

# “His Mind Aglow”: The Biological Undercurrent in Fitzgerald’s *Gatsby* and Other Works

BERT BENDER

They talked until three, from biology to organized religion, and when Amory crept shivering into bed it was with his mind aglow ...

(Fitzgerald, *This Side of Paradise*)

Readers familiar with F. Scott Fitzgerald’s early work might recall that in those years just before the Scopes trial he wrote of Victorians who “shuddered when they found what Mr. Darwin was about”; or that he joined in the fashionable comic attacks on people who could not accept their “most animal existence,” describing one such character as “a hairless ape with two dozen tricks.”<sup>1</sup> But few would guess the extent to which his interest in evolutionary biology shaped his work. He was particularly concerned with three interrelated biological problems: (1) the question of eugenics as a possible solution to civilization’s many ills, (2) the linked principles of accident and heredity (as he understood these through the lens of Ernst Haeckel’s biogenetic law), and (3) the revolutionary theory of sexual selection that Darwin had presented in *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871). As I hope to show in the following pages, his concern with these issues underlies such well-known features in the Fitzgerald landscape as his insecurity in the “social hierarchy” (his sense of its “terrifying fluidity”), his emphasis on the element of time, his interest in “the musk of money,” his interest in Spengler and the naturalists, and his negative portraiture of male

Bert Bender is a Professor in the Department of English, Arizona State University, PO Box 870302, Tempe, Arizona 85287-0302, USA.

<sup>1</sup> F. Scott Fitzgerald, *This Side of Paradise* (1920; New York: Scribner’s, 1970), 151; F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Beautiful and Damned* (1922; New York: Scribner’s, 1955), 415–16.

violence.<sup>2</sup> The principles of eugenics, accidental heredity, and sexual selection flow together as the prevailing undercurrent in most of Fitzgerald's work before and after *The Great Gatsby*, producing more anxiety than love from the tangled courtships of characters he deemed both beautiful and damned.

#### “LOVE OR EUGENICS”

By his second year at Princeton (in 1914), before he began to read the naturalists, Fitzgerald had taken in enough of the evolutionary view of life to see its relevance to the most fascinating subject for any youth of eighteen – sex. In “Love or Eugenics” he playfully wondered whether young men are most attracted by women of vigorous stock, with “plenty of muscle, / And Avoirdupois to spare,” or by modern flappers who know the value of “good cosmetics.”<sup>3</sup> But Fitzgerald grew a good deal more serious about the biology of sex before he left Princeton in 1917. In the scene from *This Side of Paradise* in which Amory and his friend Burne Holiday talked about biology until Amory's mind was “aglow,” the two came naturally to the question that gave eugenics its pressing relevance, the idea that “The light-haired man *is* a higher type,” as Burne puts it (128). When Burne (patterned on Fitzgerald's friend Henry Slater) “voluntarily attended graduate lectures in philosophy and biology” (131), he might have heard Princeton's famous Professor of Biology, Edwin G. Conklin, lecture on phylogeny (with attention to Darwin and sexual selection) and ontogeny (with emphasis on Conklin's particular interest in eugenics). Conklin published a detailed outline for the course in General Biology (*Laboratory Directions in General Biology*), and ended the section on ontogeny with this note: “All members of the class are invited, but not

<sup>2</sup> Discussions of these elements in Fitzgerald's life and work can be found, for example, in Jeffrey Meyers, *Scott Fitzgerald: A Biography* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), 1–3; and James W. Tuttleton, “Seeing Slightly Red: Fitzgerald's ‘May Day,’” in *The Short Stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald: New Approaches in Criticism*, ed. Jackson R. Bryer (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), 196; in Matthew J. Bruccoli, “Preface” to *The Great Gatsby* (New York: Collier Books, 1991), xiv–xv; in Scott Donaldson, *Fool for Love: F. Scott Fitzgerald* (New York: Congdon and Weed, 1983), 99–115, quote on p. 101; in John S. Whitely, “‘A Touch of Disaster’: Fitzgerald, Spengler and the Decline of the West,” in *Scott Fitzgerald: The Promises of Life*, ed. A. Robert Lee (New York: St. Martins, 1989) throughout his article; and in Judith Fetterly, “Who Killed Dick Diver? The Sexual Politics of *Tender is the Night*,” *Mosaic*, 17: 1 (1984), 124–26.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew J. Bruccoli and Jackson R. Bryer, eds., *F. Scott Fitzgerald In His Own Time: A Miscellany* (n.p.: Kent State University Press, 1971), 18.

required, to fill out a Family Record blank, giving details of their own heredity for the use of the Committee on Eugenics.”<sup>4</sup>

Even if Fitzgerald or Burne/Slater never read this invitation, it is clear from *This Side of Paradise* that the subject was quite palpably in the air at Princeton, no doubt heightening what Fitzgerald’s biographers have described as his insecurity in the social hierarchy. Indeed, Fitzgerald was so attuned to the subject of eugenics and heredity that he included a further brief, playful scene in his next novel: a young man accused of being an “intellectual faker” responds with the challenge, “What’s the fundamental principle of biology?” When his accuser guesses, “natural selection?” the young man corrects him: “Ontogeny recapitulates phylogony” (*sic*, *Beautiful and Damned* 153–54).

The profound social consequences of this “fundamental principle” are reflected in much of Fitzgerald’s work. Articulated by Ernst Haeckel, the idea was that a species’ evolutionary development (phylogeny) is recapitulated in the individual’s embryological development (ontogeny), revealing in the human embryo’s gill slits, for example, our ancestral relationship with fish. But, as Stephen Jay Gould notes, “Recapitulation served as a general theory of biological determinism” with a terrible appeal to many Americans who felt the pressure of immigration from Ireland and especially southern Europe. The American paleontologist E. D. Cope “preached [it as the] doctrine of Nordic supremacy”: the “inferior” groups (including “races, sexes, and classes”) were arrested in development at the level of the white male’s child. Just as the white embryo’s development recapitulated the human descent from lower forms, so did the white *child’s* development recapitulate the development of the lower or “childlike” races (who were supposedly arrested at that stage) until, triumphantly, the white males, at least, would go on to exhibit their superiority as a race.<sup>5</sup>

One begins to see how the study of heredity might have appealed to Princetonians of those years, some of whom, like Fitzgerald, were so disturbed at seeing “the negroid streak creep[ing] northward to defile the nordic race” that they were overly receptive to popular and less scientific

<sup>4</sup> Edwin G. Conklin, *Laboratory Directions in General Biology* (n.p., n.d., held in the Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University) 78; in his well-known book, Conklin builds toward his long last chapters on eugenics, arguing for example that “the promotion of human evolution [through eugenics] must be undertaken by society as its greatest work,” and that “individual freedom must be subordinated to racial welfare” (*Heredity and Environment in the Development of Men* 6th edn [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1929], 348–49).

