

Deflation of American Values: Automobile Symbolism

in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*

Undoubtedly, the American population's mass adoption of the automobile by the 1920s changed the American lifestyle like no other technological inventions before. As a result of the extensive construction of the first American interconnected highway system, the decentralization of cities, and the appearance of roadside services in suburban areas, the automobile significantly altered the general American landscape (Flink, 169-189). Simultaneously with the alteration of the physical landscape, the automobile became an instrument of social changes. Due to the range of mobility they provided, cars opened up the rural-urban geographical division of America and thus compensated for both the suburban population's isolation from economic opportunities in cities and the urban dweller's yearning for the tranquility of the countryside. (Ling 13-36). Also, it allowed a wider segment of the population such leisure pursuits as visiting motion pictures or vacationing in the countryside. However, as Zoltán Simon argues, the most significant changes "took place in the national consciousness of the American people" (63). Automobile promoted individualized travel and uninhibited geographical mobility that 19th-century thinkers such as Frederick Jackson Turner or Alexis de Tocqueville valorized as core national values and an underlying feature of a distinct American character. Pointing out how motion in general were associated with American values of freedom, self-governance, and self-reliance, Cotton Seiler demonstrates that this unfettered physical mobility that characterized US pioneer history was deemed to be a key practice as well as criterion of democratic citizenship, which the automobility in the Jazz Age reified and reinforced (21). Seiler argues that the automobile as an object of mass consumption in the Twenties reasserted the lost individualism of the Progressive era, when Taylorization eradicated the public worship of the individual and emphasized the "social self" (29). Furthermore, the automobile differed from other technological inventions of the era, such as the train, since it granted governance of one's self, which was another significant component of the republican selfhood. In brief, all these essential American traits merged in one commodity, the automobile. Therefore, compared to other technological inventions of the era, the peculiarity of automobiles in American culture, as Zoltán Simon suggests, is that they were not mere machines or means of transport but, by analogy of the physical mobility, they embodied American social mobility, progress, individualism, self-reliance, personal freedom, and even the American Dream itself (61). As James Flink aptly summarizes "automobility permitted restructuring of American society, via technical efficiency along lines dictated by traditional cultural values" (qtd. in Pursell 239). In his novel *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald represents automobiles not exclusively as the manifestations of these characteristically American values, rather, the many accidents and one fatal injury that cars cause in the narrative suggest the abuse of the individual power and freedom the automobile reifies. Fitzgerald's frequent

use of the automobile imagery in the novel shows his literary preoccupation with this ambiguous quality of automobiles. This study investigates how the implicit car symbolism in the novel challenges all the values and dreams which automobiles embody in the Twenties' American society at large. Also, this essay aims to provide a comprehensive and versatile analysis by investigating the social, economic, philosophical, and racial dimensions of Fitzgerald's automobile symbolism to highlight how these national values came to be contested by the all-pervasive changes of automobility in the Roaring Twenties.

