

Setting the Carpet Aflame

Humans are incredibly impulsive and unordered creatures. And F. Scott Fitzgerald is perfectly aware of that in his novel *The Great Gatsby*—Gatsby dies in an unspectacular murder, Daisy is tangled in a loveless relationship, and Nick finds himself tangled and torn between his eccentric neighbor and his helpless cousin. But not only is the plotline chaotic; the author uses certain stylistic devices to add disorder to his writing. Fitzgerald uses em-dashes, schemes of repetition and omission, and scattered details in order to mimic the broken-up movement of realistic action, which supports his claim that learning only occurs in moments of confusion or chaos.

The use of em-dashes in dialogue creates a natural flow of pauses. When Tom remarks, "Why—there's things between Daisy and me that you'll never know" (Fitzgerald 132), the em-dash gives the indication of thought. In that instant, Tom is in the process of procuring an example, and the "why—" is a colloquial saying. Without the pause, the phrase sounds rushed and uncertain, a question rather than an answer. Daisy also does something similar when she asks, "Why—how could I love him—possibly?" (132), which is this time a question. Here the em-dashes simply elongate the sentence as if it were spoken non-fluidly, broken. Similar to the em-dash, the use of ellipsis indicate a sense of waiting, of a pause outside of speech. Fitzgerald leaves an expectant space in his writing as he writes, "There was a husky tenderness in his voice...'Daisy?'" (132). What is symbolized here by the ellipses cannot be explained in words, and thus Fitzgerald uses a symbol in its stead; it is the expectancy, the unease of a split second before Tom more explicitly asks for Daisy's opinion by saying her name.

The use of em-dashes and the ellipses in these cases are entirely natural—to be without natural pauses in impromptu conversation would be unrealistic—but the fact that Fitzgerald captures these so explicitly and deliberately in his writing makes the difference. In other novels, it is common to transcribe sentences for accuracy of purpose, not accuracy of articulation; *The Great Gatsby*, on the other hand, is written with realistic speech in mind. Fitzgerald reminds us with every stutter or stumble or pause that people are thinking, considering, recalculating. Tom's "Why—" allows him to realize the importance of his history with Daisy, and Daisy's "Why—" allows her to reconsider her love with Tom. It is these breaks, this slight chaos that fosters the characters' ability to learn.

Conversely, some phrases are repeated for clarification or emphasis by the characters—this orderliness has an oppositely unimportant effect on the characters. When Daisy adds, "I loved [Gatsby] too," (132), Gatsby is incredulous. "You loved me *too*?" (132), he replies. An echo. This moment is of the least mental stimulation, with Gatsby's statement simply acting as a logical reassertion—nothing here complicates the situation to allow Gatsby to learn. Repeating her love is not important to the men—they already have a sense of the evident love-triangle relationship.

For Daisy, however, who works out her stance on the situation over the course of the conversation, the chaos is already there. Gatsby insists to Daisy that "You never loved [Tom]" (132), to which Daisy repeats "I never loved [Tom]" (132). Another echo. When she later clarifies, not redundantly

like the men, that she loves both Gatsby and Tom to different degrees—that she “did love [Tom] once—but I loved [Gatsby] too” (132)—the complexity of her personality. The realization that both men could be loved, simultaneously, throws Daisy’s mind for a loop and thus gives her the blunt reality of her situation. Her capricious affections for the two men is eclipsed by a new knowledge of her multifaceted love. The men, who are stuck stupidly repeating one another’s words without realizing the complexity of the situation, remain ignorant of Daisy’s dire dilemma.

Fitzgerald is also the master of anonymous insertions that randomly interrupt the flow of the story. Similar to commercials on a TV channel, the content of the advertisement is necessary to the success of the channel but not pertinent to the TV show. The fact that “from the ballroom beneath, muffled and suffocating chords were drifting up on hot waves of air” (132)—a fact totally separate from the heated argument over the love triangle of Gatsby, Daisy, and Tom—gives an unwelcome reprieve from the drama of the scene. Deviating again from the intensity of Tom’s and Gatsby’s angry claims against one another, “[Daisy] suddenly threw the cigarette and the burning match on the carpet” (132) in her desperation.

These sentences play a role in Fitzgerald’s writing analogous to that of the rhetorical device of parenthesis: they keep the setting in mind as a sort of juxtaposition from the main drama. These extra details then make more intricate the plot, which bolsters prior complexity of the situation. The characters are the actors in center stage, with ballroom music in the background and matches igniting the carpet and more and more distractions to keep them from having a peak performance.

The pressure is on.

But while Fitzgerald explicates these details, the orator of the dialogue is often surprisingly ambiguous. A person creates the conversation, which is then is lugged on by implications. “Why’s that?” (133) Tom asks, which is then followed with: “‘Daisy’s leaving you.’ ‘Nonsense.’ ‘I am, though’” (133). Considering that there are four people—Gatsby, Nick, Daisy, and Tom—present at the current conversation, the speaker cannot be determined for certain. Nor is it up to the reader to guess.

However, it is *implied*—strongly recommended by Fitzgerald—that Gatsby is the one to say to assert that “Daisy’s leaving you” and that “Nonsense” is indignantly spoken by the Tom. This is probably closer to the how Nick perceives it: orphaned speech. This relates back to the idea of a higher accuracy in terms of oration rather than of meaning, and it only builds onto the idea of the orderliness of the circumstances.

Rather than allowing his piece to run smoothly, Fitzgerald purposefully uses pauses and chaos. People will make mistakes, and people will live in a world that is not perfect, is not orderly, is not fair; but they thrive in it. The need to take everything into mind enhances decision-making abilities. Emergency is the mother of wisdom and learning.

The carpet is aflame. Daisy lit it with a match and Fitzgerald with the tension of a love triangle. The world burns, and a person learns. Sadistically but successfully.