<sup>5</sup> Stephan Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York: Norton, 1981), 115.

writers like Lothrop Stoddard.<sup>6</sup> Stoddard (cited as Goddard by Tom Buchanan in *Gatsby*) welcomed the time when “biological knowledge will have so increased” that eugenicist programs might “yield the most wonderful results”; in the meantime, he advised, “migrations of lower human types like those which have worked such havoc in the United States must be rigorously curtailed. Such migrations upset standards, sterilize better stocks, increase low types, and compromise national futures.”<sup>7</sup> As Fitzgerald wrote to Edmund Wilson from Europe in the summer of 1921, “Raise the bars of immigration and permit only Scandinavians, Teutons, Anglo Saxons + Celts to enter” (*Letters* 47).

“THE RIDDLE OF THE UNIVERSE”: ACCIDENT,  
HEREDITY, AND SELECTION

Since Fitzgerald referred to Haeckel’s “biogenetic law” and, as a reviewer, complained of another writer’s “undigested Haeckel,” it will be worth considering what he seems to have gathered from his own copy of Haeckel’s *The Riddle of the Universe at the Close of the Nineteenth Century* (1900).<sup>8</sup> Although Fitzgerald’s critics have never discussed it, *The Riddle of the Universe* is much more reliable in suggesting the outlines of Fitzgerald’s thought than is the text most frequently cited in this regard, Oswald Spengler’s *The Decline of the West* (even though it did not appear in English until 1926). In a way, the books are similar in providing different but sweeping senses of destiny: Spengler’s in his advocacy of “Goethe’s form-fulfillment” as destiny (rather than Darwin’s causality), and Haeckel’s in his closing with Goethe’s lines: “By eternal laws / Of iron ruled, / Must all fulfil / The cycle of / Their destiny.”<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Letter from Fitzgerald to Edmund Wilson, dated July 1921, in *F. Scott Fitzgerald: A Life in Letters*, ed. Matthew J. Bruccoli (New York: Scribner’s, 1994), 46–47.

<sup>7</sup> Lothrop Stoddard, *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World-Supremacy* (New York: Scribner’s, 1922), 309, 308.

<sup>8</sup> The “Fitzgerald Book Lists” in the F. Scott Fitzgerald Papers at Princeton University indicate that Fitzgerald owned and had signed a copy of *The Riddle of the Universe*, but that volume is not now contained in the University’s Department of Rare Books and Special Collections. These book lists include no volumes by Darwin. In his enthusiastic review of Dos Passos’s *Three Soldiers*, Fitzgerald cited Owen Johnston’s *The Wasted Generation* as an example of a current war story that paled by comparison, in part because “it abounded with...undigested Haeckel” (*In His Own Time*, 123).

<sup>9</sup> Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, abridged edn, trans. Charles Francis Atkinson, eds. Helmut Werner and Arthur Helps (New York: Knopf, 1962), 231; Spengler definitely rejected modern evolutionary thought, criticizing the shallowness of Darwinism and referring to the “soulless and soul-killing generation of...Haeckel” (132); Ernst Haeckel, *The Riddle of the Universe at the Close of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Harper, 1900), 383.

But, in general, Haeckel’s book does much more to bring together the two subjects about which Amory and Burne talked until their minds glowed in *This Side of Paradise* – “biology” and “organized religion.” *The Riddle of the Universe* deals with many of the key biological terms that figure in Fitzgerald’s work before, in, and after *Gatsby* – like *accident*, *egg*, *descended*, *specimen*, *instinct*, *struggle*, *adaptation*, *selection*, *extinction*, and the name of Darwin, himself, whom Haeckel praises as “*the Copernicus of the organic world*.”<sup>10</sup> But Haeckel’s particular attraction for Fitzgerald lay in his solution to the “riddle” of man’s “place... in nature” by explaining the related principles of accident, heredity, and selection (62).

Of these three, Haeckel emphasizes the role of heredity, advancing it in a larger context that dispenses with the “superstition” or “primitive” religion of revelation. Yet he explains “the embryology of the soul” and calls for a “new monistic religion,” “scientific” and “realistic,” that will be revealed in “the wonderful temple of nature” (chs. 8 and 19; p. 382). None of this pertaining to the soul or the “new monistic religion” resembles anything that I know of in Fitzgerald, but Fitzgerald certainly seems attuned to Haeckel’s criticism of primitive Christianity (which he would have especially appreciated after reading Harold Frederic’s examination of it in *The Damnation of Theron Ware*, one of his favorite books); and in *Gatsby*, especially, he emphasizes the role of accident in ways that suggest that he was quite familiar with Haeckel’s (and, ultimately, Darwin’s) discussion of it. Haeckel, going well beyond Darwin’s point about chance or accidental variation, insists that “all individual forms of existence... are but special transitory forms – *accidents* or *modes* – of substance”: “nowhere... in the evolution of animals and plants do we find any trace of design, but merely the inevitable outcome of the struggle for existence, the blind controller, instead of the provident God, that effects the changes of organic forms by a mutual action of the laws of heredity and adaptation” (216, 268–69).

In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald gives us, in place of a provident God, the gazing “eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg” that were set there by

<sup>10</sup> Some of these words and other key terms in the Darwinian lexicon (like *tangle*) are traceable in Andrew Crosland, *A Concordance to F. Scott Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby* (Detroit: Gale, 1975); *Riddle of the Universe* 252. As Haeckel notes here, he had first referred to Darwin in this way in 1868 – long before Freud’s more famous remark that after Copernicus’ first great blow to human narcissism (by showing that the earth is not at the center of the universe), Darwin dealt the second or “*biological blow*” by proving the human’s animal nature (Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey [London: Hogarth Press and The Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1953–74] 17, 141).

“some wild wag of an oculist” who “then sank down himself into eternal blindness.” These are the eyes that peer out over the bleak figure of George Wilson when he is told that his wife Myrtle was killed in an “accident,” and that provoke him to insist repeatedly, “God sees everything.”<sup>11</sup> Fitzgerald’s emphasis on “accident” becomes overwhelming in the closing pages of the novel, including Nick’s remark that Gatsby “knew that he was in Daisy’s house by a colossal accident,” and most resoundingly in his last image of the dead hero afloat in his pool: “A small gust of wind that scarcely corrugated the surface was enough to disturb [the water’s] accidental course with its accidental burden” (156, 170).

As a story of modern love, *Gatsby* is squarely within the tradition of American fiction that began to appropriate Darwin’s theory of sexual selection immediately after *The Descent of Man*, beginning with W. D. Howells’s *A Chance Acquaintance* (1873).<sup>12</sup> This is not to suggest that Fitzgerald had Howells particularly in mind, but he depicted Gatsby and Daisy in this way as they leave together after the confrontation between Gatsby and Tom Buchanan: “They were gone, without a word, snapped out, made accidental, isolated like ghosts even from our pity” (142). Rather than Howells, the American writers most on Fitzgerald’s mind during these years were Frederic, Dreiser, Frank and Charles Norris, and Wharton – to name only a few who were quite self-consciously engaged in critiquing “love” from their various biological points of view. But, again, it would seem that the most immediate theoretical support for Fitzgerald’s own critique of love was *The Riddle of the Universe*, where Haeckel refers to Darwin’s theory of sexual selection. Here, writing of the “eros” or “powerful impulse that... leads to... nuptial union,” Haeckel emphasizes: “the essential point in this physiological process is not the ‘embrace,’ as was formerly supposed, or the amorousness connected therewith; it is simply the introduction of the spermatozoa into the vagina” (138–39).