The paradoxical nature of automobile as carrier as well as destroyer of ambitious dreams is probably best exemplified when Jay Gatsby's gorgeous Rolls Royce encounters a funeral procession. Considering the symbolism of the colors, the "gilded" surface of his car apparently represents Gatsby's wealth, while the green interior may stand for hope and, generally speaking, America as the land of promise and opportunities. Nick's description of the interior of the car as a "sort of green leather conservatory" conveys its garden-like character. David Laird proposes that Gatsby's splendid Rolls Royce presents a version of Eden, an idealized place which promises well-being, individual freedom as well as protection and security (641). Such an interpretation reverberates strongly with Nick's description of how the first Dutch settlers might have viewed the New World as a kind of Eden, a "fresh, green, breast of the world" which "had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams, for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent" (187). Thus the greenness of the upholstery is metaphorically associated with the American Dream, the promise that the American continent holds as an idealized and mysterious place of endless possibilities to prosper and achieve fulfillment. In addition, the window of Gatsby's car acts as a kind of revelatory lens that displays Manhattan for Nick as a "wild promise of all the mystery and beauty of the world" (75). This positive, enchanted image of Manhattan as the land of promise, however, is overshadowed by the funeral procession. Also, taking into consideration that the destination of Gatsby's car is the meeting point with Wolfsheim, who is associated with bootlegging and gambling, the passing of the hearse can symbolically suggest that the idea of the American Dream became corrupted by the unscrupulous pursuit of wealth and materialistic values, and therefore it is doomed to death. Gatsby himself also adheres to the illusion that by accumulating money—even through corrupt means—and showing off with a splendid car and other consumer goods he can achieve his private dream, that is, winning back Daisy's love. Laird suggests that, with its green interior, Gatsby's car represents his romantic belief, his "extraordinary gift of hope" in the incorruptibility of his dream, "under the spell of which Gatsby seeks to transcend the mundane traffic of this world" (643, 644). His effort of transcending reality in the pursuit of his dream can be seen when, just before reaching Queensboro Bridge, he commits speeding: "with fenders spread like wings we scattered light through half Astoria" (74). The overtaking maneuver of the hearse in his reckless and irresponsible "race" against "the mundane traffic" (Laird 644) implies that death actually wins over Gatsby.

In this maneuver the car's spatial motion and passing of time are strongly interlinked, which portends that Gatsby's tragic inability to comprehend and realize the operation of objective time will finally lead to his downfall. Gatsby's dream is definitely time-related, since he steadfastly believes in the viability of reinstating his past relationship with Daisy in the present. This becomes obvious when Gatsby staggers at Nick's assertion that he cannot repeat the past: "Can't repeat the past? Why of course you can! ... I'm going to fix everything just the way it was before ... She'll see" (118). Also, his ironic act of restoring to its place a physical clock which almost falls down from the mantelpiece on his date with Daisy signifies that his individualistic perception of time as something which is reversible stands in sharp contradiction with quantifiable, mathematical time. Though the symbolic overtaking of the hearse signifies the passing of objective time over mundane creatures, other experiences of automobility in the narrative potentially contribute to relativizing the experience of temporality.

The modern sensation of speed as an integral part of the automobile experience alters the perception of temporality and relativizes time. In his comprehensive investigation on how revolutionary technological inventions of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century, such as the railway, the telegraph, or the car altered the conception of space and time, Stephen Kern points out that the experience of mechanic velocity led to a re-examination of temporality as heterogeneous (16,17). By using a train as demonstration, Einstein's theory of relativity pointed out "how time in one reference system moving away at a constant velocity appears to slow down when viewed from another system at rest relative to it" (Kern 19). His realization that there is a multiplicity of "correct" time depending on one's personal standpoint in physical space and thus each individual has a valid, private perception of time radically transformed the previous Newtonian space/time perception. By 1925—the publication year of *The Great Gatsby*—the American press had already devoted considerable attention to Einstein's theory, and as Ronald Berman states, this contributed to the formulation of a new modernist imagery: the association of space-speed-time in "mechanical objects moving at high speeds" (47). Berman proposes that Fitzgerald's use of automobiles moving at high speed through the landscape corresponds with Einstein's relativity of space-time framework (49). The physical landscape gains a time dimension other than the present when interpreted from Nick Carraway's mobilized point of view. He envisions the present New York as a pristine, bucolic landscape before the intrusion of modern technology, when he rides together with Myrtle and Tom in a taxicab: "We drove over to Fifth Avenue, so warm and soft, almost pastoral, on the summer Sunday afternoon that I wouldn't have been surprised to see a great flock of white sheep turn the corner" (34). Similarly, travelling in Gatsby's racing automobile *en route* to Manhattan, he perceives the city in the distant historical time of the Puritan settlers, peering through the windshield of the car: "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" (74). The pristine images Nick evokes signify his own idealized perception of America's past, which, for him, still persists in the present. These images support Raymond M. Vince's

