; songs which were new, exciting, and even dangerous at the time. If I would’ve used those songs, my soundtrack [in cooperation with Jay-Z] would’ve sound completely out of date. I use contemporary music that sounds new, exciting and even a bit rebellious — it’s my own way of giving the story some sort of contemporary urgency (Stockman 136, my translation).

A lot of critics tend to disagree with Luhrmann, but in my opinion, Luhrmann’s explanation makes sense: the music gives you a feeling of being involved with the parties — everything becomes actual. It is a successful effort to distinguish Luhrmann’s version from the previous
film adaptations. It is innovative and conform to our present day and age; linking 1920s New York with present day New York.

DiCaprio’s interpretation of Gatsby is, in my opinion, the most successful of all three adaptations. Gatsby’s green light is omnipresent in the movie — it is the first thing the audience sees, and also the closing image of the movie which gives it a certain importance. The actor himself is fascinated by the figure of Gatsby, and he tells “HUMO” that “filming *The Great Gatsby* is in fact impossible, because everyone sticks to the characters, and everyone has his or her own image of Gatsby” (Stockman 138, my translation). His Gatsby is energetic, sincere and mysterious, and he has an unrealistic image of how love should be. He wants too much, and believes in his own disillusions, sticking to his dream. As DiCaprio points out, “he is *out of touch* with reality” (*Ibid.* 139, my translation). An interesting detail is that on the gates of Gatsby’s palace, we could read the following slogan on a shield: “*ad finem fidelis*” (*The Great Gatsby 2013*) — which stands for “forever faithful.” This is a subtle reference to Gatsby’s personality and the fact that he will be forever faithful to his dream, to Daisy.

**6.2.4. Summary**

Many critics agree with the assumption that it is in fact a *mission impossible* to adapt *The Great Gatsby* into a movie version that is able to represent all the different factors that make the novel so peculiar: the spirit of the Jazz Age, the pursuing of the American dream, the character of Gatsby, the romance, the climax at the end of the story, and Fitzgerald’s beautiful prose. Nonetheless, I have discussed three film adaptations which were all considerably different from each other, each of them focusing on a different aspect of the novel.
In general, every film adaptation gives its audience an interpretation on Fitzgerald’s story, the one being more faithful to the original text than the other. Luhrmann’s adaptation is the longest, and most detailed screen version, followed by the 1974 and the 2000 version. Moreover, especially Clayton and Luhrmann’s adaptation tend to be adapted according to the norms of Hollywood: the latter adds a dramatic ending to the movie by letting Gatsby die with his last dramatic word “Daisy,” and the former focusses too much on the romantic love between Gatsby and Daisy. Concerning the representation of the Jazz Age, the 2013 version is by far the most successful one: it is historically accurate, it has beautiful costumes and it lets its audience join Gatsby’s party in a way no other film adaptation has ever done. It’s excessive, brightly colored and exuberant, just like Fitzgerald would have liked it — in my opinion, Fitzgerald himself certainly would have wanted to attend one of those parties. The music that is used to accompany those parties should normally be Jazz music, and this is obviously the case in both the 1974 and the 2000 version. The 2013 version surprises its audience with daring Hip Hop and contemporary music which is an example of the privileges a modern adaptation has. Nowadays we can accept this modern addition to the story, whereas this would not be the case with the older versions — because it would not suit the movies at all.

Furthermore, I looked at how the settings of the novel were portrayed in the different adaptations. West and East Egg and the Valley of Ashes are always present in the movies, the latter being portrayed as a terrible place that is deserted and dirty, or as a more industrial area. The significance of New York City, which is considered the most important setting for Fitzgerald, seems to lose its importance in the adaptations of Clayton and Markowitz. It appears to be nothing more than the city they visit, forming the background of their activities. The adaptation of Luhrmann, however, does focus on New York City during the 1920s: the movie starts and ends with Nick contemplating on the city; blaming it
for all its temptations that lead to so many problems. We get various impressions of the city through panoramic overviews, real life images, and even through Fitzgerald’s own words that are quoted from his essay “My Lost City.” We even get to see men working on the Empire State Building, and a speakeasy hidden behind the walls of a barber shop. From Wall Street up to Times Square towards Central Park, we can feel the energetic vibe of a growing metropolis.

The three Gatsby’s — played by Robert Redford, Toby Stephens and Leonardo DiCaprio — all uncover a different aspect of their character. Redford is the romantic Gatsby, the one who is always dreamy and does not seem to care about a thing, he only wants to be with Daisy. Stephens is the more sinister and dark Gatsby, with his permanent smile, described by Nick as a “rare smile with a quality of reassurance with it, that you may come across four or five times in your life” (TGG 49). DiCaprio’s Gatsby represents the obsessive Gatsby: obsessed with his unrealistic idea of how love should be, and how his beloved Daisy should love him. He is full of his own disillusions, which makes us almost feel sorry for him, when he needlessly reaches out towards his green light. He represents the Gatsby that most desperately wants to repeat the past. In short, all three actors succeeded quite well in playing one of America’s most iconic characters — everyone focusing on different aspects of Gatsby’s personality, adding their own weight to the character.
7. CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I have attempted to demonstrate how F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* can stand as the quintessential American novel that represents the atmosphere of the Jazz Age, and how New York City was one of the most important urban centers for those happenings during the 1920s. Given that *The Great Gatsby* takes place during the summer of 1922 and is written in 1925, Fitzgerald was able to present to us an adequate overview of the preoccupations and characteristics of that time. Furthermore, I have focused on some of the defining aspects of the American city in general, and, more important, I have elucidated some of the images of New York City, by discussing two literary representations of the city.