Such remarks provide the kind of biological insight into modern love that caused many characters in American fiction at around the turn of the century to question “love” and motherhood as Edna Pontellier did in *The Awakening*. Witnessing “the scene of torture” as her friend gave birth, Edna thought of her own experience in “awakening to find a little new

<sup>11</sup> F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, preface by Matthew J. Bruccoli, 27–28, 166–67.

<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of the Darwinian elements in *A Chance Acquaintance* and other novels of courtship and marriage by Howells, see Bert Bender, *The Descent of Love: Darwin and the Theory of Sexual Selection in American Fiction, 1871–1926* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996).

life to which she had given being, added to the great unnumbered multitude of souls that come and go”; and she feels “a flaming, outspoken revolt against the ways of Nature” (ch. 37). In *This Side of Paradise* similar insights provoke Amory’s agonizing questions, “How’ll I fit in? ... What am I for? To propagate the race?” (215). And they lead his friend Eleanor to complain of the “rotten, rotten old world” where she remains “tied to the sinking ship of future matrimony.”<sup>13</sup> Then, voicing Fitzgerald’s sense that the struggle of sexual selection is far more disturbing than what the Freudian craze had suggested in its apparent invitation to promiscuity, she remarks: “I’m hipped on Freud and all that, but it’s rotten that every bit of *real* love in the world is ninety-nine per cent passion and one little soupçon of jealousy.” Amory (already depressed about his purpose in life as a male) agrees that this “rather unpleasant overpowering force [is] part of the machinery under everything” (238).

Before going on to analyze what drives the “machinery” of “love” in *The Great Gatsby* (i.e., the process of sexual selection, as Fitzgerald construed it), there is a final important point – the essential point – to make about Fitzgerald’s interest in *The Riddle of the Universe*. Everything is determined by the accident of heredity – “the soul-blending at the moment of conception [when] only the latent forces of the two parent souls are transmitted by the coalescence of the erotic cell-nuclei” (142). Intent on showing his theory’s “far-reaching consequences” regarding “our great question” of man’s place in nature, Haeckel notes that “the human ovum, like that of all other animals, is a single cell, and this tiny globular egg cell (about the 120th of an inch in diameter) has just the same characteristic appearance as that of all other viviparous organisms” (62). Thus Haeckel concludes not only that the “law of biogeny” demonstrates our heritage back through “the ape” and all the “higher vertebrates” to “our primitive fish-ancestors,” but that it “destroy[s] the myth of the immortality of the soul” (65, 138). For Fitzgerald, though, Haeckel’s conclusion that “each personality owes its bodily and spiritual qualities to both parents” raises questions not only about man’s place in the universe,

<sup>13</sup> P. 237; another example of Fitzgerald’s biological critique of sexual love and motherhood is contained in these remarks about the character Gloria in *The Beautiful and Damned*: “She knew that in her breast she had never wanted children. The reality, the earthiness, the intolerable sentiment of child-bearing, the menace to her beauty – had appalled her. She wanted to exist only as a conscious flower, prolonging and preserving itself. Her sentimentality could cling fiercely to her own illusions, but her ironic soul whispered that motherhood was also the privilege of the female baboon. So her dreams were of ghostly children only” (392–93).

but in the social hierarchy; for it demonstrates – as “in the reigning dynasties and in old families of the nobility” – that all individuals are held “in the chain of generations” (138, 143).

For these reasons more than anything else, the imagery of eggs figures memorably in Fitzgerald’s work, not only in the absolute barrier that exists between “East Egg” and “West Egg” in *The Great Gatsby*, but in such earlier works as the unsuccessful play he produced in 1923, *The Vegetable*. There, one of the characters, Doris, explains that she plans to marry a man named “Fish,” and Fitzgerald heavily underscores both “Fish” and “egg.” “Fish? F-i-s-h?” another character (Jerry) asks. When Doris explains that “these Fishes are very nice,” he warns that she might have to live “right over his father’s place of business.” Doris is attracted not only by Mr. Fish’s “wonderful build,” but by his habit of calling her “adorable egg.” Confused again, the character Jerry asks, “What does he mean by that?” and Doris explains, “Oh ‘egg’ is just a name people use nowadays.” After Jerry asks again, “Egg?” Doris wonders, “Does your father still read the Bible?”<sup>14</sup> This apparently trivial exchange has its place in the play’s larger plot, which tracks the vegetable-hero’s failed accidental ascent to the presidency of the United States and his ultimate career as a postman. As the hero finally explains about postmen, “They not only pick ’em out – they select ’em” (134).

Even though Fitzgerald’s work with the egg idea couldn’t save *The Vegetable*, he did not give up on it. Before he wrote the play he had commented to Edmund Wilson that he thought Sherwood Anderson’s *The Triumph of the Egg* was “a wonderful title” (*Letters* 49), and he made something much more serious of it in *Gatsby* than his readers have sensed. Aside from the East and West Egg material, he includes two other odd but meaningful scenes. In the first, sitting in the New York apartment where Tom Buchanan meets with Myrtle Wilson, Nick notes that “the only picture was an over-enlarged photograph, apparently a hen sitting on a blurred rock. Looked at from a distance however the hen resolved itself into a bonnet and the countenance of a stout old lady beamed down into the room” (33). Moments later Nick realized that it was a “dim enlargement” of Myrtle’s mother that “hovered like an ectoplasm on the wall” (34). “Ectoplasm” is a succinct comment on Myrtle Wilson’s place in the social and evolutionary hierarchies, its two meanings (according to

<sup>14</sup> F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Vegetable or from President to Postman* (1923; New York: Scribner’s, 1976), 25–28; it is worth recalling that when Tom Buchanan learns that Gatsby knows his wife, he complains that “these days... [women] meet all kinds of crazy fish” (110).



the *Random House Dictionary*) being (1) “the outer portion of the cytoplasm of a cell,” and (2) “the supposed emanation from the body of a medium.” According to Haeckel, “the skin layer, or ectoderm, is the primitive psychic organ in the metazoa... the tissue-soul in its simplest form” (160).