observation that the multiple viewpoints and the role of the focalizer in the modernist narrative is commensurate with those of the observer in science (99). Moreover, the mechanic speed also transforms perceptions of space. Gazing through the windshield, Nick perceives only the contours of the buildings of Manhattan, with its “white heaps” and “sugar lumps,” which signifies that the urban landscape is broken down into geometrical forms. Later on, in his contemplation of a long row of taxicabs in New York, he refers to people in similar terms: “the forms leaned together in the taxis...and lighted cigarettes made unintelligible circles inside” (64). These images echo Wolfgang Schivelbusch’s panoramic view which argues that velocity weakens the visual perception as the observer is only able to capture the broadest outlines (55). Besides, Nick’s portrayal of Manhattan’s buildings as similar to geometric forms evokes the characteristic representation mode of Cubism whose artists painted objects looking at them from multiple perspectives (Kern 143). Kern argues that this revolutionary mode of artistic representation of space was stimulated by the new scientific theories of space-time experience (Kern 22). Nick’s perception as filtered by the windshield is thus described in terms that recall new trends in art inspired by a scientific paradigm shift.

Furthermore, it is interesting to observe how the car as symbol of modern East and the train as the embodiment of Victorian age Mid-West stand in sharp contrast in terms of temporality, and in what ways this difference in their temporal representation signifies the demise of morality and the promise of American progress. The freedom of automobile travel promotes personalized or subjective perception of time. The “disconcerting ride” of Nick and Gatsby toward Manhattan is a virtual time travel to Gatsby’s past, since he conjures up images and articulates memories of his childhood in the Mid-West, his years at Oxford, in the war, his voyage around Europe, and he even presents his military decoration from “Little Montenegro” to bolster up the authenticity of his life narrative (70). The mental extension of geographical landscape expanding from the continent of America to Europe suggests Gatsby’s legendary, cosmopolitan character, the credibility of which Nick initially challenges. Nick perceives Gatsby’s account as being slightly embellished which indicates that Gatsby constructs his “personal past” by representing his experiences from his own individualistic viewpoint. Besides, the flashback of memories breaks the temporal continuity of the car ride refuting the sequential order of time. In contrast, train travel is associated with standard, mathematically measured time as Nick notes that there is “twelve minutes to [his] train and he draw circle around “the three-fifty train” in his timetable (160, 162). From a spatial point of view, Nick considers the train as the symbol of his pastoral Mid-West home:

That’s my Middle West—not the wheat or the prairies or the lost Swede towns but the thrilling, returning trains of my youth and the street lamps and sleigh bells in the frosty dark and the shadows of holly wreaths thrown by lighted windows on the snow. I am part of that, a little solemn with the feel of those long winters, a little complacent from growing up in the Carraway house in a city where dwellings are still called through decades by a family’s name. (183)

John Brooks argues that by setting the rural Mid-West against the urban East the novel juxtaposes the Victorian times of America and the industrialized period of the 1920s (7). He sees the difference between these two spatial/temporal poles in terms of changing morality (7). Nick's returning train as the epitome of standard time signifies order, the "holiness" of principles such as the long tradition of calling the properties by family name and, generally, the continuity of Victorian values of honor and decency. As Nick puts the "old time-table" now disintegrates suggesting that the automobile as symbol of progress and modernism degenerates of these Victorian moralities (67). The manner Western character drive the cars indicates how the practice of automobility, of which one of the most important characteristics is the freedom from being bound to schedules or timetables, caused their moral degradation when they moved to East. Labeled by Nick as a "rotten driver", Jordan exhibits dishonesty when "she left a borrowed car out in the rain with the top down, and then lied about." (64). Tom wrecks his car during their honeymoon with Daisy and chambermaid as passenger of the car indicates the he is involved in adultery. Gatsby commits speeding on the road to New York and he tries to get away with it by showing up a white card. Thus, these examples suggest that spatial and temporal freedom automobile provides undermines the moral values that Fitzgerald's narrative seems to celebrate and valorize. Ironically, Gatsby's station wagon which carrying his guests to the station "scampered like a brisk yellow bug" to meet railroad timetables highlights his constant race against objective time and reality (45). Perceiving the car as the manifestation of the disrupted temporal linearity it undermines the notion of American progress as an uninterrupted prosperity and moral advancement.