To illustrate how New York came to be the dazzling center of the booming Jazz Age and how *The Great Gatsby* is able to represent those aspects, I first gave a general historical overview of the social and cultural situation during the 1920s in the United States. The Jazz Age, or the Roaring Twenties, is marked as a period in American history of an unprecedented development of production, consumption and mass culture. The industry was booming, and the cities were expanding due to a growing urbanization. Especially in New York City, which served as a gateway for many foreign immigrants who wanted to start a new life in the United States. All those immigrants shared the same hope of building up a new life; that they could improve their current situation by working hard, no matter what ethnic or religious background they had. This was their American dream: the pursuit of happiness, equality, and freedom. The Jazz Age allowed people to live out their dream, but unfortunately that same age also changed the character of the creed. It gradually became the pursuit of money and material gain — Marius Bewley even labels the Jazz Age “a corrupt period” for the beliefs in the American dream (38).
The Great Gatsby in particular gives expression to that moral corruption of the American dream, and to the characteristics of the Jazz Age in general. Its protagonist, Jay Gatsby, desperately wants to repeat his past; to repeat the time when Daisy Buchanan loved him unquestionably. Daisy is “the substance of [Gatsby’s] dreams,” and everything Gatsby does is in order to impress her (Way 100). His famous parties known for their extravagance, excessiveness and exuberance, take place in his majestic house on West Egg. His parties are the perfect example of how people violated the Prohibition laws, given that everyone could enjoy their alcoholic beverage. The Prohibition Amendment was an attempt at reaching a moral and social change in the United States — but it failed miserably in almost every city, especially the larger American cities. By dealing with, on the one hand, the expression of the American dream, and the problems with Prohibition on the other, The Great Gatsby presents to its readers two defining aspects of the Jazz Age. In addition, it is also a prophecy towards the Great Depression, since The Great Gatsby combines the euphoria of a prospering, changing and growing age, with a more darker and corrupt atmosphere. The reader is almost able to feel this particular atmosphere that creates a certain tension as the novel reaches its end. In other words, The Great Gatsby definitely is the novel that is able to present us the atmosphere of the 1920s.

Fitzgerald worked several years on his third novel, and he finished it in Paris, 1925. Nevertheless, his experiences with the Jazz Age were largely situated in New York. By describing his relation to the Jazz Age we receive a lot of information about the setting of New York City during the 1920s. Fitzgerald enjoyed his life and he also could not resist the temptations of the Jazz Age: he spent most of his money on party-going, drinking, and pleasure-seeking. In “Echoes of the Jazz Age,” he makes a good attempt at describing the age: he wants to know if the promises of the decade ever matched its reality. According to Bruccoli, this essay “shows the operation of that part of Fitzgerald that needed to analyze,
judge, and assess his experiences and the collective experiences of his time that he had assimilated” (313). Put differently, Fitzgerald states the positive aspects of the age as well as the negative ones. He describes the morals of the elder generations, the cocktail parties and the arising violence in the cities. Due to his personal lifestyle and this particular essay that describes the decade so vividly, it is safe to say that Fitzgerald deserves his role as spokesman of the age. As O’Meara points out, “he was at once within and without the culture, both American and expatriate” (73). Consequently, he was one of the most suitable novelists to write about the Jazz Age.

Given that the purpose of this thesis was to investigate the setting of New York City in relation to Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, I can conclude that *The Great Gatsby* definitely fulfills its role as a “picture of New York life” (*Life in Letters* 106). It reflects some of the characteristics of 1920s New York as well as some of the writer’s feelings towards the city. Both Fitzgerald himself and the narrator Nick Carraway come from the Mid-West and they have moved towards the East. In addition, almost every character of *The Great Gatsby* moved to the East, the complete opposite of the famous Westward expansion: Gatsby came from North Dakota, Tom came from Chicago and Daisy and Jordan from Louisville, Kentucky. Nick will enter their lives and familiarize with the various customs of the East. However, at the end of the novel Nick will return to his Mid-West, because after everything he went through he is disappointed in the shallow East. Fitzgerald thus uses the different areas of the novel — West and East Egg, the Valley of Ashes — to symbolize social differences in American society. New York City, in turn, counts for Nick as the city where he has to practice his new job. Nevertheless, through the course of the novel, Nick will get to know this remarkable city. When driving across the Queensboro Bridge accompanied by Gatsby, Nick will see the city for the first time, and he will share with us his view on the city.
According to him, anything is possible in New York City — it possesses the “first wild promise of all the mystery and the beauty in the world” (TGG 67).

In conclusion, we may not forget that New York also mattered to Fitzgerald in a personal sense. In his retrospective essay “My Lost City,” he admits the following: “[f]rom that moment I knew that New York, however often I might leave it, was home” (MLC 138). He appreciates the city, and accepts both its positive and its negative aspects. According to O’Meara, he experienced New York as a remarkable novelty, just like Eliot in London or Hemmingway in Paris (61). In “My Lost City” then, he shares with us his personal feelings towards the city: how he first came to New York and how he compares his life to “[his] own movie of New York” (MLC 135). He was especially interested in how the city made him feel; that is why he explicitly states that his essay was not an account of the city’s changes but of the changes in this writer’s feeling for the city (MLC 136). Given that New York City is never static even up until today, Fitzgerald succeeds in portraying this particular aspect in both his novels and essays. “I carry the place around in my heart, but sometimes I try to shake it off in my dreams” (Life in Letters 129), perfectly explains Fitzgerald’s contradictory relationship with the city: it will always remain a complex city that is unpredictable, yet exceptional.


Denner, Yvette. “1920s are often called the Jazz Age. To what extent did the novels and the lifestyle of F. Scott Fitzgerald reflect or define this label?” Munich: GRIN Publishing