The other “egg” scene in *The Great Gatsby* serves to gloss the well-known passage in which Tom Buchanan exclaims “violently” that “‘The Rise of the Coloured Empires’ by this man Goddard” shows how “Civilization’s going to pieces” (17). Fitzgerald seems to discredit Tom’s belief that “it’s all scientific stuff; it’s been proved” (17); but, through Nick’s observation as he and Gatsby enter the city, Fitzgerald suggests his own anxiety about the *Rising Tide of Color*. Crossing over the Queensboro Bridge, Nick sees “a dead man” pass “in a hearse” accompanied by friends with “the tragic eyes and short upper lips of south-eastern Europe”; then “a limousine passed us, driven by a white chauffeur, in which sat three modish Negroes, two bucks and a girl. I laughed aloud as the *yolks* of their eyeballs rolled toward us in haughty rivalry” (my emphasis; 73). Nick’s own anxiety is clear here when he stops laughing and thinks to himself, “Anything can happen now that we’ve slid over this bridge”; “Even Gatsby could happen, without any particular wonder,” he concludes. But this is before Nick meets Gatsby’s father, Mr. Gatz, or learns that Gatsby’s “parents were shiftless and unsuccessful farm people [and that] his imagination had never really accepted them as his parents at all” (104).

Gatsby’s effort to create himself – to spring “from his Platonic conception of himself” – can only fail in the biological universe that Haeckel described (104). And, if Gatsby is a true “son of God” who “must be about His Father’s Business, the service of a vast, vulgar and meretricious beauty,” it is in the sense that he is destined to pursue Daisy’s beauty according to the laws of sexual selection.<sup>15</sup> This force of beauty drives many of Fitzgerald’s young men, as Dexter Green is “unconsciously dictated to by his winter dreams” of Judy Jones (“Winter Dreams,”

<sup>15</sup> P. 104; as many critics have remarked, Fitzgerald’s earlier story, “Absolution” (1924), represents a preliminary effort to deal with the problem of his and his characters’ origins. As I would put it, Rudolph in that story exemplifies the kind of anxiety about his fixed evolutionary state that Gatsby and other characters in Fitzgerald experience. Rudolph confessed his sin “of not believing I was the son of my parents” and so imagined himself as Blatchford Sarnemington, a character who then “established dominance over him” (F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald* [New York: Scribner’s, 1969] 187, 189). As Haeckel might remark of such figures as Rudolph and especially Gatsby, the “boundless presumption of conceited man has misled him into making himself ‘the image of God,’ claiming an ‘eternal life’ for his ephemeral personality, and imagining that he possesses unlimited ‘freedom of will’” (15).

*Stories* 150). Even at age eleven, Judy was “beautifully ugly as little girls are apt to be” who “are destined... [to] bring no end of misery to a great number of men”; “she was arrestingly beautiful... [and the] color and the mobility of her mouth gave a continual impression of flux, of intense life, of passionate vitality” (147, 152). “The thing... deep in” Dexter that compelled his response to Judy persisted until he was much older and realized that “long ago, there was something in me, but now that thing is gone. Now that thing is gone, that thing is gone” (161, 168).

By 1922 Fitzgerald had freed himself somewhat from his earlier hero’s conclusion in *This Side of Paradise* that “the problem of evil” was “the problem of sex” and that “inseparably linked with evil was beauty” (280). In *The Beautiful and Damned* beauty is simply part of the “machinery under everything” – an engine of sexual selection; and Fitzgerald identifies “life” itself as “that sound out there, that ghastly reiterated female sound”: “active and snarling,” it moves “like a fly swarm” (*Beautiful and Damned* 150, 260). In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald anoints both Daisy and Gatsby with the power of beauty, as I will explain below; but, in both their cases, as in the “intense vitality” of Myrtle Wilson (which contains *no* “gleam of beauty”), the underlying force is simply “life” (35, 30). This is Fitzgerald’s ultimate subject in *The Great Gatsby*: “the full bellows of the earth [that was blowing] the frogs full of life” at the moment on that evening in late spring when “the silhouette of a moving cat” drew Nick’s eye to Gatsby for the first time (25). Later, when Nick leaves Daisy and Gatsby alone during her first visit to his house, he sees that they are “possessed by intense life” (102).

In the following section I explain how Fitzgerald dramatizes the process of sexual selection in the stories of Tom and Daisy Buchanan, Daisy and Gatsby, Myrtle and George Wilson, and Nick and Jordan Baker. But it will help at this point to sketch in the main features and implications of the tangled web of conflicted life in which all the players exist. First, everyone is subject to the anxieties that arise in the general, unending struggle for life. In Fitzgerald’s presentation of the evolutionary reality everything is subject to change: accidents happen at any moment, men and women must struggle to win and then keep their mates, the “tide” of “lower” racial groups is on the rise, and civilizations themselves rise and fall. Moreover, in the individual’s development through life, according to Haeckel, his or her “psychic activity” is subject to the same pattern of progress and decline. In Haeckel’s five stages of “man’s psychic activity,” the “new-born” develops “self-consciousness,” the “boy or girl” awakens to “the sexual instinct,” “the youth or

maiden” up to “the time of sexual intercourse” passes through “the ‘idealist’ period,” the mature man and woman engage in “the founding of families,” and then “*involution* sets in” as the “old man or woman” experience “degeneration.” As Haeckel dismally concludes, “Man’s psychic life runs the same evolution – upward progress, full maturity, and downward degeneration – as every other vital activity in his organization” (146–47). Rather in this key, Nick Carraway on his thirtieth birthday looks forward to only “the promise of a decade of loneliness, a thinning list of single men to know, a thinning brief-case of enthusiasm, thinning hair.” Having just witnessed the disastrous confrontation between Gatsby, Tom, and Daisy, who “loves” them both, he remarks, “So we drove on toward death through the cooling twilight” (143).

Second, in this universe of accident and change, every individual and every individual’s “house” or line is fixed at the moment of conception – as in “the Carraway house,” for example, “in a city where dwellings are still called through decades by a family’s name” (184). And third, although people like Myrtle and Gatsby are not only free but compelled to enter the struggle of sexual selection (their only means of elevating themselves in the social and evolutionary hierarchies), they nor any other characters in Fitzgerald’s fiction can break the bonds of what Haeckel calls “the chain of generations” (143). As Fitzgerald put it in “The Unspeakable Egg” (1924), the comic story he wrote while *Gatsby* was in press, although a young woman might have her choice of “attractive eggs” and unattractive ones, the “unspeakable egg” itself determines that even in “Umerica, a free country,” there aren’t really any “chauffeurs and such that marry millionaires’ daughters.”<sup>16</sup>

#### SEXUAL SELECTION IN “*THE GREAT GATSBY*”

While Fitzgerald’s understanding of heredity and ontogeny seems to have originated in his informal exposure to such ideas at Princeton and his reading in *The Riddle of the Universe*, his familiarity with the theory of sexual selection probably came as much from the novelists he admired as from biologists like Conklin or Haeckel. Both of these biologists briefly discuss the “secondary sexual characters” (like “the beard of man, the antlers of the stag, the beautiful plumage of the bird of paradise”) that, Haeckel remarks, “are the outcome of sexual selection” as Darwin had explained (*Riddle of the Universe* 139). For lengthier discussions of the