The idea of American progress as perpetual improvement by technological development seems to be challenged by images of landscapes Gatsby's car traverses heading to New York. Nick's perception of the spaces the car leaves behind suggestively evokes phases of America's evolution to a nation. "We passed Port Roosevelt, where there was a glimpse of red-belted ocean-going ships, and sped along a cobbled slum lined with the dark, undeserted saloons of the faded gilt nineteen-hundreds. Then the valley of ashes opened out on both sides of us, and I had a glimpse of Mrs. Wilson straining at the garage pump with panting vitality as we went by." (74), The image of the ocean-going ship suggests the new settlers' arrival to the promised land, while the image of saloons evoke the popular entertainment facilities of the frontier, and the straining Mrs. Wilson's "panting vitality" can be read as a modern manifestation of the Franklinesque work ethic and vigor— all references to major cornerstones of American progress. That Gatsby is driving west (from Long Island to New York) seems to reinforce that the car's journey through these landscapes is symbolic of the progressive, nation-building movements of Westward Expansion and urbanization. From Nick's perspective, however, these residential areas of the slum and the valley of ashes are desolate, impoverished places representing the faded glamour of American dreams and are emblematic of the nation's fraudulent belief in unfettered social and moral betterment by progress. Berman emphasizes that progress in the American mind has always had the connotations of forward movement, improvement, and perfection, which found expression in the transformation of America

cultural, social and geographical landscapes by rapid technological development (Berman, "America in Fitzgerald" 39). However, by the Twenties the idea of progress was heavily questioned by pragmatist philosophers such as John Dewey or William James. Walter Lippmann in *Public Opinion* (1922) provides the criticism of the Idea of Progress imagined as perfection by mechanic advancement, which reverberates with Nick's perception of the landscape.

The stereotype represented by such words as "progress" and "perfection" was composed fundamentally of mechanical inventions. [...] The habit of thinking about progress as "development" has meant that many aspects of the environment were simply neglected. With the stereotype of "progress" before their eyes, Americans have in the mass seen little that did not accord with that progress. They saw the expansion of cities, but not the accretion of slums; they cheered the census statistics, but refused to consider overcrowding; they pointed with pride to their growth, but would not see the drift from the land, or the unassimilated immigration. (108,110)

Lippmann suggests that the idea of national progress connoted improvement by technological development, however, the promise of this improvement failed to provide equally good social conditions for all. The traverse of Gatsby's ostentatious car signifies that the appearance of the automobile in the suburb deteriorated the landscape and failed to promote the universal well-being and social regeneration of the middle-class.

The transformation of Gatsby's car from status symbol and embodiment of hope into the "death car" which kills Myrtle points to the hopeless social position of the working class. Myrtle's death might be taken as the destruction or, rather, the unfulfilment of the American Dream. She had social aspirations such as entering a higher class of society, rising from rags to riches, which her affair with Tom as well as her attitude to cars reflect. As Simon notes, she regards cars not as means of transportation but as fashionable commodities which give her an elegant appearance and endow her with a sense of social status (72). In picking a taxi, she considers aesthetic features over functional ones, letting "four taxicabs drive away before she selected a new one, lavender-colored with gray upholstery" (33). Interestingly, while this taxicab is itself the object of a symbolical purchase of privileged social status, it also serves the marketplace of consumerism. The windshield of the taxi acts as a shop window for Myrtle, revealing some puppies on the curb as commodities on display: "she turned sharply from the window and leaning forward tapped on the front glass. 'I want to get one of those dogs,' she said earnestly. 'I want to get one for the apartment. They're nice to have—a dog.'" (33). She shows great interest in the dogs' breeding, which underscores her fraudulent belief that a distinguished pedigree can be purchased. Also, reading colors of the taxi symbolically, this car might anticipate the ultimate frustration of her social aspirations. With its fashionable lavender exterior, this taxi renders her a sophisticated and aristocratic quality she yearns for. The color of the interior, however, might imply her failure to advance from the greyness of the valley of ashes and position herself in the leisure class. Ironically, in her desperate desire to step on a higher echelon of society, she is violently deprived of her "American Dream" by the splendid car of Gatsby:

she is hit by Gatsby's automobile and dies in the valley of ashes. Her left breast which is severed in the accident appallingly resonates with Nick's description of the American continent for the new settlers as the "fresh, green breast of the world" (187). Thus the severance of her left breast in the car accident can symbolize the end of America as a nurturing, protective, Edenic place, due to the violent intrusion of modern technology. In this sense, Fitzgerald's 1920s novel integrates into a long tradition of 19th-century American writing in which Leo Marx in his *Machine in the Garden* discerned the sudden intrusion of machinery in the garden as symbolic of the disruption and transformation of the pastoral landscape of America. The setting of Myrtle's violent death in the valley of ashes also implies this transformation of the American landscape—as result of technological and industrial activity—from the "green breast of the world" to a dusty and desolate dumping ground (187). Therefore, this violent, machinery-induced severance of Myrtle's breast also implicitly conveys that America is no longer a land of promise and endless possibilities for those who want to achieve the American Dream. In addition, Myrtle was hit by Daisy, a representative of the upper class, which also suggests a social and economic climate that is ultimately hostile to working-class aspirations, despite any myth of a classless society. Apparently, the "death car" image symbolically counterpoints the kind of social mobility that the automobile is generally associated with in the larger cultural context.

In a figurative sense, the "death car" incident also has the potential to foreshadow the fate of dreams and human values in the capitalistic, technology-centered world of the twenties. Gatsby's death car shatters the dream of another representative of the working class, George Wilson. For George, Tom's blue coupé means a "damp gleam of hope" to fulfill his dream of moving west with Myrtle and starting a new life (31). Therefore, George as a member of the working class is highly dependent on and is under the control of a representative of the aristocratic upper class until the death of Myrtle. As O'Meara suggests, George sees Tom's blue automobile as a monetary unit, as a currency the value of which fluctuates throughout the novel (84). Tom changes his mind several times selling the car to George, as his car is obviously connected to Wilson's wife: his frequent visits to Wilson's garage provide an opportunity to see Myrtle, his mistress. The possession of the car is also a crucial factor for him to keep his mistress, since if he decides to sell it to Wilson, the mechanic leaves town with his wife. Thus Myrtle's death influences the value of the blue car as a currency in two different ways. As O'Meara has also observed, while for Tom the value of the car mounts up and serves as material means of buying Wilson's silence, for Wilson, his wife's death devalues the currency as his dream of family bliss is shattered (84). Incidentally, this textual clue reflects the instability of the actual supply-demand capitalistic market economy, where, as O'Meara argues, the changes in the market value depend on circumstantial events (86). In a historicist sense, this sudden value change of the blue coupe in the novel anticipates the dead-end of the roaring twenties, that is, the Great Depression, and it signifies the tragic consequences of the belief that the economic expansion and prosperity can be prolonged endlessly. In addition, this mutual commodification of cars and human lives severely criticizes the capitalism and excessive consumerism of the 1920s' America. The

value of Tom's car apparently depends on Myrtle's life and death, thus she implicitly assumes the status of commodity which can be bought or sold, and this reflects the dehumanizing effect of modern technology and capitalism. Myrtle's severed left breast suggests that the patriarchal leaning of capitalism defeminizes women and, in doing so, it degrades women into corporeal possessions or commodities. Suzanne del Gizzo, in quoting Ross Posnock, points out that this commodification resonates with the Marxist idea of reification and commodity fetishism. These two concepts characterize consumerism and denote that animated objects, such as consumer products, are endowed with "mystical" or personified qualities. Posnock argues that, in the long run, this carries the danger that individuals and objects become confused: people become objectified and are transformed into commodities which can be bought and sold. As Gizzo suggests, Fitzgerald shows literary attempts to capture the moral implications of this confusion between people and objects and, in doing so, forms a critique of the consumer culture of the twenties (Web). Fitzgerald also implies the severe consequence of American capitalism in making the victim of modern technology and consumerism a woman who is herself the representative of this consumerist attitude.