<sup>16</sup> *The Price Was High: The Last Uncollected Stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, ed. Matthew J. Bruccoli (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979) 132, 134.

theory of sexual selection, including courtship behavior, Fitzgerald might have turned to any number of sources, from *The Descent of Man* to Havelock Ellis's *Sexual Selection in Man* (a volume collected as part of his *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*), or Upton Sinclair's *The Book of Life* (1921). It is important to realize that, *had* he turned to these three, he would have seen distinctly different versions of the sexual reality. Ellis, for example, built on Darwin's theory but then strove to elevate the psychology of sex into the art of love and ultimately a transcendent religion in which the human's animal nature is scarcely perceptible; and Sinclair strove to emphasize the human's "supremacy over nature by his greater power to combine in groups" – as in "primitive communist society."<sup>17</sup> No less than the theory of natural selection, the theory of sexual selection was (and continues to be) susceptible to various interpretations, as different writers construed evolutionary theory in ways that reflected their particular points of view regarding gender, class, race, or political ideology, as well as their particular spiritual or psychological anxieties.

Whatever his sources, it is clear that Fitzgerald focused on the key principles of sexual selection that previous American novelists from Howells to Edith Wharton had depended upon in constructing their own plots of courtship and marriage. Seeing the process in general as he put it in *This Side of Paradise*, as the "rather unpleasant overpowering force that's part of the machinery under everything" (238), he emphasized the female's power to select the superior male, and the male's struggle to *be* selected. Both the male and female in Fitzgerald's fiction wield the power to attract, often through music or dance, the female through her physical beauty and the beauty of her voice, and the male through his strength or ornamental display. And like so many American novelists who had also worked with the Darwinian materials, Fitzgerald embraced Darwin's observation that civilized human beings select for wealth or social position. Also, as in Darwin and the many realist and naturalist novelists who took up his theory, the successful male is compelled to exhibit superior strength and to contest his strength with competing males in what Darwin called "the law of battle" for possession of the female. Finally, as part of a more recent development in literary interpretations of Darwin's theory, Fitzgerald was interested in (and considerably frightened by) the new woman's aggressive sexuality – her occasional desire for more than one man and her recognition that she must engage in sometimes deadly competition with other females to win her man.

<sup>17</sup> Upton Sinclair, *The Book of Life*, 2 Vols. in 1 (Chicago: Paine, 1922), 2, 9–10.

Working essentially with these points in *The Great Gatsby*, then, Fitzgerald constructed a plot with a fully natural ending: Gatsby fails in his romantic quest and remains a “poor son-of-a-bitch” because he denies his genetic identity and ignores the laws of sexual selection. Moreover, while Tom Buchanan retains physical possession of Daisy, his hand covering hers in “an unmistakable air of natural intimacy,” he continues in his “alert, aggressive way... his head moving sharply here and there, adapting itself to his restless eyes.” And Nick, having exhibited much anxiety and ambivalence in his own sexual relations, having witnessed the violent, chaotic drama involving Gatsby, the Buchanans, and the Wilsons, and having realized that the most profound “difference between men... [is] the difference between the sick and the well” – Nick withdraws alone into the middle-west of his youth, “half sick between grotesque reality and savage frightening dreams” (183, 152, 186, 131, 154).

Fitzgerald takes his first step toward this natural ending with his epigraph. Here, carrying forward his interest in the sexual “machinery under everything” (from *This Side of Paradise*), he focuses immediately upon the essential workings of sexual selection – the male’s struggle in dance or ornamental display to be selected and the female’s power to select:

Then wear the gold hat, if that will move her;  
If you can bounce high, bounce for her too,  
Till she cry “Lover, gold-hatted, high-bouncing lover,  
I must have you!”

But before Nick enters into the story of Gatsby’s effort to win Daisy, he begins by referring to his own “clan’s” descent and telling of his own participation in a “counter-raid” in the “Teutonic migration known as the Great War” (“the last love battle,” as Fitzgerald later termed it).<sup>18</sup> Resulting in his feeling at “the ragged edge of the universe,” Nick’s war experience has made him a wounded veteran in the larger sexual struggle about which Tom Buchanan is so anxious – that “the white race will be – will be utterly submerged” in the rising tide of color, and ultimately that he stands to lose his wife to a “crazy fish” like Gatsby (7, 17, 110). If you “sit back and let Mr Nobody from Nowhere make love to your wife,” Tom complains, you might as well “throw everything overboard and have intermarriage between black and white” (137).

<sup>18</sup> Pp. 6–7; in *Tender Is the Night*, as Dick Diver surveys a battlefield on the western front, he remarks: “Why this was a love battle – there was a century of middle-class love spent here. This was the last love battle” (*Tender Is the Night* [1934; New York: Scribner’s, 1962], 68).

In his first chapter, then, Fitzgerald identifies his other main characters and sets them adrift in the fluid, evolutionary universe wherein – as Nick remarks in the famous last line – “we [all] beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past” (189). Tom Buchanan, Daisy, and Gatsby all “drift” in and out of the novel as the dead Gatsby finally does in his swimming pool, where Fitzgerald surrounds him with other “poor ghosts” who “drifted fortuitously about” in this “new world” (169). Telling how by “chance” he had rented his house near the “pair of enormous eggs” in that “strangest [of] communities in North America” to which Tom and Daisy had also “drifted” (and where Daisy will joke about “accidentally” arranging Nick’s marriage to Jordan Baker), Nick begins to picture a tumultuous reality of high winds and rampant growth (9, 10, 23).

The “great bursts of leaves growing...just as things grow in fast movies” are driven by the same cosmic force that blows the “frogs full of life” and causes the Buchanans’ “lawn [to start] at the beach and [run] toward the front door for a quarter of a mile, jumping over sun-dials and brick walks in burning gardens – finally when it reached the house drifting up the side in bright vines as though from the momentum of its run” (8, 25, 11). Developing this theme, Fitzgerald writes that the “fresh grass...seemed to grow a little way into the [Buchanan] house,” suggesting that, like all life, it emerged from the sea and is related to the life force within the Buchanan line.<sup>19</sup> Later in the novel Nick describes how “the Buchanans’ house floated suddenly” into view (149). This household’s vital force throbs in “the enormous power of [Tom’s] body” with its “great pack of muscle shifting” beneath his coat; and it has produced the child about whom Nick remarks, “I suppose she talks, and – eats, and everything” (11, 21). Moreover, it is reflected in the “paternal contempt” of Tom’s “gruff” voice, which seemed to say, “I’m stronger and more of a man than you are” (11). Within pages we learn of the first incident in which this dominant male, a “hulking physical specimen,” uses his “cruel body” to injure each of the three women in his life (16, 11).

<sup>19</sup> P. 12; elsewhere, in many places, Fitzgerald is far more explicit in suggesting the human link to fish and the sea. In “The Swimmers” (1929), for example, the character Henry Marston enjoys swimming and feeling like a “porpoise,” and he thinks that Americans could better deal with their restlessness if they had developed “fins and wings”; he comments ironically on the American idea that we could “leave out history and the past,” “inheritance or tradition” (*Bits of Paradise: 21 Uncollected Stories by F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald* [London: The Bodley Head, 1973], 201). Similarly, in *Tender Is the Night*, Fitzgerald remarks that “Nicole had been designed for change, for flight with money as fins and wings” (311).

He is responsible not only for Daisy’s “black and blue” knuckle in this scene, but also for another woman’s broken arm (82), and he will go on to break Myrtle Wilson’s nose (41). Ultimately, Fitzgerald’s point is that Tom’s brutal sexual power is alive in his “house” and that it is determinant in his struggles with both George Wilson over Myrtle and with Gatsby over Daisy. By contrast, no such force resides in Gatsby’s fake “ancestral home” (162). Indeed, the futility of Gatsby’s romantic denial of his biological identity and the violence of sexual selection is reflected in his well-trimmed lawn (which soon grew to be as long as Nick’s after Gatsby’s death) and the “thin beard of raw ivy” that covers his “tower” (188, 9).

Despite Tom’s brutal strength, however, neither he nor any other individual in Fitzgerald’s evolutionary world can rest secure. Frequently drawing attention to Tom’s prehensile power, as Darwin referred to it (the male’s physical tools – secondary sexual characters – for capturing and holding the female, as in the lobster’s claws), Fitzgerald notes that Tom “broke [Myrtle’s] nose with his open hand,” that “he put out his broad, flat hand with well-concealed dislike” when introduced to Gatsby, and finally that “his hand [fell] upon and covered” Daisy’s, signaling the end of his struggle with Gatsby.<sup>20</sup> By contrast at this conclusive moment, Nick leaves Gatsby “with his hands in his coat pockets... watching over nothing” (153). Still, Fitzgerald emphasizes that in this world where “there are only the pursued, the pursuing, the busy and the tired” (85), Tom must be ever vigilant. As Nick observes in chapter one, even with *two* women, “something was making [Tom] nibble at the edge of stale ideas as if his sturdy physical egotism no longer nourished his peremptory heart,” and when we see him last he continues in his “restless,” “alert, aggressive way, his hands out a little from his body as if to fight off interference” (25, 186).

Also one of the “pursuing,” Gatsby expresses his “restlessness” as well: “he was never quite still; there was always a tapping foot somewhere or the impatient opening and closing of a hand” (68). When

<sup>20</sup> Pp. 41, 122, 152; discussions of other writers’ work with the male’s prehensile power are indexed in *The Descent of Love*, where, on pp. 143 and 191, for example, I discuss Henry James’s use of these materials in *The Portrait of a Lady*. In his initial discussion of this male “secondary sexual character,” evolved in order for the male to gain an “advantage... over other individuals of the same sex and species, in exclusive relation to reproduction,” Darwin writes that “when the male has found the female he sometimes absolutely requires prehensile organs to hold her” (Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex*, 2 vols. in 1 [1871; Princeton University Press, 1981], 1, 256).

told that “you can’t repeat the past,” he looks around “wildly, as if the past were lurking here in the shadow of his house, just out of reach of his hand” (116–17); and, since Gatsby’s past moment with Daisy is out of reach largely because of the inherent deficiency of his “house,” Fitzgerald presents Gatsby in a precarious state of balance: “he was balancing himself on the dashboard of his car with that resourcefulness of movement that is so peculiarly American” (68).

For similar reasons, in chapter one Fitzgerald depicts another of his main characters, the equally unattached and restless Jordan Baker, as “the balancing girl”; she had a way of holding her “chin...as if she were balancing something on it which was quite likely to fall” (13). Supplementing the precariousness of her social situation as a single woman who is both pursuer and pursued is her notably androgynous nature. A “small-breasted girl with an erect carriage” who looks “like a young cadet” and whom Fitzgerald identifies as the other athlete in his group, she displays, “a flutter of slender muscles in her arms” within the same sentence that captures the bright “lamp-light [on Tom’s] boots” (15, 22). As others have noted, Jordan’s androgyny appeals to Nick, who “enjoyed looking at her,” and seems part of Fitzgerald’s effort to reveal Nick’s own sexual ambivalence (15).

As Nick explains in chapter one, one of the reasons he went “east [to] learn the bond business” was to escape the rumors that he was engaged (7, 24), and during his time in the east he breaks off with two other women. With a history of being “privy to the secret griefs of wild, unknown men” whose “intimate revelation[s]” sometimes “quiver[ed] on the horizon...marred by obvious suppressions,” Nick will go on to tell of one of his most intimate moments in the east – when he reaches out to touch Mr. McKee, the “pale feminine man from the flat below” Tom’s and Myrtle’s. Minutes later, Nick and McKee “groaned down in the elevator” together on the way to McKee’s flat (5–6, 34, 41–42). And, immediately after the strange brief scene in which Nick stands beside McKee’s bed (where “between the sheets, clad in his underwear,” he shows Nick some of his photographs), Nick finds himself “half asleep in the cold lower level of the Pennsylvania Station” (42). Aside from the possible reflections of Fitzgerald’s and Nick’s vague homoerotic desire that others have sensed in this scene, it would seem that Fitzgerald’s emphasis on “down,” “below,” and “lower,” represent another dimension in his view of the social and evolutionary hierarchy.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup> For other controversial but insightful studies of androgyny and homosexual possibilities in *The Great Gatsby* that have only recently emerged (especially in the scene with Nick



Further suggested by Tom’s remark when meeting Nick unexpectedly at lunch, “How’d you happen to come up this far to eat?” Fitzgerald’s references to *up* and *down* in regard to Nick’s biological activities suggest his susceptibility to degeneracy (78). This possibility is further suggested in the uncorrected galleys, where Nick tells of having written the names of Gatsby’s guests (names like Bull, Fishguard, Hammerhead, and Beluga) on an “old time-table [that was] degenerating at its folds.”<sup>22</sup> That is, as a reference to Nick’s sexual identity, the idea that he “groaned down in the elevator” suggests more than his possible moral degeneration, as someone like Max Nordau would emphasize. Rather, Jordan’s androgyny and Nick’s sexual ambivalence reflect on one of the darker aspects in the evolution of sex that Darwin brought to light in *The Descent of Man*: that “it has now been ascertained that at a very early embryonic period both sexes possess true male and female glands. Hence some extremely remote progenitor of the whole vertebrate kingdom appears to have been hermaphrodite or androgynous” (1: 207). Fitzgerald was certainly aware of this idea from his having read of Dr. Ledsmar’s Darwinian experiment about hermaphroditism in plants (in *The Damnation of Theron Ware*), and probably from having read Haeckel’s discussion of such “rudimentary structures” as “the nipple and milk-gland of the male” (265). At any rate, an important result of Fitzgerald’s presentation of these possibilities in *The Great Gatsby* is that they contribute to Nick’s being repelled by the chaotic nature of sex. “Half sick between grotesque reality and savage frightening dreams,” he withdraws from both the brutal male force that nevertheless fascinates him in Tom Buchanan, and from “the secret griefs of wild, unknown men,” though they fascinate him as well (he frequently “feigned sleep” when the “intimate revelation was quivering on the horizon” [154, 5–6]). He let one “short affair with a girl” “blow quietly away” when he was confronted with a violent male: “her brother began throwing mean looks in my direction” (61). Similarly, although he had come east to learn “the bond business,” when he found himself confined with the unlovely couples Tom and Myrtle and the McKees, Nick