While Myrtle's car accident symbolically conveys the implied criticism of the capitalistic American economy, others highlight characteristic symptoms of the Roaring Twenties. The recurring image of the amputated wheel implies that the automobile as the embodiment of unrestricted freedom and means of escape frequently gets disconnected from social realities and moral codes. The wheels disjointed from Tom's car and that of the drunken driver at Gatsby's party, respectively, can represent the consequences of moral corruption. In Tom's case, the observable, physical damages, such as the ripped front wheel of his car and the fracture injury of his mistress sitting within it, indicate his spiritually broken bond with his wife, Daisy, as well as foreshadow his later adultery committed with Myrtle. In the drunk driver's case, the amputated wheel portentously signifies the consequence of the era's decadent lifestyle with excessive drinking, ceaseless pursuit of excitement, general carelessness and irresponsible behavior. The real tragedy of this accident, however, seems to be the driver's resemblance of Gatsby in lacking a sense of reality. The crowd surrounding the site of the accident unsuccessfully attempts to enlighten the drunk driver that the car is not drivable any more, as "the wheel and the car were no longer joined by any physical bond" (62). Moreover, both the driver and the passenger of this wrecked car are characterized by certain difficulty to distinguish between reality and illusion. Earlier at the party, Owl Eyes, the passenger of the car, marvels at the genuinity of Gatsby's library, not having expected books with real "pages and everything" (51). Therefore, the image of the disjointed wheel potentially indicates the discrepancy between dream and reality for the intoxicated motorist and Owl Eyes.

On the other hand, taking place at Gatsby's party, this accident also casts a shadow over the escapist attitude of Jazz-Age America at large. The visitors of Gatsby's opulent party, who ceaselessly immerse in jazz, dancing, and excessive drinking, seemingly embody this attitude which characterized many Americans during the unprecedented prosperity of the Roaring Twenties. The figure of the driver from Gatsby's party can stand as

an epitome of escapist attitude of entire generation of the Twenties which is signified by his pivotal position in the spotlight as “a dozen headlights illuminated a bizarre and tumultuous scene” (60). That the driver is “blinded by the glare of the headlights” (61) indicates his perceptual inability to distinguish between illusion and reality, and recognize the disjointed wheel as the crucial problem. The physical description of his look also highlights that his whole persona does not seem to be grounded in reality. The only part of physical look is textually enlarged “uncertain” dancing shoes” with which he “paw[s] tentatively at the ground” (61). Also, his portrayal lends him some odd metaphysical quality since he is endowed with some fearsome supernatural features, described as an “apparition” and even the opening of his car door produces “a ghostly pause” (61). Though what further complicates and aggravates his detachment from reality is that in failing to perceive the root of the tangible problem as the shorn wheel, he seems to present a sign of a vague attempt to conceive the accident on a metaphysical level: “Half a dozen fingers pointed at the amputated wheel — he stared at it for a moment, and then looked upward as though he suspected that it had dropped from the sky.”(61). His upward gesture given as a reaction to the several fingers directed to the ground, where the severed wheel lies, also implies his tendency to distance himself from real problems. More importantly, the spatial connection between the wheel and the sky created by his gaze suggests that he might attribute the amputated wheel not to his own human error but to a “greater power,” to something which is beyond him and comprehensible physical reality. The drunk driver’s apparent spiritual awe over the disconnected wheel is comparable to George Wilson’s belief that the advertisement with Dr. T.J Eckleburg’s giant eyes embodies God. Both of them show inclination to relate commercial objects—the disjointed wheel and the oculist advertisement, respectively—to a supernatural entity. However, Dale Randall suggests that Eckleburg’s large, empty eyes represent the absence rather than presence of God and stand as a sign of “what is no longer available spiritually” (56). In this sense the driver’s gesture represents no more than bafflement over the lost wheel. To conclude, the amputated wheel image stands as a trope for the appalling lack of “any physical bond” between illusion and reality which can be seen as characteristic symptom of the Roaring Twenties’ escapist attitude (62).The disjointed wheel, along with the car’s drunk driver from the party, gloomily foreshadows the dangers of this detachment. While in these accidents, namely in the accident with Tom’s blue coupe and the drunk driver’s one at Gatsby’s party, only the wheel is severed in the homicidal scene the general irresponsibility and carelessness coming from the misuse of technology amputates a human body part, Myrtle’s left breast. All the examples associated with the amputated wheel image demonstrate that the misuse of technology also implicates the abuse of the individual freedom, independence, and self-autonomy the automobile provides and embodies.

Another significant perspective of Fitzgerald’s automobile symbolism is the representation of black characters in relation to automobile. A company of African Americans overtakes Gatsby’s automobile in a limousine driven by a white chauffeur on the Queensboro Bridge. Associating these blacks with dynamism suggests that they counter their stereotypically fixed image as subservient as well as their immobile position in

the social structure. Also, the car owned and driven by the African Americans share the public road of America with the white population. As Cotton Seiler states unarrested geographical mobility has always been seen as an evidence of black freedom and African American's social mobility. The American road was idealistically perceived as a democratic social space that, by transcending race and color, promotes equal rights and opportunities for any of its drivers who possesses a car. In Seiler's view this space of the open road constructs the "republic of drivers" where one's citizenship is performatively affirmed by the practice of driving (Seiler 107). Paul Gilroy also states that the automobile as a signifier of political freedom "suggested a dimension of citizenship and status", which were blocked by the racially imbued politics of the road (94). Investigating the black middle class attitude to automobility in the interwar years Kathleen Franz gives an overview of blacks' disappointing experiences travelling on the road. Though the car made possible to escape Jim Crowism in public transport, black drivers experienced the segregation as they were rejected by roadside services and auto camps. Thus, both Cotton Seiler and Kathleen Franz point out that while the American road was constructed by white culture as a democratic space, simultaneously they distorted the promised uniformity and equality by "limit[ing] access to automobility through a system of discrimination and representation that positioned nonwhites outside the new motor culture." (Franz 135, Seiler 107). This ambivalence is exemplified by how Nick Carraway portrays the spectacle of the modish black company passing on the Queensboro Bridge: "As we crossed Blackwell's Island 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." (49). Nick's clearly oppressive language by using the word "bucks" as well as his stereotypical remark on the black's eyeballs indicate that he perceives this black group from a white supremacist point of view. His stereotypical description suggests that Nick differentiates and distances himself as well as Gatsby from these characters. Therefore, his discriminative attitude toward African Americans dismantles the idealized conception of democratic equality figured around the open space of the road, and the identical chance to social and geographical mobility the automobile grants and epitomizes. Also, the fact that this symbolic discrimination takes place within the spatial framework of a bridge, an architectural element with the function of connecting and unifying indicates the white America's restrictive attitude toward black (auto)mobility. Nick's symbolic exclusion of black character from the "democratic" space of the bridge undermines the political equality of the African-Americans, therefore the open road seems to be constructed by white population as another space of segregation and racial hierarchy.