---

and McKee), see Keath Fraser, “Another Reading of *The Great Gatsby*,” *English Studies in Canada*, 5:3 (1979); Patricia Pacey Thornton, “Sexual Roles in *The Great Gatsby*,” *English Studies in Canada*, 5:4 (1979); and Edward Wasiolek, “The Sexual Drama of Nick and Gatsby,” *The International Fiction Review*, 19:1 (1992). Also in reference to Nick’s evolutionary identity, consider the ironic possibilities of Gatsby’s repeated way of addressing him as “old sport,” as on pp. 86–87.

<sup>22</sup> F. Scott Fitzgerald *Manuscripts III The Great Gatsby: The Revised and Rewritten Galleys*, intro. and arranged by Matthew J. Bruccoli (New York: Garland, 1990), 47.

“wanted to get out and walk eastward toward the park.” But “each time [he] tried to go [he] became entangled in some wild strident argument which pulled [him] back” (40). Still a resoundingly Darwinian term in the early 1920s, “entangled” in this scene soon leads to the outburst of Tom’s violence (when he breaks Myrtle’s nose) that causes Nick to leave with the “feminine” McKee. As the scene in McKee’s apartment ends, Fitzgerald suggests in the titles of the first two pictures in McKee’s portfolio that Nick’s underlying story has to do mostly with “Beauty and the Beast” and “Loneliness” (42).

If Tom’s brutal male power represents the “beast” in Fitzgerald’s imagination, Daisy’s voice is the deadly instrument of beauty. At the end of *This Side of Paradise* Amory had begun “to identify evil with... strong phallic worship” and concluded that “inseparably linked with evil was beauty,” as in “Eleanor’s voice, in an old song at night... half rhythm, half darkness” (280). There is certainly something of Eleanor’s struggle with her female nature that lingers in Daisy: as Eleanor cried, “*why* am I a girl?... tied to the sinking ship of future matrimony,” Daisy wept when she learned that her baby was a girl, thinking “the best thing a girl can be in this world [is] a beautiful little fool” (*Paradise* 237, *Gatsby* 21). But even as she is aware of her biological entrapment (as Hemingway would later refer to it in *A Farewell to Arms*<sup>23</sup>) she cannot refrain from voicing what is perhaps the most alluring appeal in American literature. Playing on Darwin’s analysis of the sexual appeal of music and the voice, many writers had invested the female voice with such power, as in W. D. Howells’s Lydia Blood and James’s Verena Tarrant.<sup>24</sup> But, whatever Fitzgerald’s sources for this idea (Darwin, Haeckel, or any of the many “Darwinian” novelists), no writer dramatizes it more fully. He introduces the musical theme as part of the scene of natural history wherein the grass grows up from the beach into the Buchanan “house” and a sea “breeze... rippled over the wine-colored rug, making a shadow on it as wind does on the sea” (12). Then Daisy began asking Nick

questions in her low, thrilling voice. It was the kind of voice that the ear follows up and down as if each speech is an arrangement of notes that will never be played again. Her face was sad and lovely with bright things in it, bright eyes and a

<sup>23</sup> Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms* (1929; New York: Scribner’s, 1932), 139, 320.

<sup>24</sup> Discussions of Howells’s, James’s and other novelists’ uses of Darwin’s observations about the sexual appeal of music and the voice are indexed in *The Descent of Love*. Whether Fitzgerald caught it or not, Darwin referred to Haeckel’s “interesting discussion of this subject,” agreeing that “women... possess sweeter voices than men,” but concluding “that they first acquired [these] musical powers in order to attract the opposite sex” (*Descent of Man*, 2, 337).

bright passionate mouth – but there was an excitement in her voice that men who had cared for her found difficult to forget: a singing compulsion, a whispered “Listen,” a promise that she had done gay, exciting things just a while since and that there were gay, exciting things hovering in the next hour. (13–14)

In his innumerable references to Daisy’s voice, Fitzgerald identifies it as the principle instrument with which she casts her spell over Gatsby, compelling his belief in the kind of love that cannot exist in Fitzgerald’s view of life. As Nick notes even in this first scene, “the instant her voice broke off, ceasing to compel my attention, my belief, I felt the basic insincerity of what she had said” (22). But the “deathless song” of Daisy’s “voice held” Gatsby “with its fluctuating, feverish warmth because it couldn’t be over-dreamed” (101). And when Gatsby tells Nick that “her voice is full of money,” Nick immediately realizes that “the inexhaustible charm that rose and fell in it [was] the cymbals’ song of...the king’s daughter, the golden girl.”<sup>25</sup>

As Daisy consciously or unconsciously wields her irresistible power, she becomes further entangled in the web of sexual struggle. When Gatsby left for the war after their brief romance, she had “suddenly” begun to date other men, only to find that, with her “evening dress tangled among dying orchids on the floor beside her bed... she wanted her life shaped... by some force,” which soon proved to be the “force... of Tom Buchanan” (158–59); and even when she has not only Tom but possibly Gatsby, she looks back at Gatsby’s house as she leaves the party, wondering, “what would happen now in the dim incalculable hours? Perhaps some unbelievable guest would arrive, a person infinitely rare and to be marvelled at, some authentically radiant young girl who with one fresh glance at Gatsby, one moment of magical encounter, would blot out those five years of unwavering devotion” (115). She is instinctively aware of “the first law of woman” – that she is a competitor in the sexual arena, as Fitzgerald had treated this subject in 1924 in “Diamond Dick and the First Law of Woman.” Diana (“Diamond Dick”) Dickey’s “nickname survived” – “she had selected it herself” – and she lived up to it by threatening a sexual competitor with a revolver (*The Price* 69). “I think

<sup>25</sup> P. 127; among the innumerable parallels in Fitzgerald’s story of a naive male’s destruction in an encounter with the sexual reality, compared with Harold Frederic’s in *The Damnation of Theron Ware*, are Celia Madden’s several musical performances and Theron’s fascination with “Miss Madden’s riches”; the “glamour” of wealth “shown upon her,” the “veritable gleam of gold” (*The Damnation of Theron Ware or Illumination*, Vol. 3 of *The Harold Frederic Edition* [1896; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985], 254). Both Fitzgerald and Frederic work with Darwin’s point that human beings select for wealth and social position.