The association between African American characters and cars also underlines Fitzgerald's intense awareness of non-whites' social mobility. Kathleen Franz argues that automobile served not only as an instrument for African-Americans to avoid segregation but "as a material expression of racial uplift ideology" (132). Franz points out that black middle class used the automobile for their political goals to infuse black images with dignity. Newspapers owned by black elite frequently published photographs that by portraying

black motorists as respectable, prosperous and well-dressed countered the stereotypical representation of black drivers as technologically primitive and inferior. As Franz states, in the post-war period the slowly emergent black middle class evidently adopted automobile to prove black economic success and social advancement. Fitzgerald's African American characters seem to represent this elite stratum of the black middle class since both the company on the bridge and the witness of Myrtle's murder car are portrayed as modish and well-dressed. The narrative representation of the three modish blacks chauffeured by a white individual bolsters the appropriation of automobile as an instrument of African American social uplift which Nick as a representative of white class derides as ridiculous joke. The accentuated facial feature of their "yolks of their eyeballs" evokes for Nick the minstrel blackface. Nick's stereotypical demeanor indicates that older, inscribed forms of racial discrimination are not only still vivid in white culture's perception of black freedom and social progress in the Twenties society, but it is perpetuated in the technological realm of automobility. Setting Nick's prejudicial and dissociative white attitude against the challenging haughtiness of blacks' gaze upon him as well as their overtaking maneuver of Gatsby's splendid car affirms Kathleen Franz's observation of automobility and the American road as a "contested terrain" for non-whites (136). As such, automobile ownership for these supposedly black middle class characters serves as an instrument in their symbolic combat to be recognized as equal citizens and also to counter the minstrel image in Nick's view. Both of the scenes where blacks appear characterized by overtaking maneuvers which exemplifies the African-American practice of automobility as a contested experience. However, while on the bridge it is the black's limousine which overtakes Gatsby's car performatively affirming their challenged "auto citizenship," in the valley of ashes, prior to Myrtle's hit-and-run accident, it is the black witness who is passed down by the speeding car of Gatsby and Daisy. This latter symbolic passing seems to reinforce the exclusion of blacks from white-privileged automobility and reaffirm black's ineligibility to citizenship in the contested area of the road. However, as Goldsmith suggests, in this scene the narrative "reverses Nick's earlier examination of the black middle-class, allowing a representative of this group to return the gaze of the white elite" (462). Goldsmith argues that similarly to Nick the black driver perceives Gatsby's passing down on him in terms of class mobility, since he sees the actual, golden façade of the car rather than the perpetrator of the crime residing in it (Goldsmith 462). This suggests that measuring class status on the scale of displayed material wealth, including the commodity of automobile, characterizes not only the white culture but black population, as well. Besides, this observation also highlights that the automobile equally serves as an essential instrument of social mobility for both whites and blacks, therefore the distinction between the mode of Gatsby's social climbing and of middle class blacks seems to be blurred.

As I was striving to demonstrate, Fitzgerald uses the automobile imagery in a really complex and versatile way. While automobile is a symbol of modernity, it is also a means of characterization and a dramatic device for Fitzgerald (Simon 71). Also, by way of the automobile symbolism, the author reflects to the effects and consequences of the modern technological development on the social and cultural landscape of the Twenties'

America. In this respect, the automobile symbolism often conveys the disenchantment of the most precious American values and demystifies the American Dream. The idea of progress which is America's steady belief in the endless social and economic advancement is called into question in relation to the impact of automobility on the time/space perceptions. While the automobile was considered to be an instrument of social mobility and the material expression of the fulfilled American Dream, Myrtle and George Wilson's tragic endings suggest that the automobile fraudulent contribution to the realization of working class social advancement. Similarly, the democratic space of the road in the novel seems to form another space of segregation and racial hierarchy. Also, the car accidents indicate the moral decadence of the American society as well as the dehumanizing effects of capitalism. However, Fitzgerald's automobile symbolism, though it is concerned with the consequences of the fast pace of technological development on the American psyche, cannot be read as only a strong criticism of technology. In his novel the automobiles such as Gatsby's splendid one are appreciated and celebrated as the manifestation of Gatsby's self-made man image and individualism. Therefore his narrative treatment of automobiles suggest that, as the most popular transportation means of the Roaring Twenties, the opportunities it provided had an ambiguous impact on the American mind. Fitzgerald's concern with automobiles in this novel is really critical at some points, but in general it can be characterized as an eager fascination and intense awareness of the fate of American society in an era of unprecedented technological development.

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