you've got my man" (82), she explains; "I wasn't made for anything like love" (79). No less a hunter than this Diana, or perhaps even Hemingway's Margot Macomber, Daisy is implicated in Myrtle Wilson's "accidental" death, as Fitzgerald suggests in Nick's concern that if "Tom found out that Daisy had been driving... he might think he saw a connection in it – he might think anything."<sup>26</sup>

Gatsby himself can never conceive of such a grim possibility, for he is determined to deny his origins and wants to believe "that the rock of the world was founded securely on a fairy's wing" (105). Nor can he accept the other part of his reality, as suggested in Fitzgerald's epigraph – that he was destined to perform the lover's dance in the biological struggle to be selected. He is always acted upon by the natural laws he cannot accept, as when the "universe of ineffable gaudiness spun itself out in his brain" one night as "the clock ticked" and his "tangled clothes [lay] upon the floor"; then "an instinct toward his future glory" led him on his way, first to St. Olaf College, and finally to his second opportunity to be selected by Daisy (105). Even then, "as if he were on a wire," he seems unaware that his most effective moment comes, as Fitzgerald's epigraph and Darwin's theory suggest, when he proudly displays his ornamental attractions – the "many-colored disarray... [of] shirts with stripes and scrolls and plaids in coral and apple green and lavender and faint orange with monograms of Indian blue" (91, 97–98). Not too subtly invoking the Darwinian idea when he has Gatsby explain that "a man in England... sends over a selection of things at the beginning of each season," Fitzgerald illustrates how effective is the power of beauty in sexual selection: "'They're such beautiful shirts,' [Daisy] sobbed, her voice muffled in the thick folds... 'I've never seen such – such beautiful shirts before'" (97–98).

Certainly the most splendid peacock in American literature, Gatsby repeatedly wears his famous pink suit, has his man Klipspringer perform "The Love Nest" on the piano, and, in general, "deck[s] out [his illusion] with every bright feather that drifted his way" (100–01). Nothing could be gaudier to attract the female's eye for ornamental beauty unless it is perhaps the taxi cab that appeals to Myrtle Wilson: "she let four taxi cabs drive away before she selected a new one, lavender-colored with grey upholstery [in which the party] slid out from the mass of the station into the glowing sunshine" (31). The image of phallic power and beauty is

<sup>26</sup> P. 152; in Fitzgerald's story "The Dance" (1926) another sexual struggle between women ends in murder because "all the girls are good friends... except when two of them are try'n to get hold of the same man" (*Bits of Paradise*, 154).

evident here, as it is in “Gatsby’s gorgeous car... [of] rich cream color, bright with nickel, swollen here and there in its monstrous length with triumphant hatboxes,” and so forth (68). But as Fitzgerald suggests in the line from “Ain’t We Got Fun?” (“nothing’s surer / The rich get richer”), despite Gatsby’s gorgeous ornamentation and phallic appeal, he is no match for Buchanan when they finally confront each other “with competitive firmness” (101, 138).

Gatsby manages moderately well in the dance, with his “graceful, conservative fox-trot” (112); and Tom reveals himself to be no more impressive at this natural feat, in which, as Fitzgerald knew in *This Side of Paradise*, people are “selected by the cut-in system at dances, which favors the survival of the fittest” (58). More restrained in this dance with Daisy than at the first raucous event that Nick attended, Gatsby conceals his instinctive sense that music and dance can be effectively combined in what Darwin called “love-antics and dances” (*Descent of Man* 2: 68). There he had requested that the orchestra play the “Jazz History of the World,” and it achieved its desired effect: “girls were putting their heads on men’s shoulders... and swooning backward... into men’s arms” (55). The trouble is, such primitive performances tend also to arouse the combative instincts that are inherent in the struggle for reproductive success. In a passage that Fitzgerald cut from the galleys, the “Jazz History of the World” is something like H. G. Wells’s evolutionary *Outline of History*, providing “a weird sense that it was a preposterous cycle after all” – one “discord” after another.<sup>27</sup> In the novel, the scene ends with one “fight” leading to several others, and the frenzy of “dissension” and “flank attacks” subsides only when two “wives [are] lifted kicking into the night.”<sup>28</sup>

Of course, this is the way the struggle will end in *The Great Gatsby*, with the stronger male prevailing not so much for his beauty or “love,” as Gatsby might have hoped, but for the superior physical and financial strength that inheres in his “house.” Other American novelists had reached similar conclusions but in different ways: some of Howells’s

<sup>27</sup> P. 36; something of Fitzgerald’s early attraction to the evolutionary view of life is evident in the interest he showed in Wells’s *Outline of History, Being a Plain History of Life and Humankind*, which, he remarked in 1920, was “Most absorbing!” (*Correspondence of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, eds. Matthew J. Bruccoli and Margaret M. Duggan [New York: Random House, 1980], 73).

<sup>28</sup> Pp. 56–57; for similar remarks by Fitzgerald on the role of music and dance in sexual selection, see “The Dance,” which is set in a small town where life’s affairs and scandals “live on all tangled up with the natural ebb and flow of outward life” (*Bits of Paradise*, 140).

heroes in the 1870s, for example, who prevail over rival males because women select them for their *moral* as well as financial strength; or James's Basil Ransom, who prevails over weaker males (as well as a female competitor) because of his physical and *mental* power; or Harold Frederic's Joel Stormont Thorp because of his combined "nerve-force" and physical and financial strength, as well as the woman's attraction to his "frank barbarism of power"; or Edith Wharton's Cobham Stilling, in her story "The Choice," because of his sheer physical strength without financial wealth (Mrs. Stilling possesses the wealth).<sup>29</sup>

Unlike any of these, Fitzgerald's plot is quite in accord with "the fundamental principle of biology" that he alluded to in *The Beautiful and Damned*, the "ontogenic fact" that in the "tiny globular egg cell" one is already bound within "the chain of generations" (Haeckel 63, 62, 143). Representing a different "strata" from Daisy's, Gatsby "had no real right to touch her hand"; and when she saw his "huge incoherent failure of a house," it simply fell "in like a card house at the disapproval in her eyes" (156, 188, 120). For such reasons Fitzgerald suggests in his closing paragraphs that there never has been a "new world," only the "old unknown world." The "fresh, green breast of the new world... pandered in whispers" to the first sailors, compelling their unwanted "aesthetic contemplation"; and beauty is still part of the "machinery under everything" that derives us toward an "orgastic future" (189). "The essential point," as Haeckel remarked, "is not the 'embrace'... or the amorousness connected therewith; it is simply the introduction of the spermatozoa into the vagina" (139). Thus the imagined "pap of life" at which Gatsby would "gulp down the incomparable milk of wonder" is destroyed by the "accident," and by the grotesque reality of Myrtle's "left breast... swinging loose like a flap" (117, 145).

<sup>29</sup> Discussions of these examples are indexed in *The Descent of Love*.